

# **The Nobel Prize Lecture**

## **Vicente Aleixandre**

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At a moment like this, so important in the life of a man of letters, I should like to express in the most eloquent words at my command the emotion that a human being feels and the gratitude he experiences in the face of an event such as that which is taking place today. I was born in a middle-class family, but I had the benefit of its eminently open and liberal outlook. My restless spirit led me to practise contradictory professions. I was a teacher of mercantile law, an employee in a railway company, a financial journalist. From early youth this restlessness of which I have spoken lifted me to one particular delight: reading and, in time, writing. At the age of 18 the prentice poet began to write his first verses, sketched out in secret amid the turmoil of a life which, because it had not yet found its true axis, I might call adventurous. The destiny of my life, its direction, was determined by a bodily weakness. I became seriously ill of a chronic complaint. I had to abandon all my other concerns, those which I might call corporal, and to retreat to the countryside far from my former activities. The vacuum thus created was soon invaded by another activity which did not call for physical exertion and could easily be combined with the rest that the doctors had ordered me to take. This unforgettable, all-conquering invasion was the practice of letters; poetry occupied to the full the gap in activity. I began to write with complete dedication and it was then, only then, that I became possessed by the passion which was never to leave me.

Hours of solitude, hours of creation, hours of meditation. Solitude and meditation gave me an awareness, a perspective which I have never lost: that of solidarity with the rest of mankind. Since that time I have always proclaimed that poetry is communication, in the exact sense of that word.

Poetry is a succession of questions which the poet constantly poses. Each poem, each book is a demand, a solicitation, an interrogation, and the answer is tacit, implicit, but also continuous, and the reader gives it to himself through his reading. It is an exquisite dialogue in which the poet questions and the reader silently gives his full answer.

I wish I could find fitting words to describe what a Nobel Prize means

to the poet. It cannot be done; I can only assure you that I am with you body and soul, and that the Nobel Prize is as it were the response, not gradual, not tacit, but collected and simultaneous, sudden, of a general voice which generously and miraculously becomes one and itself answers the unceasing question which it has come to address to mankind. Hence my gratitude for this symbol of the collected and simultaneous voice to which the Swedish Academy has enabled me to listen with the senses of the soul for which I here publicly render my devoted thanks.

On the other hand, I consider that a prize such as I have received today is, in all circumstances, and I believe without exception, a prize directed to the literary tradition in which the author concerned – in this case myself – has been formed. For there can be no doubt that poetry, art, are always and above all tradition, and in that tradition each individual author represents at most a modest link in the chain leading to a new kind of aesthetic expression; his fundamental mission is, to use a different metaphor, to pass on a living torch to the younger generation which has to continue the arduous struggle. We can conceive of a poet who has been born with the highest talents to accomplish a destiny. He will be able to do little or nothing unless he has the good fortune to find himself placed in an artistic current of sufficient strength and validity. Conversely, I think that a less gifted poet may perhaps play a more successful role if he is lucky enough to be able to develop himself within a literary movement which is truly creative and alive. In this respect I was born under the protection of benign stars inasmuch as, during a sufficiently long period before my birth, Spanish culture had undergone an extremely important process of swift renewal, a development which I think is no secret to anyone. Novelists such as Galdós; poets like Machado, Unamuno, Juan Ramón Jiménez and, earlier, Becquer; philosophers like Ortega y Gasset; prose writers such as Azorín and Baroja; dramatists such as Valle-Inclán; painters like Picasso and Miró; composers such as de Falla: such figures do not just conjure themselves up, nor are they the products of chance. My generation saw itself aided and enriched by this warm environment, by this source, by this enormously fertile cultural soil, without which perhaps none of us would have become anything.

From the tribune in which I now address you I should like therefore to associate my words with this generous nursery ground of my compatriots who from another era and in the most diverse ways formed us and enabled us, myself and my friends of the same generation, to reach a place from which we could speak with a voice which perhaps was genuine or was peculiar to ourselves.

And I do not refer only to these figures which constitute the immediate tradition, which is always the one most visible and determinative. I allude also to the other tradition, the one of the day before yesterday, which though more distant in time was yet capable of establishing close ties with ourselves;

the tradition formed by our classics from the Golden Age, Garcilaso, Fray Luis de León, San Juan de la Cruz, Gongora, Quevedo, Lope de Vega, to which we have also felt linked and from which we have received no little stimulation. Spain was able to revive and renew herself thanks to the fact that, through the generation of Galdós, and later through the generation of 1898, she as it were opened herself, made herself available, and as a result of this the whole of the nourishing sap from the distant past came flowing towards us in overwhelming abundance. The generation of 1927 did not wish to spurn anything of the great deal that remained alive in this splendid world of the past which suddenly lay revealed to our eyes in a lightning flash of uninterrupted beauty. We rejected nothing, except what was mediocre; our generation tended towards affirmation and enthusiasm, not to scepticism or taciturn restraint.

Everything that was of value was of interest to us, no matter whence it came. And if we were revolutionaries, if we were able to be that, it was because we had once loved and absorbed even those values against which we now reacted. We supported ourselves firmly on them in order to brace ourselves for the perilous leap forward to meet our destiny. Thus it should not surprise you that a poet who began as a surrealist today presents a defence of tradition. Tradition and revolution – here are two words which are identical.

And then there was the tradition, not vertical but horizontal, which came to help us in the form of a stimulating and fraternal competition from our flanks, from the side of the road we were pursuing. I refer to that other group of young people (when I too was young) who ran with us in the same race. How fortunate I was to be able to live and perform, to mould myself in the company of poets so admirable as those I came to know and devote myself to with the right of a contemporary! I loved them dearly, every one. I loved them precisely because I was seeking something different, something which it was only possible to find through differences and contrast in relation to these poets, my comrades. Our nature achieves its true individuality only in community with others, face to face with our neighbours. The higher the quality of the human environment in which our personality is formed, the better it is for us. I can say that here, too, I have had the good fortune to be able to realize my destiny through communion with one of the best companies of men of which it is possible to conceive. The time has come to name this company in all its multiplicity: Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, Manuel Altolaguirre, Emilio Prados, Dámaso Alonso, Gerardo Diego, Luis Cernuda.

I speak then of solidarity, of communion, as well as of contrast. If I do so, it is because such has been the feeling that has been most deeply implanted on my soul, and it is its heartbeat that, in one way or another, can be heard most clearly behind the greater part of my verse. It is therefore natural that the very way in which I look upon humanity and poetry has much to do

with this feeling. The poet, the truly determinative poet, is always a revealer; he is, essentially, a seer, a prophet. But his "prophecy" is of course not a prophecy about the future; for it may have to do with the past: it is a prophecy without time. Illuminator, aimer of light, chastiser of mankind, the poet is the possessor of a Sesame which in a mysterious way is, so to speak, the word of his destiny.

To sum up, then, the poet is a man who was able to be more than a man: for he is in addition a poet. The poet is full of "wisdom"; but this he cannot pride himself on, for perhaps it is not his own. A power which cannot be explained, a spirit, speaks through his mouth: the spirit of his race, of his peculiar tradition. He stands with his feet firmly planted on the ground, but beneath the soles of his feet a mighty current gathers and is intensified, flowing through his body and finding its way out through his tongue. Then it is the earth itself, the deep earth, that flames from his glowing body. But at other times the poet has grown, and now towards the heights, and with his brow reaching into the heavens, he speaks with a starry voice, with cosmic resonance, while he feels the very wind from the stars fanning his breast. All is then brotherhood and communion. The tiny ant, the soft blade of grass against which his cheek sometimes rests, these are not distinct from himself. And he can understand them and spy out their secret sound, whose delicate note can be heard amidst the rolling of the thunder.

I do not think that the poet is primarily determined by his goldsmith's work. Perfection in his work is something which he hopes gradually to achieve, and his message will be worth nothing if he offers mankind a coarse and inadequate surface. But emptiness cannot be covered up by the efforts of a polisher, however untiring he may be.

Some poets – this is another problem and one which does not concern expression but the point of departure – are poets of "minorities". They are artist (how great they are does not matter) who owe their individuality to devoting themselves to exquisite and limited subjects, to refined details (how delicate and profound were the poems that Mallarmé devoted to fans!), to the minutely savoured essences in individuals expressive of our detail-burdened civilization.

Other poets (here, too, their stature is of no importance) turn to what is enduring in man. Not to that which subtly distinguishes but to that which essentially unites. And even though they see man in the midst of the civilization of his own times, they sense all his pure nakedness radiating immutably from beneath his tired vestments. Love, sorrow, hate or death are unchanging. These poets are radical poets and they speak to the primary, the elemental in man. They cannot feel themselves to be the poets of "minorities". Among them I count myself.

And therefore a poet of my kind has what I would call a communicative vocation. He wants to make himself heard from within each human breast, since his voice is in a way the voice of the collective, the collective to which the poet for a moment lends his passionate voice. Hence the necessity of being understood in languages other than his own. Poetry can only in part be translated. But from this zone of authentic interpretation the poet has the truly extraordinary experience of speaking in another way to other people and being understood by them. And then something unexpected occurs: the reader is installed, as through a miracle, in a culture which in large measure is not his own but in which he can nevertheless feel without difficulty the beating of his own heart, which in this way communicates and lives in two dimensions of reality: its own and that conferred on it by the new home in which it has been received. What has been said remains equally true if we turn it round and apply it not to the reader but to the poet who has been translated into another language. The poet, too, feels himself to be like one of those figures encountered in dreams, which exhibit, perfectly identified, two distinct personalities. Thus it is with the translated author, who feels within himself two personae: the one conferred on him by the new verbal attire which now covers him and his own genuine personae which, beneath the other, still exists and asserts itself.

Thus I conclude by claiming for the poet a role of symbolic representation, enshrining as he does in his own person that longing for solidarity with humankind for which precisely the Nobel Prize was founded.

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