

HELENA VAZ DA SILVA EUROPEAN AWARD FOR RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS ON CULTURAL HERITAGE 2020

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IN PRAISE OF THE BOOK

I am honoured to have been selected as this year's winner of the Helena Vaz da Silva European Award for Raising Public Awareness on Cultural Heritage. In particular, I would like to thank the jury and the institutions who have come together to present me with this award. I would also like to thank our host, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, whose president, Isabel Mota, is here with us this evening. Finally, I wish to extend my sincerest gratitude to everyone else who has contributed to this event, in person and remotely, starting with the President of the United Nations General Assembly, the President of the Portuguese Republic, the Minister of Culture, the President of the Centro Nacional de Cultura, the Secretary-General of Europa Nostra and the President of the Clube Português de Imprensa. My greetings to all of you who were kind enough to honour us with your presence here this evening and those of you who are watching this event online. Thank you all very much.

The fact that this award is named after Helena Vaz da Silva is, for me, a source of great joy and certainly a great responsibility. I knew Helena Vaz da Silva only as an acquaintance, but she made a strong impression on me. In fact, the friendship I was lucky enough to maintain over the years with her husband, Alberto Vaz da Silva, enabled me, in a way, to appreciate Helena and her legacy on a more personal level, seeing her through the most powerful of lenses, that of love.

Before beginning the speech I have prepared, I would like to respond to the very relevant question I was asked by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Guterres, about the relationship between social friendship, the term coined by Pope Francis in the recent encyclical 'Fratelli Tutti', and culture.

From my own experience, and this I would like to witness here, the presence, the imprint in the world of culture and that which culture gives us, can be seen and is expressed very clearly in the dynamics of friendship.

And there are three words that, in my view, are the architecture, as it were, of a presence in the world of culture and that connect it to friendship. The first of these words is curiosity. Culture teaches us the vital importance of curiosity, interest in others, the ability to comprehend that which we do not yet understand, that which we are not yet familiar with, and what the other, in their alterity, has to offer us. A great author who also wrote important things about friendship, Jesuit Matteo Ricci, said 'my friend is the other half of myself'. And, in fact, in curiosity we get to know the other, and we also get to know ourselves.

The second word is the word encounter. Both social friendship and culture are really the celebration of an encounter. Of an unexpected encounter, a different encounter, a necessarily dialogic encounter, but bringing with it that which the encounter introduces into our life, which is the capacity for astonishment, the capacity to listen, the time needed to make the encounter itself precious, mutual respect, the encounter that is often

woven in singularity, and on a path where the alterity of the other is not a threat, is not a hostility, but a call to hospitality.

And, finally, the word future. In social friendship and in culture, we see that there is a future for every one of us that is indissociable from our relationship with the other. This is what Pope Francis refers to so often when he says 'we are all in the same boat' and 'we are all experiencing the same situation', and this profound awareness is something that in civil friendship, social friendship and cultural friendship is the experience that enriches us most. And, in this respect, I am very grateful for the generous things that have been said about me here, undoubtedly things that only friendship can justify, but I have always been very aware of the fact that I am, from the beginning until the end of my life, a work of others. And that, in fact, without this encounter with alterity, I would not be, I would not think, I would not write.

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Ladies and gentlemen

It is said that we are nearing the end of the era of the book. And not because books have suddenly ceased to exist, or will at one point cease to exist, during the historical period of our lives: we hope and very much wish that they will continue to be written and read, published, supported and conserved for a long time to come. What is happening, rather, is that, whether as artefacts or as transmitters of a certain moral conceptualisation of life, books no longer represent, as George Steiner argued in the 1960s, the principal focus of energy of our civilisation. In this capacity, the book has been replaced by the screen. Indeed, each one of us now spends more time in front of a screen than in front of a book. And the screens that massively populate and shape our everyday lives are multiple, thus spreading the impact of the digital revolution on our era and the ever-increasing interference of technology in human communication. This was the place that, for centuries, was reserved for the page and the text, handwritten or printed. What we can see, very clearly, over the course of this change, is that even alphabetical text has become just one modality among many others of the production of billions of messages to be displayed on a screen. An increasingly minority role is reserved for the book and what it represents. In the self-representation of the contemporary world, the book is no longer the great metaphor that it was in the 12th century, for example, when theologian and mystic Hugh of Saint Victor argued that 'omnis mundi creatura quasi liber' to say that every creature of this world is like a book and can be explained by an analogy to the latter; or like it was at the end of the 19th century, when Mallarmé conceived of the book as an all-encompassing structure, a kind of total amalgam of decipherable and undecipherable writings of humans and the universe.

It is true that there are those who say that rather than a decline, we should be talking about a transformation, as what is happening is simply a change of medium by which the book is transmitted and not, strictly speaking, the book itself. The current form of the book on paper is one stage in a longer history that began with texts carved into stones, clay tablets and labels, a history which will continue its trajectory. Thus, Umberto Eco felt confident to say that the book was part of that immovable technology represented by the wheel, the knife, the spoon, the hammer, the pot and the bicycle. No matter how much designers invest in transforming this or that particular, a knife and a spoon will always be recognisable as such. A bicycle will always end up having two wheels and an axle. In the same way, regardless of how many variations are brought in, what we will have in our hands will continue to be a book.

Still, let us not forget that the civilisation that invented the book as we have known it until now also invented the conditions required for reading it, and that the latter shaped us anthropologically over the course of centuries and constitute a cultural heritage that must be preserved. Because whoever invented the book invented the silence of reading; invented that intimate form of temporality that makes the encounter with the book indissociable from the encounter with ourselves; invented attention, the adventure of knowledge built on certain premises and curiosity; invented a social regime where intellectual activity was permitted and, let us not forget, a regime that liberated the human, revealing to them their dignity; invented the universal right to literacy and multiplied the reading community; invented the individual and private life; invented trust in the consistency of language and libraries; invented literary salons, cafés and squares as places of debate, invented the critical and hermeneutic systems that guarantee not only the legibility of books, but the comprehension of possible worlds; invented monastic schools and the modern idea of university; invented humanism and freedom of expression, which is always inseparable from freedom of being. The book accompanied the birth and expansion of the modern languages of the West, and witnessed the development of their expressive, cognitive and imaginative potential. Whoever invented the book invented a certain way of producing history and also invented the figure of the reader that we still are. The human, cultural and spiritual heritage that the book represents is, therefore, incalculable. What is at stake in the book is much more than the book itself. We cannot do away with it as if it were an archaic vestige destined to be gradually decommissioned. Mario Vargas Llosa wrote: ‘When I think of the immense pleasure that libraries have given me and how good it is to work in them, stimulated by the thousands of books that contain the knowledge and literary fantasy of so many centuries, I think with sadness that perhaps mine will be the last generation to have this experience if, as is already not hard to imagine, new generations of writers are surrounded by screens instead of bookshelves, and books are made not of paper, but rather the liquid glass of computers.’ At this time of civilisational transition we must ask ourselves what we can do as societies to value this extraordinary heritage so that the book may continue to inspire us in the task of constructing our humanity.

Books not only make us readers; they also make us citizens. The history of Europe is inseparable from the books that have constituted its way of creating culture, science, spirituality and thought through to the present day. We cannot look at European identity and its original values without connecting with the world of books that helped it, over the ages, to overcome ideological monolithism, narrowness of horizons and the inconsistency and limits of vision. The most extraordinary dimension of the European project was not the result of a military conquest, an economic or merely political rumination. Books made Europe. From Homer to Virgil, Cato to Petrarch. From Aristotle’s treatises to Paul’s epistles. From Terence’s comedies to the Confessions of Saint Augustine. From the fantasies of Lucretius to the Summa of Thomas Aquinas. From the medieval troubadours to Dante and Camões. From the pamphlets of Voltaire to Marx. From Hegel to Freud. From Dostoevsky to Joyce. From Simone Weil to Maria Zambrano.

Some of the most beautiful declarations of love to books were made during especially difficult moments of European history, and I would like to recall some of them now. I remember the writer Thomas Mann who, on leaving as an exile for the United States, during the long ocean crossing, wished to read and discuss Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. I remember Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum who, in the small rucksack she took with her into the concentration camp, chose to take two books: the Bible and a volume of poetry by Rainer Maria Rilke. And the story of writer Józef Czapski, prisoner between 1940 and 1941, in a gulag four hundred kilometres north of Moscow. At the end of each day of forced labour, withstanding Siberian temperatures, a

handful of prisoners would sit in a circle around Czapski to hear him give a series of lectures on Proust. The last time he had held the work of Proust in his hands was before 1939 and he thought he would never see a book again. As a result, his lectures were based on an exercise of recalling from memory that colossal romantic universe. Czapski wrote: 'I thought then with emotion about Proust, in his overheated cork-lined room, who would certainly have been amazed and maybe even touched to learn that, twenty years after his death, some Polish prisoners, following a whole day spent in the snow and cold, would be listening with keen interest to the story of the Duchesse de Guermantes.'

One last story. Theologian Romano Guardini said that 'in one of the great battles of the last war, a detachment found itself, at some point, in a desperate situation. The military chaplain was present and, feeling that he had nothing suitable to say at that time, took from his bag his volume of the New Testament and gave a page to each of the soldiers.'

We project the cultural heritage that books represent. They are maps to work out where we came from. But they are also telescopes and probes pointed towards the future.