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“The Role of the Word in the Creation of a New World”

It's a great honour to be speaking here in Bogotá. This gathering is in the great tradition of the International PEN Congresses I have attended from the 1980s on. And it is wonderful to be here with Juri Grusa, who continues to play such an important role as our international president; and of course, with Enrique Santos Molano, the President of Colombian PEN, and Cecilia Balcazar de Bucher, Member of the Board of International PEN. Colombian PEN deserves all our congratulations for putting together this Congress.

Bogotá represents a fascinating and complicated society. Each of us comes from different societies, each with their own complexity. I want to talk tonight about the characteristics of the shared situation in which all of us write in our different countries and civilizations.

If we were to step back in order to look at the nature of our societies, I think we would find that they could best be described today as corporatist – in the 1930s sense of that word. And as so often happens in a corporatist era, we find ourselves surrounded by the repeated phenomena of populism, perhaps the last thing many of us expected to be obliged to live through in this new century.

I think that all of us as writers are searching for the words, the language, the concepts to deal with this combination of corporatism and populism. Nothing is more difficult to deal with than a civilization which describes itself as doing one thing when it is actually doing another.

But let me first introduce this talk with a few words about International PEN. Since the late 1980s, this organization has been undergoing a remarkable evolution. Yesterday, at the opening, Juri Grusa said that “PEN was perhaps born in Europe, but that is a small part of the whole.” In other words, International PEN has become truly international. This evolution over the last quarter-century has

happened gradually, and while PEN has embraced the world, it has also embraced the equivalent principles and purposes around the world which marry naturally with those of its origins. We have stayed true to ourselves and changed profoundly. And we have put in place a modern democratic structure and organization without falling into the bureaucratic difficulties which have overcome many other NGOs. As a result, International PEN continues to do its work for freedom of speech and writers in prison as it always has, but with new approaches and constantly in search of yet more new approaches. And so, what Juri and Homero before him, Eugene and Joanne before him have accomplished, is quite remarkable. And I think that the building up of an increasingly effective office under Caroline is something we should all be proud of, as it has allowed PEN to increasingly fulfill its role around the world.

Secondly, a few words about the development of the Writers In Exile program around the world. It has a very powerful organization in Europe with ICORN, which is gradually taking on an international form and has developed a program, which already covers some 30-50 writers in exile. PEN Canada has developed a program which ranges between 20-25 writers in exile. All together, there are potentially 75 places for writers in exile in different parts of the world. I feel there will be many more. I follow this closely because I've been involved since the beginning in the PEN Canada program and sit on the Advisory Board of ICORN. And of course, the PEN central office plays a key role in making all of this viable.

I'm taking the time to talk about the Writers In Exile program because I think it is a particularly important way for all of us to examine the strength and fragility of literature in the world. We all know what happens when a writer is put in prison. But there are other forms of prison. Exile is more often than not a form of prison for a creative writer. After all, with exile they or indeed we lose our community and our reading public, and more often than not our publishing houses. And if we write in a language which is not an international language, we also become victims of the lack of international structures for what could be called minority languages.

And so, a writer may find herself free from prison, but living in a new sort of cell which for a writer could be called the prison of silence. We

at PEN, with our traditional work to save writers' lives and to get writers out of prison, may well have done a great deal. We may have helped to save their lives. But for that action to be complete, particularly if they are forced into exile, we have to think about their life as writers in exile. There are no easy answers to this problem, and with each exile this will continue to test not only the writer in question, but all of us. This is also a reminder of the relationship between language and power. Many of us speak extraordinary languages – languages which are powerful across borders – but which also, therefore, have an imperial aspect to them. As we all know, there are many other languages which are just as rich, and just as extraordinary, but they do not have international powers, or even national powers. In many cases, the story of the modern nation state has been the creation of an internal exile for the writers of such languages. More recently a few of those languages have found their own political borders. In other cases, some of the old monolithic nation states have opened their idea of themselves to embrace minority languages. And yet this Writers In Exile work is a constant reminder of some of the negative outcomes of the creation of the monolithic nation state, and certainly of the difficulties of politics which are aligned with a narrow idea of culture. Because we write through particular languages, we are still for better or worse caught up in that era of national structures built around particular languages. As those of us who come from smaller countries know, this can be a great strength, protecting our language and the use of it. But it can also be a weakness when faced with the absence of freedom of speech. There is an additional weakness which has appeared over the last two decades with the growing power of corporatism and populism in its newest forms. In the West we have come through a half-millennium of nation-state creation; it has been driven by the idea of purity – the search for societies with one race, one religion, one language, one myth. Those societies which had the power to do so often carried this idea of purity out into the concept of empires, which set out to destroy non-monolithic societies, minority societies and minority languages in the name of the empire's national destiny, culture, and language. Through all of that period we have seen many positive things happen – the building of social programs and of public education, for example – but for many this has been a time of what José Martí called “the vengeful democracy/ that advances in darkness.”

We think of ourselves today as caught up for better or worse in a globalised world. This new form of internationalism has many advantages to it. But it is also filled with a revised form of that sense of the inevitable destiny of more powerful civilizations. In many ways, what is called globalism has turned out to be false internationalism. And indeed, with its emphasis on an economic imperative – an economic perspective by which everything else has to be judged, including culture – we have found ourselves in a situation which discourages a real conversation between cultures. On the one hand, this system encourages a certain international commercial conformity which is to be applied in all places and to all situations; and on the other hand, it seems to have led, perhaps as a reaction, to the revival of populism, and to negative rivalries between cultures. In other words, what was meant to be a new chapter of internationalism has encouraged instead the return of both corporatism and populism.

At the same time we have seen emerge interesting contemporary models of post-modern nation states, or what I would call non-monolithic nation states. For example, what is often seen in Europe as a struggle between pro- and anti-immigrant forces is perhaps really more about the passing of the old Enlightenment idea of the monolithic state and its gradual replacement by a new form of non-monolithic nation states. What does that mean? Well, in many ways it means a return to what was most interesting in the pre-Enlightenment period. That is, that people could imagine themselves belonging to a continent, a region, a city and an insipient nation. In other words, people could see themselves in a non-monolithic manner; they could enjoy the idea of complexity and of living in multi-layered societies, societies which have the equivalent of multiple personalities. I've often said about the Canadian situation that we are a positive version of that sickness called multiple personality disorder. Instead, we are, when we are at our best, a multiple personality order.

Ours is only one society among many in the Americas which views immigration as a great opportunity, and sees it as something which has a very local impact. At the municipal and regional level it helps to break open the monolithic and gives people a way to embrace living in multi-layered societies. In the city of Toronto, which I come from, over 50% of the population was born in another country. We live this

as a great opportunity, among other things, for the reconsideration of words and language and ideas. This local human reality has developed into an opportunity to resuscitate the idea of the citizen outside of the old ideas of race and of monolithic mythologies.

I mention all of this because, in many ways, PEN at its best is an illustration of that idea of the non-monolithic citizen. Many of us come from societies in which a great deal of blood has been shed in order to create a monolithic idea of the nation. And yet, here we are, only a few years later, attempting to move away from that false purity towards the more interesting idea of complexity. Many of us come from societies which remained embedded in that idea of complexity, in part because we live in societies filled with strong minorities and strong minority cultures. What we know is that this meeting of minorities and majorities, if taken as a positive, can be a great force for creativity and imagination.

But I want to go back to the idea of the return of corporatism. Most of us have tended to write off the idea of corporatism since the end of the Second World War as a bit of a joke at best, and certainly as something which disappeared after 1945. The link between Mussolini and corporatism has been used as a way of laughing off corporatism, because of the militaristic and brutally dictatorial aspects he gave to it. But it's important to go back and examine what happened in the 1930s. Corporatism was presented by a series of philosophers, in particular in Italy, but also elsewhere, as an alternate option to the various forms of individualism and citizenship being proposed in what were thought of as the liberal democracies. In its place these corporatist philosophers were proposing another sort of civilization which would be run by groups, in particular by interest groups and their representatives. Today, we might hear them being called stakeholder groups.

This alternative to citizen-based democracy was presented by a large group of thinkers as a form of rational leadership. Indeed, it was to be a rational leadership made up of experts; a meritocratic civilization which would focus on strengthening its meritocracies through specialization and education or what we might now call silo education. These were to be vertically structured societies as opposed to horizontally structured societies.

One of the characteristics of successful corporatist societies was that each meritocratic group of specialists would develop its own specialist dialect, which would become increasingly incomprehensible to the specialists in the other silos. And because those with specialist expertise would be unable to speak effectively with each other – indeed a conversation between them would be a betrayal of professionalism – it followed that society would be run by a modern form of managers who would specialize in organizing the silos of content. In other words, corporatism would be a society in which power was about form over content. And because the specialists would not be asked to engage in public debate – that is in the admission of uncertainty – it would be a civilization built around isolated silos of specialist certainty and the efficiency of management linkages.

In such a civilization real language would become increasingly difficult to use. It would certainly be unacceptable from a social point of view. In a sense, creative language would be an expression of disloyalty to the corporations and it would perturb the efficiency of the managers.

You will have noticed by now that the way in which I'm describing the methods of 1930s corporatism, stripped of its militarism and racism and overt dictatorial violence, strangely resembles those methods which are admired today by our universities and our structures of governance and our private sector.

From society's point of view, what does the corporatist condition look like today? First, there is a growing confusion between the social contract and the commercial contract. I've talked with judges in Supreme Courts around the world, and they are almost all in agreement that we have now reached a stage where the administrative methods of the last half-century have succeeded in so confusing the social contract and the commercial contract that it is difficult for them to make rulings based on principals of justice as opposed to narrow interpretations of law. In many ways this explains the frustration which citizens feel with their justice systems.

Second, the rise of specialization and specialist dialects has made it increasingly difficult to carry out broad conversations, arguments, public musings, even an education based upon broad reading. Of course, all of these things take place. But they are not what is most admired in our society. They are seen rather as a form of dilettantism. And so increasingly we find that we live in societies led by highly specialized elites who themselves do not take seriously the idea of broad conversations or debates; they do not read broadly and are certainly not encouraged to think in a broad manner. All of this they would consider unprofessional and amateurish. This in turn breeds among those in positions of power a growing fear of uncertainty. They are particularly fearful of showing uncertainty in public. Certainty, they believe, is a sign of their meritocratic capabilities.

But democracy is entirely dependent upon the acceptance of public uncertainty by its leaders. The strength of any form of democracy – and there are many different forms with very different sources all over the world – is that the citizens benefit from their leaders living with uncertainty as a positive strength.

And of course writers have as one of their central roles the celebration of creativity as a great positive force for constant uncertainty.

Third, after the slow rise of freedom of speech to a central role in many nation states, we have witnessed its gradual marginalization by the most unexpected of means. Even a banal tool such as the employment contract has become a mechanism of corporatism. Of course, the gradual organization of Western societies in particular into highly managed societies, has had many positive sides to it. This has provided the sort of protection for workers and even white collar employees which the old systems of uncontrolled employment simply didn't offer. But in its more recent form we have seen the rise of the employment contract or the equivalent of the employment contract to the role of a mechanism which can control and severely limit a citizen's freedom of speech and action. What do I mean? Citizens through their taxes pay for the education of young citizens. These students graduate, only to be employed on the basis that everything they have learned which makes them qualified as experts now belongs to the employer. The expression of their opinions rising out of

their expertise now belongs to their employer. They are no longer able to speak freely in public about the subjects they know best. In this simple way the corporatist system has effectively removed from the public place the most important contribution that a specialist – who is after all also a citizen with a citizen's obligations – can make to their society. In that sense, the power of the employment contract has turned into a direct attack on the freedom of speech of citizens.

And yet, the public place is filled with the noise of commentary. We know this because we are part of that public noise. But in a sense, we have been marginalized into the role of entertainer and cut off from our role as responsible individuals in society.

Fourth, the rise of corporatism has led to a very particular new form of conformism which is called loyalty – a form of loyalty which misrepresents the relationship between the citizen and the state. After all, a citizen is by definition loyal. That is one of the meanings of citizenship. The state's legitimacy is based on the idea of the citizenry. The state therefore has no right to question the loyalty of the citizen. It is the citizen's obligation to be as disagreeable and disturbing to the state as possible. In other words, the citizen, through his engagement in the public place, expresses his expectations of the loyalty of the state. After all, it is our state.

And we as writers have a particularly important obligation to be as disturbing to the state as possible. One could actually argue that the citizen has an obligation to be disloyal to any structure which demands conformity from the citizenry; to be even more precise, there is an obligation for citizens to be disloyal to the fear which those who have power feel when faced by non-conformity. The characteristics of the loyal citizen include orneriness, outspokenness and disloyalty to conformity. The leading early Canadian feminist, Nellie McClung, put it this way: "[minding your own business] is a cheap and second-rate virtue, much extolled in certain circles, overestimated by the world at large; in constant use as an excuse for laziness; an alibi for indifference, coldness and neglect; the slacker's refuge, the sluggard's sure defense."

Fifth, such ideas as meritocratic silos, silo dialects, society based on group interests as opposed to citizen obligations, the use of loyalty to

disguise the celebration of conformity; all of these lead to the acceptance of the idea of inevitability as a characteristic of modern civilization. Much of globalism has been built around the idea of its own inevitability. Of course, ideologists have always presented themselves as being inevitable. And the more they insist on it the closer they tend to be to their own end. What is perhaps unusual in the contemporary corporatist intellectual structure is that inevitability is presented as if it were a natural outcome of rational expertise. But it is only possible to come to this idea of the inevitability of events by putting aside the uncertainty which people such as writers know we must all live with. Only through the isolation created by specialist silos can leaders believe that they are on a pre-destined path to what I suppose could be called sequential certainties. In a curious way our system, what is supposed to be remarkably modern, even post-modern, leading us into an undefinable but certain future riding on the backs of ideology, increasingly resembles old-fashioned 19th century utilitarianism. Indeed the way our societies operate often betrays the certainty of the old religions in which elites held onto their place by denying the possibility of choice. What needs to be said is simply that civilizations based upon concepts of inevitability cannot in any way be rational. In fact, it would be difficult to think of a more romantic idea of how reality works than one in which leaders operate in silos without communicating properly among themselves. It is not surprising that as a result, so many of our leaders come to believe in inevitability as the nature of a healthy civilization. From a distance, we can see that what they describe is ideology, not destiny.

Sixth – and I think many of us have noticed this – the gradual rise in strength of the managerial class, in other words of form over content, has led to a virtual assassination of formal public language. We know that the power structures have moved over the last five hundred years from the priest to the soldier to the lawyer and now to the manager. From a public language point of view, our managerial society resembles more that of the old priest-led society than the other two. In the case of the priestly castes and managerial castes, the principal aim is to use public language as a tool against communication and against public discussion.

And so in this way, corporatism attempts to squeeze the life out of words and out of language. And populism attempts to hijack the force

of real language by combining the politics of fear with the politics of love. This combination can quite effectively occupy the space of the public good, in particular a space in which responsible individualism or citizenship can be seen as our ability to imagine *the Other*. So populism often ends up feeling like an ideology. But it isn't ideology, because ideologies are constantly seeking clarity and certainty. Populism, on the other hand, works on the metaphysics of fear and love. It's a magical trick which can make the abnormal appear normal.

I put so much emphasis on populism because through this metaphysical trick it steals the creative writer's fundamental power. After all, what is writing if not the talent to arrive at the universal through some real evocation of the specific? The reader's imagination is released through those metaphysics of turning the specific into the universal. And so, populism deforms our metaphysical talent to turn the specific into the universal through the reader's imagination, and instead exploits that imagination through the confusion of fear and love. Thomas Eloi Martinez put it this way: "Rumour is the precaution that facts take before becoming true." In other words, they are not true. This is the power of populism and the way in which it acts as an angry counterweight to corporatism, while at the same time it is its most effective supporter.

Yesterday, Jorge Orlando Melo spoke about an incident at the National University of Bogota in which one brief image was shown on television of one individual wearing a mask uttering a few words. This was converted into a widespread fear that there were hundreds of terrorists at the university. The way in which this was done could be seen as classic populism. Haroon Siddiqui commented on the incident by saying that we as wordsmiths are having great difficulty breaking through that form of populism. Why? Because the emotion unleashed by the inexplicable combination of fear and love creates a language which penetrates deep within us. The supposed rational power of facts and arguments are shoved aside. Even the beauty of language seems robbed of its power. Instead, there is a kind of fantasy which suddenly appears to be reality, making any kind of sensible reply impossible. This is metaphysics at its worst.

We have often thought as writers that the way to break through these sorts of blockages is with a blinding explosion of linguistic clarity. This is what Jonathan Swift did with his *Modest Proposal* for the eating of Irish children as a solution to both poverty and population explosion. This was also what Voltaire did in his Lisbon Earthquake poem, which changed forever the way in which Europeans would hear the words of the dominant church. It was as if these sudden and unexpected moments of creative clarity had changed everything, at least in people's imaginations:

Give me back
the key
of the door that was shut.

Pablo Neruda's lines evoke the confusion which people feel in such moments. It ought to be easy today to do the same thing. And yet here we are in an era when people who have made their entire careers as pure free marketers, who hate government, to say nothing of government involvement in the free market, are busy nationalizing broad sectors of the free market as a way of keeping themselves in business. Our confusion in this period has largely turned into an attack on the corruption of the senior managers in various countries. And yet, this sort of focus has more to do with old-style paranoia, in other words old-style populism, than with concentrating on what actually could be done. What's more, this sort of focus seems to have very little effect on what actually happens. We've just come through three decades of global economic populism, or romanticism. Here it is collapsing all around us and yet we have not yet been able to come up with a new language to describe what could or rather should happen next. We should be happy that there are great differences of opinion once again in the public debate. And yet most things are simply continuing on. For example, the United States government continues to create six million new secrets each year. Other governments around the world must be doing the same thing, on a more or less per capita basis. What could these secrets possibly be? They are the false secrets of a corporatist civilization in which the control of language is a form of power. Secondly, look at how our idea of technology has radically changed over the last two or three years. Until then, many of us were convinced that technology was leading to a breakdown of the control mechanisms of power, whether

it be public or private. Increasingly, we are seeing technology being used to the exact opposite effect; for example, to limit privacy and to turn universal systems of technological information and control into mechanisms for making money and understanding what people are saying.

What was introduced only a few years ago as a new free-wheeling sector of service industries, which operate either through computers or telephones, now almost all involve the employees being listened to by their employers as they talk to clients. We are told by a recording that they are listening in order to ensure that we are well served. But no other democratic society has even thought this necessary or, indeed ethically acceptable. This sort of Big Brother listening-in on every word uttered would have been impossible only a few years ago. Witness the number of cameras in the streets. London is the city in which citizens are the most watched by the authorities, but this is spreading everywhere. Look at companies such as Google and Yahoo, and eBay, operating in countries such as China. We worry about the ease with which they have conformed to the idea of limiting information as defined by the Chinese authorities; and the technical ease with which they have been able to do this.

Perhaps most disturbing is the way in which all of this has involved a confusing of information with freedom of speech and commerce. The other day I came across a reflection of Cicero. As the old Roman republic was collapsing into the new Empire, Cicero noticed that the old uninhabited freedom of speech was giving away to verbal caution at any function – even social functions. His reflection has an eerie resemblance to the corporatist atmosphere today. What would today's equivalent of the Empire be? Probably the combination of corporatism and populism, both phenomena which urgently attempt to undercut the ability of citizens to find new ways of speaking and hearing – in other words, of exercising their freedom of speech.

In the 1840s, Robert Baldwin, one of the two leaders of the democratic movement in Canada, said that it was a struggle of “the might of public opinion against fashion and corruption.” Nowadays, most intellectuals tend to think of public opinion in a negative light. This is a mistake. Public opinion is the essential positive partner of the writer. After all, most people in our societies – in any society –

don't have the opportunity to choose their language or their words. We often think of freedom of speech as the right to speak and to write. But freedom of speech is also the right to hear and upon hearing to think, and upon thinking to act. Corporatism and populism, and their attached obsession with certainty, are all about building a sense of passivity into the citizenry, a sense that they should not be listening with intent. Should they listen in such a creative way, citizens might develop their thoughts and move to public action. The greatest fear of a corporatist-populist system is that the city will awake. Gabriel Garcia Marquez: "The city awoke out of the lethargy of centuries with the warm, calm soft breeze of a great man dead. Only then did we dare to go into the presidential palace." Who is today's great man? Corporatism and populism. How can it be defeated?

Well, first there are various versions of the old idea of simply saying no. Those of you who are from Bogota know the Colombian version of simple refusal: Gonzal Arango's idea of *nadaismo* – nothingness. Attractive though it is, it simply doesn't lead anywhere. Nor will Octavio Paz's critique of "our incapacity for critical thinking...criticism unfolds the possibility of freedom and is thus an invitation to action."

It ought to work, but the system in place has effectively de-fanged much of the power of thought. And yet, Paz is also right. We need to rethink what our language means. When Confucius was asked what he would do upon taking power, he replied that the very first thing to be done was "the rectification of the names." In other words, the very first thing to be done was to reexamine the meaning of the words. He went on to say, "if the Names aren't right, what you try to do will fail."

What are the false meanings of today which need to be rectified? In many ways they are the meanings which I have been describing tonight – the meanings coming out of corporatism and populism; their resistant, leftover monolithic mythologies, the ability of the enormous management structures in our societies to use unparalleled amounts of money in order to dominate the way in which public language is defended.

Let me finish with one idea which has particular meaning in the Americas, from South to North. All of us – apostles of the word – are

in a sense victims of the creed of the written word. Both corporatism and populism are based upon their deforming of the written word. They are able to use the written page almost the way religious texts were used in the late Middle Ages. In other words, the European society of the Middle Ages was blocked to a great extent by its obsession with the details of the written word – we could describe it as a society in which communication was replaced by monks making careful notations in the margins of other people's texts. To put this in modern, academic terms, it was a society which believed that truth lay in an accumulation of footnotes, and yet nobody really believed that the result was truth. Rather, they believed that controlling the written word was essential to power.

Today's combination of corporatism and populism is based upon the same sort of obsession with the written word as a false language which prevents communications. We in the Americas could take this a step further by saying that the written project of the late Middle Ages and the early Enlightenment was all about erasing the force of the oral cultures of the Americas; it was all about enforcing a linear idea of written truth over a circular idea of oral consideration.

Of course, what we forget, because of the success of the written project, is that much of Europe in the 17th and 18th century was profoundly oral. Even the Enlightenment was to a great extent based upon the oral used as written. Certainly the early written novels of the Enlightenment were essentially oral texts and were used as oral texts by those who wished to spread the ideas they contained far beyond the small percentage of people who could read. And so the novels were publicly declaimed, just as oral cultures has publicly declaimed mythologies for thousands of years.

As for those of us who live in the Americas, I believe that there is a continuing discomfort, even disequilibrium, in spite of our current civilizations having had four centuries to take shape. That disequilibrium and discomfort takes different forms in the dozens of different countries that stretch from the Antarctic to the Arctic. But there is also a shared explanation for this disequilibrium. I believe that shared explanation lies in our continuing denial of the reality of our continents; and that reality is indigenous. And that indigenous reality – unlike the European model – blends people and geography as one.

It is the opposite of the Western idea of the human being as set above the place. And that indigenous reality is profoundly oral. To the extent that we are in denial of this, so we are in denial of ourselves and of the great creative accuracy of oral culture.

In spite of this formal denial, the novels and poetry and films and plays which have been coming out of our continents over the last few decades have been, increasingly, expressions of that oral reality, that circular non-linear approach, that blending of people and place. We understand this and we talk about it, but we have not identified this phenomenon as a re-emergence of the collective unconscious of the Americas in protest against the linear, falsely rational, highly written, corporatist structures of power.

I feel that within that orality lie the tools which could help us deal with the disconnects in our very different and yet similar societies up and down the Americas.

This is a force which, if embraced, could help us to deal intellectually and politically with the barriers of corporatism and populism. And I believe that this approach could be the great gift of the Americas to dealing with these problems which we share with the rest of the world.

Gracias.