

## Address at the *Honoris Causa* Ceremony, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

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Translated by

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Honorable Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Illustrious Professors

Esteemed Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

My Friends

In recent months I have had, frequently, the privilege of rising to similar university podiums, on more or less solemn occasions, to express my gratitude and to expound upon some broad ideas related to both my activity as a writer as well as my concerns as a citizen. Presumably these invitations stem from personal merits which, I fear, do not always rise to the distinctions awarded them. Nevertheless, like any other human being entitled to my modicum of vanity, I will not venture to question your judgement, even though I am predisposed, either by virtue of a natural tendency or perhaps an acquired one, to render coolly those merits all relative, to view them as contingent, variable, accidental, the mere fruit of whimsical tastes, and, therefore, dependent on the conditions of time and place. I have already received the degree of Doctor *Honoris Causa* from universities in Spain, Italy, France, Brazil, and the United Kingdom, as well as Portugal. From this moment on, thanks to what is perhaps best understood as a particularly generous show of charity in your academic evaluation of me, I am similarly honored by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

My reference to those countries and universities, which have previously opened their doors to me, was by no means gratuitous, nor did it stem from some irresistible temptation for self-indulgence. If I have allowed myself the liberty to ponder such a wide trajectory, indeed one that covers almost half the planet, it is only to underscore the importance, and reflect upon, with as much rigor as I can muster, the relevance of my stepping before you today in Dartmouth. In truth, I sense or recognize in this ceremony, at least

as I am experiencing it now, a singularity, a unique quality, which, I confess, moves me in a way that is both intimate and profound. It is not due, as some of you, who are able to recall the list of my academic distinctions, might imagine, to the fact that this is the first time that an honorary doctorate has been bestowed upon me by a North American university. Presumably this would serve as a sufficient and justifiable motive for the emotion that envelops me now, and yet I recognize that the roots of my sentiment go much deeper. I stand as witness as they break down the walls that surround us, and extend beyond the limits of the university campus, to finally unite with those people who, although I have not met them, are fully recognizable to me (if you will pardon this apparent contradiction). Their roots, both close and distant, from abroad and from here, pulled less by their sense of adventure and more by their response to necessity, thousands of Portuguese immigrants at one point in time came to this State, in many cases for two or three generations, to live and to work. Theirs is an unremitting human chain and, as such, has always been and will continue to be an example of living history, one that inevitably carries within itself the recollection of a distinct past and the memory of a distant country, of a continent, an island. A place invoked by desire, at times pain, but always nostalgia, even when it seemed to us forgotten, sometimes forgotten, sometimes remembered, remembered and forgotten, forgotten, remembered. Here, in this place, as I speak to you, I would like to be seen, above all, as a Portuguese who came to be with other Portuguese, as someone born and raised on the Other Side of the Ocean, and as one whom life's circumstances taught to cultivate with love and respect the full harvest of the Portuguese language. I would like to be seen as someone who in time developed into a writer, one who, in turn, with the help of both the knowledge and the will he had acquired, ended up by returning to the earth itself the handful of kernels that he had collected from life, with the idea that the renewal of the harvest can take place only through the rejuvenation of different generations and their experiences, as well as the lively clash between the works of yesterday and the works of today. It is from the same tree that dropped its leaves that the new buds grow.

Presumably for reasons of political convenience, excessive optimism or, perhaps, a propensity for round figures, it has been said countless times that there are two hundred million speakers of Portuguese on this planet. In actuality, there are not so many of us, but some day undoubtedly there will

be. That day will come when the African nations with Portuguese as their official language are able to free themselves once and for all from the ravages of war and the equally devastating misfortune of economic and cultural underdevelopment, and assume, at least according to the usual rhetoric, their own destinies. It is not by chance that I invoke here that part of Africa that decided to adopt Portuguese as their basis, as an instrumental link in national unity, and as a privileged medium for literary and artistic expression. Following the historical precedent of an independent Brazil, and free from their colonial yoke after sustained fighting, immeasurable human sacrifice and devastating structural wreckage, these countries repaid the injury we inflicted upon them, with their offering to choose forever Portuguese as their language. (And I truly believe it will be forever.) Surrounded, constrained, and one might even say oppressed economically and culturally by an extensive chain of countries who use English as their official language, Lusophone Africa has elected to continue living with the minority language of yesteryear, and in so doing has entrusted it to their teachers, their writers, their people, as the key to unlock the door to the world. By choosing this route they were unaware, in all likelihood, that the Portuguese would also ultimately benefit from their decision. Even as the courageous and martyred people of East Timor have done, albeit for different reasons, when they have articulated their grievances on international television in fluent and correct Portuguese, much to the surprise, probably, of many people. Allow me then to pose a loaded question: Would we be happier, would we communicate any better or look forward to a brighter future if we had chosen to speak and write in a language that was more widespread, predominant, and universal? There are undoubtedly reasons why someone would answer yes to this question, and yet this is not the position defended by the Angolan and Mozambican writers who just a few weeks ago, in Luanda and Maputo, called my attention to something that I had never considered. They explained to me, in all seriousness, that if, for example, they had written in English, they would find themselves now submersed in an immense ocean of Anglophone authors from around the world; whereas, writing in Portuguese, they at least enjoy the advantages afforded them by the *difference* they represent. They are therefore *others*, who can benefit from the curiosity that seeks out that which is qualitatively *distinct*. As this example clearly demonstrates, there are not merely disadvantages to speaking and writing in the language of the minority... which, as we have seen, is not such a small group after all, when

we consider that we are on the road to 200 hundred million people and are unlikely to stop at this number.

We may be compelled, then, to speak and write in different languages spread across this vast world, either out of a unilateral necessity for communication or when the simple pleasure to extend our knowledge possesses us. And yet, we must always be prepared to defend, through its practice and study, the common tree of the Portuguese language with its diverse national expressions, a tree whose branches spread out over the Earth, casting a shadow that we recognize as no less than the projection of our mutual heritage. There are those who contend that languages have no need for a savior, that a language is an extremely adaptable, living organism and that this capacity for continuous adaptation is the very stuff of life. All of this is indeed true. In this day and age, however, a language that does not defend itself will die. It suffers not a sudden death, but rather one of gradual disintegration through consumption that may take centuries to complete, thus creating the illusion of a language that is long-lived, and which, in turn, cultivates the indolence and masks the complicity, consciously or subconsciously, of its suicidal speakers. Clearly we would have our language avoid this fate. Fortunately, we are at this moment at a university in which Portuguese Studies have prospered and where our hope for its future development will undoubtedly solidify its achievements. It is my ardent desire, as a writer and a Portuguese, that your endeavors be fully realized. I am confident that I share this sentiment with the Portuguese immigrants in the State of Massachusetts, whom I cordially address as well.

To conclude, Honorable Chancellor, I would like to express my gratitude to the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth for bestowing upon me the honor of including me among its own. I shall strive always to be worthy of this honor and to live up to the thoughtfulness with which you welcomed me to your house, a place that, henceforward, I shall also consider my own. Thank you very much.