

Adelaide Festival of Arts – 28 February – 5 March 2010

Adelaide Writers' Week

Pioneer Women's Memorial Gardens

Wednesday 3 March – Solo Session, 12:45

MEET THE AUTHOR: Cristovão Tezza

I would like to start by thanking the organisers of the Adelaide Festival of Arts for inviting me to come from Brazil to Australia to take part in this wonderful literary event. It has been a great opportunity for me to get to know this marvellous country so far away from my own. Judging from Adelaide, I would say that Australia is the country closest to a utopia that I have ever known. As a writer, it is indeed a pleasure to be here in Australia at a time when my book, *The Eternal Son*, has been translated and published beautifully into its first English edition by Scribe Publishers. It has been a privilege to participate in the Festival and to personally meet and exchange ideas with so many writers from the English speaking world. I would especially like to thank Dr. Denise MacLeod who has generously translated my presentation to you. Needless to say, I take full responsibility for this strange sounding English that you are now hearing.

My literary background, or how I came to be a writer (one of those mysterious questions so difficult to answer), is related to Brazil's recent history of the last forty or fifty years. In the nineteen-sixties when I began writing, the world was experiencing great changes which had serious repercussions for Brazilian history. I will give you a brief outline. From an economic perspective, Brazil lived through an intense industrialisation which transformed what was basically a rural and agrarian country into a country that was predominantly urban and industrial. From a social perspective, there was a swift and significant population migration from the country to the city. This resulted in the well-known negative effects of urban expansion and poverty in the outskirts of the big cities which were incapable of absorbing the increasing population. There were also some positive effects due to an expansive and emerging urban middle class who began demanding improvements in the education and social fields.

Another significant factor of the nineteen-sixties which gave us lasting consequences was that of the political spectrum. Teetering on the edge of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States was Brazil which suffered a military coup that installed a dictatorship for the two decades which would follow.

My youth was marked by this political moment that profoundly affected, not only those in Brazil who wanted to be associated with literature and the arts in general - but all aspects of Brazilian life. At the same time in the rest of the world during the sixties, the impact of these great changes in traditions and values were also reflected in the rebellious Brazilian youth.

And so, in the midst of all this tension, I began writing. On the one hand, I had a desire to become a citizen of the world through literature, to transcend the limits of the Brazilian province; on the other hand, there was the idea that artistic activity only gained its true value if it were an ethical process that involved all aspects of life. Therefore, the initial idea that I formed as a writer and as an artist was that Art and Life were inseparable entities.

Right, this was typically a nineteen-sixties' point of view, a type of mantra of the era, when the idea of creating Art became critically confused with the idea of living. As an example, the Beatles were not just a band to listen to in a bar; they represented a lifestyle. There were several mythical and mystical features that were significant for my generation. For example, there was a certain suspicion of reason, a search for an alternative "unofficial" understanding, let us say, in the areas of religion and culture. There was a rediscovery of Eastern values. In the arts in general, artistic work was understood as an existential type of performance, of acting, that did not have conventional or defined limits. This was fairly evident in the theatre, where plays and shows began to leave the closed stages and spill out into the streets and public places. To some degree, there was also a Rousseau-like *cult of nature* that we can now see consolidated and reflected in the great ecological movements of today. Among the key-words that defined the ethics of this generation was that of "authenticity" – we wanted to be "true to ourselves".

Politically, this youthful authenticity was often code for the decision to use armed violence, perhaps one of the most terrifying mistakes of my generation. The example of Cuba – which is today a country overwhelmed by its revolution – was taken seriously by a generation of thinkers who did not see any positive attributes in the "bourgeoisie democracy", as it was called at the time. In Brazil, the omnipresence of the military dictatorship ended up sparking its own violent counterpart. We were all "anti", so there was no ethical way to defend the dictatorship.

So, in brief, that was the social framework in which I learned to be a writer. Looking at it now in hindsight, some forty years later, it all seems like a grand comedy of errors, but at that time when these events were taking place they were really taken very seriously. If there is a recurrent characteristic of that era, it is the absence of cynicism. If that generation had

been a little more cynical or, at least, a little less emotionally involved in the political sense, perhaps some of these mistakes could have been avoided.

I remember that I felt so inadequate in that world at that time that I did not even want to go to university. At the age of seventeen and eighteen, I was firmly convinced that university would destroy me as a person and as a writer. (Even today I still do not know if I was right, but if I had not made that crazy decision back then, perhaps today my English would be much better...).

In fits and starts I tried all the alternative means of surviving until, at the age of thirty, I finally succumbed to the idea of university. I ended up lecturing, completing a PhD, and spending twenty-four years teaching and writing academic textbooks at the National University of Paraná until last month when I resigned at last. As a matter of fact, today, the third of March, is my third day of not being a teacher, and I am especially happy to make this official announcement here in Adelaide. There could not be a better scenario for my new life.

I have now returned to being a full-time writer. In a way, it is as if only now I could have, in effect, realised my childhood dream of making life coincide with art, a task which is, by the way, almost always impossible.

Of course, being a teacher was a means of sustaining my literature. Since nineteen-eighty, I have published thirteen novels and a collection of short stories. I also regularly write articles in Brazilian newspapers and magazines about national and international literature.

If I am asked what it is that I write about (always a difficult question to ask a writer because, in general, contrary to what common sense would dictate, writers are creatures who do not really know what they do), I would say that I am deeply interested in understanding human relationships in everyday urban life in the city. I think that fiction-writing is perhaps the most suitable language to describe that subtle awareness which indeed takes place when people meet each other. It is probably best to leave the definition somewhere here - a little bit vague as it really should be. As for the rest, what matters is the literature itself, which never gives us definitive answers, only ever helpful clues.

So everything seemed to go quite well, at least from a practical point of view, in my life as a writer. However, in nineteen-eighty, something extraordinary happened. Here I quote a famous line by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Brazil's greatest poet, who said: "Tinha uma pedra no meio do caminho / There was a stone in the middle of the road". This stone in the middle of the road was the most remarkable event in my life: it turned out that my first child had Down's syndrome. Having a first child is already a

defining and worrisome time in a person's life – which is never the same after having a baby - so you can imagine the degree to which a special child would be particularly unsettling.

Looking back at that time now, what is interesting is that this life-changing event never became a part of my writing, that is, I always thought of my child as being a strictly personal problem, belonging exclusively to just me and my life. It never even entered my mind that I could write about him. There would be nothing to say, I thought, and everything I *may* be able to say would result in bad literature. I would make the fatal mistake of dabbling in the areas of religion, or self-help, or psychological counselling, or I may find myself in a particular type of sentimental or self-pitying literature that would end up exposing me, would expose my son and ultimately ruin me. So, I had set around me all of the snares and traps that would prevent me from writing a good book, if I decided to go ahead and write about the subject.

Literature is not confession, nor is it therapy I kept saying and with good reason actually. Literature can represent a confession and can represent an act of catharsis, but it can never be confused with the two. In this way, the dream of art as performance which, in a way, I nurtured in my youth could not resist its first test. The theme of a child with special needs, or any topic related to it, had not appeared in any book I'd written over the last twenty years. I had created a literary taboo for myself.

Around the beginning of the noughties decade, the idea of writing about this experience began to pop up in the back of my mind for the first time. This might have been because my son had finally stopped being a “problem”, that is, at least, he was not any more of a problem than we would normally have in a relationship with any child. I began to feel spurred on by the idea that I alone had created, that it would be a cop-out to go through life without ever confronting this issue. It would be personal and professional cowardice as an author, I would tell myself, in an effort to give a dramatic flourish to my simple desire to write about my experience.

At first, for a moment I thought about writing an essay, a study, something that was less emotional and more distant, but I soon realised that it would not work. I was not really qualified to write about the relationship between a father and a special needs child. Strictly speaking, that was the domain of a doctor, of a psychologist, not exactly a fiction writer. My experience in the area was limited exclusively to my own son. It would be a very limited case study indeed as a pretext for an essay. What did I know of other parents? Or of the hundreds of problems affecting “special needs” children in the world? Absolutely nothing.

Next, I thought about writing something totally autobiographical, a tribute to my son, maybe composed of bits and pieces of things I remembered, a few anecdotes, my recollection removed from my experience of being a father. But here too my efforts failed – I needed some kind of fictional uniformity for me to feel really free. Speaking in the first person is very difficult for me and so as soon as I start to avoid the truth and tell lies, all biographic intention disappears.

Finally, I decided on the format of a novel, and I transformed myself into a character; a character, however, that is subjected to a narrator who knows him extremely well and who makes every effort to get under his skin, a cruel narrator, as they should all be. In a way, I needed the detachment of the narrator to control the emotional intensity of the character and only fiction could give me that power.

This was how *The Eternal Son* was born - with a father split into two. It is a story which is, of course, based almost entirely on real events in my life. I do insist, though, that it is a work of fiction. When I say that it is a story and not a biography, I do so thinking about the language that gives meaning to the story, which is, the language and the perspective of fiction. There is no relevance in the book as to whether the facts are real or not; in a biography however, the essential facts are absolutely unavoidable. The reader of a biography signs a “pact of factual truth” with the biographer, yet in fiction this has no importance whatsoever. In my book, the father becomes the character completely, and this was the very secret which allowed me to continue writing my story, after several fruitless attempts. I wrote the book in the third person and this gave me the immense freedom of narration.

There are two narrative angles. One of them is the father and son relationship or, more to the point, the slow and painful process of the father trying to assimilate his son (not necessarily an act of acceptance), to eventually allow him to adjust to his own life. In this way, the son’s simple existence unavoidably changes the father’s existence, no matter what he does. This process is one of the themes of the novel.

In the other angle of the novel, which is told through the use of flashbacks which merge with the present narrative moment, the father recalls the story of his own education. The great question he poses is: why have all the utopian and idealistic ideas and dreams about mankind, the ideas which nurtured his education and made him a writer, been so distressingly useless in face of his son’s reality? This man, who was so conscientiously prepared through literature and his dreams of a better world, to accept difference, proved himself to be rudely incapable of coming to terms with it, the moment it appeared before him. The book tries to retrace the father’s

steps to, who knows, maybe try to discover where it was that he went wrong.

So there you have it: that is the theme of *The Eternal Son*. Before closing I would like to share with you a question that Brazilian readers are always asking me: “What does my son think of the book, and what does he think about how he is represented in it?” Well, perhaps here is another key to the story: my son has no concept of reading at all. Books for him are objects which are defined by the colour or design of their cover, by their size, or by their illustrations but never by their words. His writing skills are developed enough that he can copy letters which is a skill he uses to search the football club websites, his favourite hobby. (He is a proud supporter of *Clube Atlético Paranaense*, like his father.) However, he does know that he is the subject of the book and sometimes at home he introduces himself to people who come to visit with a cheerful and proud “*Oi! Eu sou o filho eterno! / Hi! I am the eternal son!*”

In a certain way, the fact that the son will never read what the father has written is perhaps, literally at the heart of the novel. The father will have to accept this relationship which will always be just a perpetual present moment. And that, in itself, is another story.

Now, Dr. Denise will read an excerpt from my novel.

Thank you all for your kind attention.

(Translated by Dr. Denise MacLeod)