



Closing Ceremony 2016

Speech by the Paolo Rumiz

Exiles and Ulysses' lesson

Dear students, ladies and gentlemen,

Over the last few months, I have met many fugitives searching for a haven.

One morning, I was in a small railway station in Liguria, in the North West of Italy, waiting for a train to Marseilles, in France. The weather was fantastic, the sea slightly choppy. The full moon was migrating behind the mountains.

In the waiting room between platforms 2 and ,3 a man and a woman in their thirties were sleeping curled up on some cardboard. There was a young two-year old child between them, with dark hair, a pale and exhausted look, yet so sweet in his abandon. Syrians. Their intimacy was evident to anyone looking through the windows of the waiting room, yet everyone pretended not to see them, out of discretion or an instinct of removal.

That heart-wrenching nativity in the middle of a crowded station was the “symphonic” perception of the tragedy that is taking place and the helplessness that surrounds it, far more so than the images of dead people in the trucks or on the boats. This Trinity of Liguria was there to summarize ourselves, our millenary destiny. It spoke of individuals, not numbers. It obliges us to become familiar with the existential condition of the exiled, similar to that of the Spanish Jew who still carries the key to the house he lost five centuries ago, or the war refugee who, in a poem by Brecht, has a brick in his suitcase to prove he once had a home.

...

You’ve understood: I’m going to talk to you about refugees, the theme of the moment. About people fleeing from the war and crossing frontiers. I know quite a bit about this topic. I was born in Trieste, a few steps from a country that no longer exists, Yugoslavia. And that’s not all. Just like the “Midnight children” by the Indian author Salman Rushdie, I was born on the same night in which the frontier was drawn up to define the new legal status of my land.

It was December 20th, 1947, and the Anglo-American soldiers together with Tito’s troops, exchanging Long Size cigarettes and glasses of *Slivovica*, cheerfully planted the dividing stakes while my mother ruptured her amniotic sack. My grandmother, who was born in 1890, had learned to live with the tragicomedy of Europe’s most mobile frontier. Without ever leaving Trieste, she had lived under six flags: the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Kingdom of Italy, the German Reich, the Yugoslav Federation, the Allied Military Government, and the Italian Republic.

...

Ever since I was born, my life has been marked by frontiers. I have experienced Tito’s Yugoslav frontier, the flight from Soviet repression in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the harshness of the frontier controls when entering Communist Russia. In the 70s, on my way by train to Moscow, while exiting Hungary in the midst of a heavy storm, the train was lifted onto jacks to adapt the carriage to the

different width of the Russian rails. It was an endless wait, in a huge railway area, amongst Alsatian dogs and rolls of electrified barbed wire, just like in Auschwitz.

Then the bipolar world ended. In June 1989 the iron curtain between Austria and Hungary fell (I still have a piece of the fencing from that day), then the Berlin Wall suffered the same fate. On December 21st of that same year, the barrier into Romania was opened with a smile by the same policeman who had turned me back just 24 hours earlier. It suddenly seemed the world was moving towards unlimited openings. Capitalism was so certain of having won across the planet that one of the minds in the US State Department, Francis Fukuyama, dared to proclaim "The end of History".

It was a reckless declaration, because it was immediately followed by disillusion. Just over one year later, during a night in the Spring of 1991, while I was sleeping in a wagon-lit on my way to Belgrade, Croatian soldiers climbed on board and rummaged through my luggage, obliging some Serbs to get off, accompanied by blasphemy. It was the start of the Balkan war. The first European war since 1945.

Ten years later I experienced a new illusory opening when I entered Afghanistan on a convoy of trucks full of happy Pakistani Mujaheddin armed to the teeth. Those men, who were going to fight the Taliban, opened the road for me to Jalalabad and Kabul, where I remained for two months.

Here too, it seemed like the beginning of liberty – I remember my newspaper insisting on believing in the full liberation of women in a world where they had been subordinated for thousands of years – and it turned out to be the beginning of unending suffering. The same illusion repeated itself in Iraq, in Syria, in Libya. Instead of liberation, there was civil war and millions of refugees fleeing towards the happy lands of the European Union, where peace had reigned uninterrupted for 70 years.

One by one, the bastions of secularism gave way to religious fundamentalism. On the other side, the world that had deluded itself that it could live without frontiers began to build walls. Never have there been as many as in the last ten years. History has decidedly not gone the way the brains of the ministries and the professors of geopolitics wanted.

...

From my town I have seen refugees arriving since I was born. I saw the Istrians fleeing from Tito, the Hungarians fleeing from the Soviet repression, the Kurds fleeing from Turkey or Iraq, the Africans fleeing from hunger, the Croats and Bosnians fleeing from the Yugoslav massacre, the Serbs fleeing from the Croatian troops, the Albanians fleeing from the Serb repression. And now Syrians and Afghans.

They may look different, but no: it's the same film. Behind the ethnic clash, whether religious or national, lies pillage. The war waged by a band of well-armed "primitives" against a defenceless "evolved" people. Predatory acts committed at the expense of builders of resources in an ever tighter world. Plunderers who ennoble their theft with the idea of a nation, with identity, religion or ideology. And the refugees arrive, they fill the railway stations, the roads and the newspapers but we still do not have a language to define them. Strategists call them "collateral effect". And we waver between words such as refugee, foreigner, migrant, illegal immigrant, fugitive. Such swerving in an alphabetic void demonstrates our embarrassment, our struggle to understand.

Yet, faced with this great escape, there is a word which I feel helps us to understand: "Exiles". We are facing an exile, a biblical event, apparently unstoppable, and to understand the phenomenon, it would be better to read the Exodus or the Expulsion of the Jews from Sefarad – Spain – rather than a text on world geopolitics.

But who is the exile, really? What do we know about him or her?

To understand our ignorance, a phenomenal dialogue from the film "Grand Budapest Hotel" is of help. A dialogue between the maître, Mr. Gustave, and Zero, his very young assistant of Arab origin. "What led you – says the European in an irritated tone – to leave your country and cover long distances to become a poor immigrant in a refined and cultured society which would have survived admirably

even without you?”. The other answers: “War. My father was killed, my family executed by a platoon, our village burned to the ground and the survivors forced to leave. I left my country because of the war.” Gustave: “I understand. So you are a refugee. In which case, I take everything back. I’m a real idiot, an egoistic bastard. That is shameful and not in keeping with the standards of the Budapest Hotel”.

This exchange contains everything. It very effectively summarizes the situation these days. Europeans have forgotten what war means and they are faced with castaways on a scale unknown before. The Syrian exiles of today never ever considered leaving until anarchy broke out. They were fine where they were and were aware of having lived in a country that was, until just a few years ago, relatively tolerant. But for us they remain numbers, not people. They disturb our quiet life and force us to think.

...

For us to consider a refugee as a person, we have to understand what goes through the mind of someone who in desperation ends up in a foreign country. We should approach him but we don’t know where to start. Yet history is full of migrations, shipwrecks and populations on the move. History has always been made by the tireless feet of homo sapiens, by the determination of those whose bridges are cut off behind them and who face the black sea to search for a better life. In this case too, rather than in the analyses of the US Department of State, in the studies of the Foreign Office or in the arid statistical forecasts of the European Union, it is useful to look to ancient times. Earlier, I spoke about the Exodus in the Bible. Now I would like to talk about another key book: Homer’s Odyssey. Ulysses embodies the castaway par excellence. He is the symbol of all those who cross an unknown space to survive. He is a war veteran who has lost all his companions in the desperate circumnavigation of the seas. He wanders for ten years without finding his final shore. He was at the mercy of a storm on a raft for seventeen days, then the waves took him away and flung him naked, exhausted and famished onto an unknown beach, which turned out to be the island of the Phaeacians.

...

Before being shipwrecked, Odysseus says:

“At sea, I reached the peak of my suffering. A quick death is now certain. Three and four times more blessed were all the Greeks who died in the vast land of Troy. Would that I had met a death like theirs! I would have gained funeral rites; I would have earned the fame of the Achaeans. Now I have to suffer a miserable death.”

We are entering the mind of those who cross the Mediterranean on the boats of the despairing. What is the sea to them? The Greeks have many names for it. “Thalassa”, which means a mass of water. “Als” which means a salty element. “Pelagos”, a surface separating islands. But the strongest term is “pontos”, loaded with a terrible ambivalence. On the one hand, it is “that which unites”, hence the Latin word “pons” (bridge). On the other hand, it is the unknown space to face up to. This double meaning is typical of languages from the classical era. “Enemy” and “Guest”, in Latin, come from the same root: “Hostes” e “Hospes”. The same applies to the frontier area: “limes”, which is a fortified frontier, closure, defence, and “limen” which means passage way, beginning of a new world. Janus, the god of beginnings and doorways, has two faces: one looking out and one looking in. For Ulysses, “pontos” is hope and damnation. Exactly like for the today’s fugitives, it is the only route to salvation and a possible tomb.

...

What is the state of mind of a fugitive who sees salvation within grasp? Let’s read Homer again. When Ulysses nears an unknown island, the first thing he asks himself is whether the rule of hospitality is applied on that land or not. He has already had some bad experiences. The Laestrygonians and the Cyclops massacred his companions and he is afraid of a repeat.

Hospitality in Greek is “Filoxenia”, from the word “Xenos”, foreigner. It is a rule of life that is very dear to the gods. On the other side is destructive fury, the so-called “Hybris”. Ulysses lands on the island of the

Phaeacians, does not know how he will be received and asks himself: "Alas poor me! Among what manner of people am I fallen? Are they savage and uncivilized or hospitable and fearful of the anger of the gods?"

He is naked, exhausted from the effort, ugly to the sight. He is perfectly aware of frightening whoever he might meet. He knows this would considerably complicate his approach with the island's inhabitants. This is the situation in which he meets Nausicaa, the king's daughter and whom the gods pushed with her maids towards the shore where Odysseus was sleeping.

We are in a crucial book of the *Odyssey*, the sixth. It summarizes all the delicacy of a situation that is as old as mankind: the encounter with a fugitive who knocks on your door. Meeting someone who is fleeing entails ambiguity. You do not know whether they come with a hostile intent or not. Encountering an enemy is much more simple because the enemy immediately declares himself as such and allows you to prepare your defences.

...

Book six, verse 137. Here is how Ulysses reveals himself to Nausicaa and her maids.

"He presented a fearsome aspect, caked in salt, and they took fright and flew across the jugged shore". The young girls flew but Nausicaa stood her ground. The rules of hospitality restrained her. These rules are founded on a very important premise: there could be a God hiding behind any foreigner. The *Odyssey* is full of gods camouflaged as strangers. So Nausicaa offers Ulysses the chance to speak. She wants to listen to him, to learn something about him.

And Ulysses talks, and reveals himself according to precise rules, and after a long preamble. First of all, he implores, then praises the divine beauty of the virgin before him, then summarizes his adventures. Only at the end does he ask for something, something simple: "may I have a cloth to cover myself". He concludes with a wish: "may the gods grant you the sweetness of a wedding and a hearth."

Nausicaa's reply also follows precise rules. One: she recognises the stranger's dignity from his words. Two: she recognises his suffering and his right to implore. Three: she states she is willing to help him. Four: she reassures her maids. Five: she arranges for food and drink for him. Six: she has clothes brought to restore his dignity.

...

Ulysses eats hungrily, gets dressed and regains all his beauty and dignity. This, and the power of his story, help him to convince the king of the Phaeacians to give him a ship to return to Ithaca, his homeland.

His adventure shines light on the sacred commandments of the ancient Greeks' "Filoxenia". These are: 1) first I welcome you, and only after do I ask you who you are and where you are from, 2) the arrival of a stranger is a perfect occasion for celebration, 3) the act of welcoming establishes an eternal bond because destiny can play nasty tricks and those who welcome today may find themselves in need of a welcome tomorrow, 4) hospitality restores dignity and identity to those who are welcomed through the narration of their adventures, 5) a stranger's story is a present for the host.

...

The present that today's exiled people give us is telling us that the truth about today's world and its seven billion souls is not our evening cocktail and the warm greenhouse in which the Western world lives, but the war over the last remaining resources. And it also tells us that the exiles on the move, in the midst of so many castaways, will find a shore. Just as Ulysses did. They will find it despite the terrorist attacks, despite the mafias that exploit them, despite our fences and our fears.

Immigration is an inescapable destiny that we can either endure or govern. Nothing can stop a twenty-year-old whose stomach is empty and head is full of dreams. The eyes of the refugees are often more lively than ours. Their children brighter and hungrier for life. It is also for this reason that we are afraid of them. We fear they are stronger than we are.