

## Laudatory / laudatory speech Prof. Dr. Alfonso de Toro / 09.17.2015

“Behind the gate”

*Dear audience, muy estimado Prof. Dr. Alfonso de Toro,*

It is a tremendous pleasure and honor for me to give some laudatory words to *el profe* on behalf of his PhD and postdoctoral students in order to provide an insight into the attention and care he provides to his scientific offspring. I was asked to give a personal speech, and it will become personal already at the beginning, starting with the fact that I was scientifically adopted by him, despite the fact that I came from a less popular Institute of Romance Languages in Saxony. He received and supported me with hospitality and continues to support me to this day.

I entitled this laudatory speech “Behind the gate”, following Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” (first written in German we call it as well *Türhüterlegende*). What would have happened, if the law-seeking man from the country had approached the gate and the gatekeeper – or MS Steinberg – had not said, „but not now“? What would happen then behind the door to the office of *el profe*?

But let me just digress from the gate-concept for a moment and start with an anecdote. When I gave my PhD defense speech, I could hardly concentrate the whole time. I felt stumbling over my words and thoughts – a normal process. What helped me to stand this never-ending stressful moment, was the concentration held by Profesor de Toro. He focused his gaze on me and wouldn't look away. It was he who maintained the tension, not I. As I spoke, I thought, “wow, el professor de Toro is holding *Mula Banda*,” a rudimental yoga practice to maintain attention and concentration.

But let’s return to the physical place of the door. We know gates and doors are considered liminal spaces. To recall Turner’s concept of social liminality (1960/70s), he defines individuation as a "movement through liminal space and time, from disorientation to integration....What takes place in the dark phase of liminality is a process of breaking down...in the interest of "making whole" one's meaning, purpose and sense of relatedness '. Between-ness defines those spaces and a definitively liminal condition predominates the gate of de Toro’s office.

Except for the PhD or postdoctoral student himself, how a supervisor nurtures his or her candidate is unfortunately of little interest. There is no bonus-program, no statistics for a qualitatively high supervisor-relationship, no indicators for someone who takes his responsibility to supervise the delicate process of a creation of a PhD seriously. Once accepted

as a PhD-student of de Toro, if geographically possible, the attendance at the weekly colloquium is mandatory. At least once, normally twice a semester you have to present your results, meaning texts, or an outline to your future results. Ahora bien. What is really striking during this creative process is what really happens “Behind the gate”. Let me describe it.

The appointments normally last two hours. So, two hours sitting face to face and reading line by line, smoke coming from your brain (sometimes cigarettes), a cup of tea, profound discussions, recommendations, and constructive criticism. One always had sufficient time to review the writing, just then we had to present in the arena of the colloquium. After two hours “Behind the gate”, I always felt like having run a marathon through Borges’ Library of Babel or like meditating with an infinite book. The threshold, le seuil, el umbral, die Schwelle of Prof. de Toro’s office represents a liminal space of knowledge that helps overcome disorientation with his highly inspiring and motivating support, his curiosity, interest and remarkable capacity of enthusiasm.

In addition, he gave good advice on how to combat nervousness. Seduce your audience, a speech is a kind of performance. Short before handing in the thesis, he recommended going jogging regularly, abstaining from alcohol (or at least drinking less) and sleeping without an alarm clock at least once a week. It wasn't only his advice that provoked envy amongst my PhD colleagues at other universities; they suffered from a complete absence of supervision. Some would meet their supervisors just on the day of the defense and it was obvious that the supervisor had hardly read their thesis.

A few days ago, el Prof. de Toro told me that candidates are writing him from all over the world, because they wish to be supervised by him. They know why they insist on having him and it’s good that they do so. In Kafka’s parable “Before the law”, the waiting period is described as follows: “The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, but at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet.” I hope that as much candidates as possible overcome your threshold and enter to office to train and multiply the ideas of Prof. de Toro scientific work. Thank you so much; muchísimas gracias en nombre de todos y todas.