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Laudatio

In celebration of Alfonso de Toro's 65th birthday, University of Leipzig
September 17, 2015

GREET guests of honor....

Alfonso de Toro, Claudia Gatzemeier, René Ceballos, esteemed colleagues, friends, family members of Alfonso de Toro, and honored guests,

Good things come in threes. Twice before have I given a *laudatio* in this very room, not for today's guest of honor, but for the tenth and twentieth anniversary, the latter of which was just last year, of the foundation of Leipzig's Ibero-American Research Seminar, created in January of 1994 by Alfonso de Toro and successfully directed by him since that time. As a friend and colleague, I found it considerably simpler when the **Institute** was the subject of this encomiastic type of laudatory text. But I agreed immediately when the Chair staff requested this *laudatio*. For one thing, I am especially honored to have been selected for this complex task. Further, I agreed to take on this challenge due to my esteem for Alfonso de Toro on a personal and professional level. And because good things come in threes, I would like to offer this audience three different facets: First, a few remarks on Alfonso de Toro as a **friend**, then a look at his **organizational genius**, and finally, the **scholar** and his oeuvre.

First. Honoring my friend in this *laudatio* (**my working title**: *laus tauri*) brings to mind diverse thoughts of intensive, not unheated, but thereby interesting discussions (on long car rides, for example); one particular memory stands out of a gondola ride, not in Venice, but in Leipzig; of a restaurant in this city of

yours and mine, or of *chupe de locos* (which is in truth perfectly appropriate and which has nothing to do with crazy people!) at Azul Profundo, my favorite restaurant in Santiago de Chile's *barrio de Bellavista*, as well as of several shared bottles of wine. (I am not sure to what extent the Chilean vineyards Concha y Toro are related to Alfonso family. But I am sure that your family, dear Alfonso, has no possessions in the revered wine country of Toro in Spain. Nevertheless, here is a bottle for you from this area, for of course: If it says Toro, then Toro should drink it. In the past I have piqued your interest with a different Spanish wine, Marqués de Riscal – but enough of that.) Now, on the same date, we both depart from our university teaching and administrative careers. Starting October first, we'll enter the much-coveted period of retirement and rest – or should I say unrest. I am sure it will suit us, delight us, and inspire us, just as much as a good bottle of wine.

I met my friend Alfonso de Toro, dear guests, not only as an elegant and metropolitan citizen of the world, as we all know and esteem him, but also as – in contrast to myself – a connoisseur of music who leaves the dabbler far behind. That not music, but literature, would become his calling, was long unclear; and this delighted me even more, as I myself am unmusical. Since the early nineties, from when our joint volume was published by Reichenberger, to the current Spanish novel, my friend Alfonso de Toro, the aesthete and energetic lover of literature, has been a sometimes pugnacious, but always reliable and solid person with one skill that you truly do not see every day: the readiness to remain open, to listen, not to be cowed, but (not always, but in certain justified cases) to be convinced. There are probably people, dear Alfonso, who, unlike myself, never see this side of you, or who only get a small glimpse of it. For this reason, I insist on highlighting this ability to accept advice, and on thanking you for all of the advice, recommendations, corrections, and tips that you have given me. In short, thank you for joining me over the past twenty years in a process between Berlin and Leipzig of fruitful dialogue that has far exceeded mere verbal exchange. Thank you too for everything that I have learned. – So much about my friend, Alfonso.

Second, I would like to continue by talking about the **Organizer** Alfonso de Toro, and here there is truly much to tell. Those of us who are involved in the day-to-day activities of an institute of higher education know what it means, in addition to serving as Chair, to direct a complex institution like the Ibero-American Research Seminar, to conduct numerous conferences, and at the same time, to support young scholars effectively, without neglecting the less popular academic administrative duties, one's own. I know – and I now know that many who see Alfonso's daily work agree wholeheartedly – no one who accomplishes the sort of multitasking required of professors in today's academic world with such aplomb, even bravado, as Alfonso de Toro.

Of his various tasks I would first like to mention his **publications**, because they are the core of de Toro's academic management activities. Among the four peer-reviewed series with their international Boards of Editors that Alfonso de Toro edits I will first name – and please forgive my personal bias – the 57 volume *TKKL/Theorie und Kritik der Kultur und Literatur*. Its list of titles reads like an overview of the central innovative topics and people of recent Latin American studies, with works treating the most important themes in recent theory and debate, from the new historic novel to migration, from models of hybridity to gender questions, from globalization to otherness. And, dear Alfonso, dear guests, *as a line consists of an endless number of points, a plane of an endless number of lines, a volumetric shape of an endless number of planes*, as Borges correctly pointed out in his *Libro de arena*, then the TKKL series is, of course, a *hypervolume*, which Borges places above the volume, or the collection. As a true hypervolume, this series will go down in the national and international cultural history of Latin American Studies. I think in the entire world, there is no other series that even comes close to tracing and influencing Latin American culture theory with such intensity and comparative consistency. Those who have insight into the typically quite hairy and often thankless business of regular publishing will be astounded at the more than **one hundred** books that Alfonso de Toro and his staff have produced within these

four series: in addition to TKKL, we see *Theorie und Praxis des Theaters*, *Passagen. Transdisziplinäre Kulturperspektiven*, and *Transversalität* (with L'Harmattan).

Not just a few of the publications are related to the **projects** that de Toro has initiated and conducted. I think now of those supported by the DFG, the large project running from 1997 to 2003 called *Diversity of discourses. Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Communication in the Context of Post-Modernism and Post-Coloniality*. I think of the more than 100 scientists and scholars that were involved and the 11 volumes that emerged (of which my volume on *Cultura gay y lesbiana en Latinoamérica* was the last, if I recall correctly).

The second DFG funded research undertaking, accompanied by conferences, that I wish to name is *Archivos de la Memoria*, the Archive of Memory, a project carried out with the Pontificia Universidad Católica, Santiago, and with Argentine and U.S. American scholars. It dealt with the central paradigm in the Humanities of the recent age, memory cultures, from a transdisciplinary perspective centered on Latin America. This project brought us together not just in Leipzig, but also in Santiago de Chile.

As one of the former Board members of the Association of German Hispanists, when talking of our master organizer, I think of the 13th German Hispanists' Day in 2001, conducted by Alfonso de Toro in Leipzig. This was one of the most successful of our Association's events. Last, but not at all least, I must mention the **Research Days** initiated for our anniversary and realized with incredible engagement – thirteen in total! – which effectively supported young scholars, and not just our own doctoral candidates! It is clear what *curiositas* means, in the sense of true scientific curiosity, when one sees Alfonso de Toro in dialogue with young scholars. The great number of extremely successful habilitation candidates – most of whom are here – and doctoral candidates is just *one* result of Alfonso de Toro's work.

An organizational team – today we would probably say *organization task force* – must also do **public relations and international networking work**. Here,

too, Alfonso did not require a large team. He himself strove optimally and with great success to establish national and international cooperation: to create academic networks not only with France and Spain, but especially with Chile and the rest of Latin and North America, with the Maghreb, and with Israeli institutions of higher education. Outside of the university sector, he made German Romance and Latin American Studies visible at the Leipzig Book Fair, giving them an audible voice in cooperation with politics. I particularly remember the visit of two Chilean government officials, and the meeting of Latin American diplomats here in Leipzig. He has received some thanks and recognition for this engagement: In 2009, the Chilean government honored him for his service in spreading Chilean culture with the Gabriela Mistral Order. Since 2014, Alfonso de Toro has been a corresponding member of the Chilean Academy of Sciences. Many of us have also had intensive firsthand experience of the fact that Alfonso de Toro never held back in his academic and political endeavors when it came to speaking unpleasant truths in his engagement for the preservation of Leipzig's Romance Studies. These were situations in which the phrase *nomen est omen* proved true, as de Toro fought like a bull, but only with the razor sharp weapon of argument. As an organizer and manager of sciences, de Toro not only filled core scientific terms like internationalization or trans- and interdisciplinarity with life; he also steered the sizeable ship of third-party funds in the amount of no less than **1.2 million euros** into port. — And finally, onto my third point!

Third (and now I come to my central point): the **scholar** Alfonso de Toro. To explain to our guests today that Alfonso de Toro is among the most successful and influential and most esteemed personalities in German Romance and Latin American Studies (especially internationally) will require that we look at his life's work, which I was privileged to witness firsthand. Though we never studied together (when I was called to the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich in 1990, it had already been eight years since you successfully defended your doctoral thesis), you had long been in Northern Germany, and were doing your habilitation in Hamburg. Still, Munich was common ground for

us before we both went on to face the challenges that the former East German institutes of higher education brought with them. In 1994 you were called to Leipzig, and in 1995 I was called to the Humboldt University in Berlin. Your dissertation entitled *Zeitstruktur im Gegenwartsroman* (Tübingen 1985) was a part of the enthusiasm for structuralism of those years, and Leo Pollmann confirmed in a very positive discussion of the work that it was even legible for non-structuralists. It was one of the first studies on the *nouveau roman* (Robbe-Grillet) and important representatives of the *nueva novela latinoamericana* (García Márquez, Vargas Llosa and Rulfo), and I first became acquainted with it in the Spanish version with the better title: *Los laberintos del tiempo*, which was also one of the first contributions of the new TKKL series.

The 1990s were a time of paradigm shift from structuralism to semiotics, and saw the emergence of your habilitation, the impressive and groundbreaking investigation entitled *Von den Ähnlichkeiten und Differenzen. Ehre und Drama des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts in Italien und Spanien*, published in German in 1993 and translated into Spanish in 1998. Today we know that Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus' prediction that this study would become a reference work for the future treatment of the **Ehrdrama** came true. The Westphalian Austrian Schulz-Buschhaus saw in it the "Verbindung von semiotischem ‚esprit de géométrie‘ und literaturhistorischer Erudition".

If you read the near 700 pages of your habilitation work closely, you can see that behind the semiotic apparatus, an interest in cultural theory prefigures that marks your later work. Indeed, you find, on a fold-out overview table, this, and I quote: – "interkulturelle und intertextuelle Referenzmodell des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts", very early evidence of the now omnipresent interculturality from an historical perspective. First, the openness to sociocultural and intercultural questions has made it possible to receive the Baroque **Ehrdrama** no longer as the alternative to unchristian hardness and early forms of absolutist despotism, but to think of honor and *honra* together with pure-bloodedness, with *limpieza de sangre*, an *avant la lettre* feminist approach that is fully drafted in the

second chapter and the implications of which international Hispanic Studies recognized and acknowledged only much later.

But neither narrative temporal structures in the novel nor the problems of the **Ehrdrama** are at the heart of your subsequent, near uncountable and unsummarizeable, thematically branched research. You were driven by academic curiosity in the winding, branching, and often thorny paths of the private gardens of new Anglo-Saxon and Latin American culture theory, the concepts of which you drew on, rethought, developed, and recontextualized. In addition, you specified new models of description, including the postmodern and postcolonial models, with concepts like hybridity, alterity, transversality, spectacularity, transtextuality, liminality, and recently, virtuality. You also supplemented these models with reflections on the terms of rhizome, paradox, the decentral, the metahistorical, and now, diaspora...

Because it would be impossible within this *laus tauri* to mention the nearly 200 publications by Alfonso de Toro or the 37 books that he edited or co-edited, or even to give appropriate praise to his seven monographies, I will have to limit myself to broader topics that pertain to his work, one of the most glowing of which is his work with the eccentric and genius Argentine storyteller, thinker, and translator, Jorge Luis Borges. De Toro reads Borges not only as a predecessor to rhizomatic and postmodern modes of thought, but as a theoretician of knowledge, as an overcomer of logocentrism, and a lender of energy to the imagination of the virtual. And as in Borges' story of the book of Sand, the *Libro de arena*, which always produces new pages, so did new perspectives on Borges and on Latin American culture theory in general spring from de Toro's pen, which has already brought me to the idea that Alfonso may have brought the Aleph out of Borges's story of the same name into the basement at Beethoven Street 17, and that it is this which has allowed him to bring together all of the pillars of the postmodern: Bhabha's spaces, Anderson's images of the nation, Ashcroft's **Schreibbrachen**, Spivak's subaltern, Derrida's grammatologies. All of the key points of academic culture theory are

concentrated in de Toro's publications, just like the seas, pyramids, pillars, and ruins are in the Aleph in the basement of the house in Garay Street.

But on a serious note: Early on, Borges and his monstrosities became **the** challenge for Alfonso de Toro in his academic endeavors. In a professional polylogue with the most important Borges specialists in Germany and the whole world, within the TKKL series, numerous volumes emerged in which the great Argentine storyteller and essayist always conquered new pages, until finally, Alfonso de Toro himself presented the volume *Borges infinito – Borgesvirtual. Pensamiento y Saber de los siglos XX y XXI* in 2008 as the *summa* of his diverse approaches. The 10 chapters of this revolutionary study each take a systematic approach with the goal of confronting the classic-hermeneutic and especially the postmodern literature theory theses on Borges with his own personal, anticanonical reflections. And so de Toro reads Borges – to name just one important example – no longer as the typical fantastic narrator, but, on the basis of numerous prologues, as a **critic** of the fantastic (and as its admirer, where the author is Cervantes and the fantastic book the second part of his *Quixote*). With the turning away from a psychologizing or referential way of writing, Borges (and Bioy Casares) postulate, according to de Toro, an antimimetic, autoreferential *literariedad*, which opens a transition to a method of reading Borges that doesn't only foreshadow the cardinal theorems of the postmodern in the Borgesian worlds, but that also connects these to other, fractal, virtual worlds, and finally to the *world wide web*. Of all of his monographies, de Toro's *Borges infinito Borgesvirtual* is thus the most clearly intermedial, which, as with his important work on Frida Kahlo, includes photography, and it is the most interdisciplinary, as here mathematics and philosophy have no less communicative power than the analytical models of culture and literature.

I was present at one of the many presentations of the work that Alfonso de Toro and Michael Rössner carried out on the stage of Berlin's Instituto Cervantes, and I saw how the audience was fascinated by this new Borges. This fascination is also apparent in the *Presse-Echo*, which, in light of the

presentation of his volume in Buenos Aires on Borges' birthday, could be read in the most important newspaper in the country, *La Nación* (from August 30, 2009).

The article in the Argentine press clearly shows that is all his erudition, knowledge of theory, and expertise, Alfonso de Toro never forgot or neglected the public, and we may even say social, dimension of cultural action in the humanities. Particularly his reflections on colonialism and colonial history as well as on „otherness“ have generally and repeatedly been positioned in a **political** realm (and not only in the sense of constellations internal to institutes of higher education). In light of the often catastrophic treatment of people with the oft-referenced migration background, I would like to quote a passage from de Toro's essay on the „Recodification of Otherness“ from the volume *Andersheit. Von der Eroberung bis zu New World Borders*, a volume published in 2008, the year of my 60th birthday, and that is dedicated to me. For this, Alfonso, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I quote:

„Derjenige, der ‚Aus-länder‘ sagt, macht diese Menschen zu ‚Aus-ländern‘ im Sinne von nicht gleichberechtigten Menschen (...). Dieser Begriff ist unfreiwillig äußerst diskriminierend und wohl ungewollt rassistisch, denn er fußt auf Blut- und Bodenkriterien, die immer noch Bestandteil der Gesetzgebung und nationaler Definitionen von Identität und Kultur sind. Der Begriff ‚Aus-länder‘ oder die Begriffe ‚Fremder‘, bzw. das ‚Fremde‘ und das ‚Eigene‘ schaffen sofort Grenzen, sie markieren den Ausschluss, die ausschließende Differenz, sie sind der Inbegriff dieses Ausschlusses, da Menschen aufgrund ihrer Abstammung (Blut) und Herkunft (Boden), und nicht aufgrund ihres Tuns, z.B. aufgrund eines Verstoßes gegen demokratische Gesetze oder allgemeine menschliche Regeln ausgegrenzt und stigmatisiert werden.“

And later:

Eine solche Begrifflichkeit stammt aus einem binären (nationalen-kolonialen) Denken, das von 1492 bis 1945 grauenvolle Früchte getragen hat und auch heute wieder trägt. (p. 13 f.)

Nevertheless, according to de Toro, there is a concept of cultural action that is based on mutual respect and true civilization:

Kultur hat ... mit einem bestimmten Umgang miteinander, mit Dialogizität, mit Offenheit zu tun. Kultur hat mit Bewegung, mit Nomadismus, mit Schnittstellen zu tun, mit einer hohen Bewusstheit und Reflexivität bezüglich dessen, was heute in der Welt vor sich geht. Kultur hat mit *Anerkennung*, mit *Teilen*, mit *Toleranz* zu tun. (p. 16)

Dear Alfonso, thank you for everything you have given international Romance and Latin American Studies, but especially for these clear words! We will have much time over the coming years to continue to practice culture in this sense, as we stroll amid the gardens of the forking paths in the underbrush of our time. May you continue to follow your path and do your work! I hope and wish for you that creativity will continue to flow, and that you will never lose that mix of skepticism, engagement, and energetic openness! *Enhorabuena, ad multos annos!*