

Madame l'Ambassadeur, Monsieur le Consul, Ambassadors, dignataries and guests ...

When the ancestor who gave me my surname, Guillaume du Toit, came to South Africa almost 350 years ago as a refugee from France, he was forced to abandon not only his fatherland but also his mother tongue. As traumatic as it is to lose one's physical environment, it is even more devastating to lose the invisible spaces of language that shape the world of our thoughts, our dreams, our creativity. Now that I have learnt this tongue of the ancestors again as a foreigner and am able to live and work in this language, I do feel that I have regained a lost world. Therefore I am particularly sensitive, Madame l'Ambassadeur, to this award that recognizes my contribution to the French language and culture. I can only hope that neither I nor my children will ever be forced to give up our new mother tongue, this between-language of Afrikaans that roots us in this continent.

Of course, a teacher like myself, can never achieve anything in splendid isolation. I would like to thank the French government and its representatives in South Africa for their generous support that enabled me to study in France and to further various projects in South Africa. I would like to single out the one service at the Embassy that truly makes an enormous contribution to the promotion of French and francophone culture in South Africa, the Book People, as I call them and particularly two representatives of the Bureau du Livre et des Médiathèques: Jérôme Chevrier and Nathalie Lelong. Without the dedication, the professionalism and the support of my colleagues, especially those present this evening, I would not have been able to continue teaching or doing research in the face of the current market-driven, managerialist onslaught against institutions of higher learning.

My students have always been a source of inspiration and passion and I thank all of them who are here tonight – from one of the earliest (almost thirty years ago – Father Wim, who is not wearing his lovely summer soutane), the crazy team that translated Michel Houellebecq's poetry with me (Joubert and Frances) – to one of the most recent, Lungelo Sikhakane who is a budding, very promising, French-Zulu translator. Over the years a fiercely loyal group of brilliant and patient assistants have helped me clean various Augean stables, Stefan, Liza-Marie, Jaco, Janet. There are friends here tonight who have encouraged me and have served as role models at the same time: the inimitable Mme Éliane May de Lencquesaing with her remarkable zest for life, Lorraine Blumer for her generosity and wit, Naas Steenkamp with his wisdom and humanity, Deon Meyer with his sharp observations of South African Society and finally, the passion and brilliant mind of our own Lorca, poet, Breyten Breytenbach, himself a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. I must also thank my family, Jacques, Matthias and Saskia, for allowing me to spend so much time on my work.

The French language and literature has done more for me than I can ever hope to do in return. It has given me another world in which to read, to write, to think. It has given me another self with other visions, other perspectives. Aussi insignifiante que je sois, je continuerai tant que possible de tenir haut, où que je sois, le flambeau francophone.