

THE ANNUAL JOAN GILI MEMORIAL LECTURE

Joan Francesc Mira

The Domain of the Written Language

The Anglo-Catalan Society
2005

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This is the seventh in the regular series of lectures convened by The Anglo-Catalan Society to be delivered at its annual conference, in commemoration of the figure of Joan Lluís Gili i Serra (1907-1998), founder member of the Society and Honorary Life President from 1979. The object of publication is to ensure wider diffusion, in English, for an address to the Society given by a distinguished figure of Catalan letters whose specialism coincides with an aspect of the multiple interests and achievements of Joan Gili, as scholar, bibliophile and translator. This lecture was given by Joan Francesc Mira at Eton College, London, on the occasion of the Anglo-Catalan Society's fiftieth anniversary conference, 19 December, 2004.

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The author

Joan Francesc Mira (Valencia, 1939) is both an accomplished novelist and one of the foremost intellectuals of the Catalan-speaking territories. He studied philosophy at the Gregorian University in Rome, returning to Valencia to complete his doctorate in 1971. He has worked on cultural anthropology with Claude L vi-Strauss in Paris, founded and ran Valencia's Museum of Ethnology, and for many years was Professor of Greek at the University of Valencia. He has been professor and Head of the Department of European Languages and Cultures at the Universitat Jaume I in Castell  since the early 1990s. Mira has written numerous important works on cultural anthropology, both on tribal communities and on nationalism. The best known of these is his *Cr tica de la naci  pura* (1985). More recent studies have focused on Valencian cultural figures, including *Sant Vicent Ferrer, vida i llegenda d'un predicador* (2002), *La prodigiosa hist ria de Vicent Blasco Ib  ez* (2004) and, perhaps the most powerful international force to have originated in the Catalan-speaking territories, *Els Borja, fam lia i mite* (2000). He has written prize-winning novels, amongst them two of the most significant novels to be published in Catalan in the last quarter of a

century, his historical novel based on the lives of the Catalan family the Borgias in *Borja Papa* (1996) and, more recently, *Purgatori* (2003). He is an accomplished translator; indeed, his prize-winning translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* into Catalan (2000) is perhaps his most impressive achievement.

A common theme in fiction and non-fiction is his reflection on the relationship between space, society and the individual, particularly in the conflictual space of Valencia. He has received numerous prizes for his work, including the Creu de Sant Jordi (1991) and the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes (2004). Whilst he is a defender of the autonomy of the literary field, he has also been a committed political and cultural activist on behalf of Valencian culture. He was President of Acció Cultural del País Valencià until 1999, as well as a member of the Bloc Nacionalista Valencià. He was Vice-President of the International PEN Club from 1995 and 2002, and is currently a fellow and supporter of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans. In the paper reproduced here, Mira responds to contemporary debate over Catalan literature and culture that has arisen in response to events like the International Book Fairs in Guadalajara (2004) and Frankfurt (2007), demands for more political autonomy and recognition in Catalonia, and the contested status of the Catalan language across the Catalan-speaking territories. The defence he makes here of the relationship between language and literature is explored in more depth in *Literatura, món, literatures* (2005).

The Domain of the Written Language

Whilst most sincerely thanking those who have invited me to speak on this occasion, I have to confess, to begin my talk, that I am not entirely sure if I myself, or the subject of my contribution, are the most appropriate in a substantially academic colloquium such as this, amongst so many specialists in well-defined subjects, and in the context of contributions and debates on *New Directions for Catalan Studies*. The area on which I shall make a few comments is not one for scholars, for specialists or researchers, but rather for simple citizens and loyal users of a language. And the manner in which I shall deal with it, briefly and informally, with all certainty cannot be considered either a 'study' or a new direction or a new suggestion for future studies. Or perhaps it is, above all if certain orientations and directions that are more ideological than academic, more political than scientific continue to be held and prosper. For these could eventually affect, and very seriously so, the social and territorial domain of Catalan as a written language, a language that is read, and as a public and published language. If there are studies, done and still to be done, on the long process of restoring a common domain for the formal and literary language, who knows whether in a not too distant future there will have to be, regrettably, other studies on the process of fragmentation of this same domain. God Save the Language, then; as I do hope that we can save ourselves the necessity of such studies. I would like to think that Joan Gili, translator, publisher and author, sixty years ago, of a Catalan Grammar, would agree with the aim and content of this paper. In his honour we are gathered here today.

As for my intention at this time and place, I will talk a little about literature, above all because literature is part of my 'trade', and I will talk about language — written language —, which is the raw material of this trade, the tool with which, and often *on behalf of which*, a servant practices his relationship with the people to whom providence or destiny have assigned the language as close to them and belonging to them. I shall also talk about languages in the history of Europe. In any case, it will not only be an opportune reflection, but probably a necessary one, if we think about the times that the territory or territories of the Catalan language are going through. And more necessary still, perhaps, because this reflection is being made from the Valencian perspective, from the *País Valencià*: it is there above all, not so much in Catalonia nor even in the Balearic Islands, where the problems of linguistic community, of language as a vehicle of culture, of the possibilities of survival with

a minimum of health and comfort at a time of extremely severe pressure from all sides present themselves most acutely. From there, then, more so than from anywhere else, the defence of a common domain is the defence of a domain that is simply one's own, and defending the unity of this domain is the only effective way to keep alive and active the Valencian part of this same shared area. With your permission, I shall say it in a more direct way, and using plain and simple terms: in Catalonia, Catalan could, ultimately, make its way alone as a language of culture (alone means without taking into account what happens or does not happen south of the Sénia River); in the *País Valencià*, Valencian alone could not follow the same path. This is the first conclusion, although not the only one, and I advance it to you from the start.

First, however, I would like to make an incursion into the field of concepts and provide a brief historical survey, because the matter before us has a long history, and ours is not the only case in which the domains of language, culture and supply and demand are blurred and broken. I believe that we should not, as we normally do in our part of the world in good faith, identify the particular field of a language with the frame of a culture. The matter is more complex than it seems, and neither would I like to analyse it in depth nor cast it aside with a few simplificatory statements. None the less, I will make a few elementary statements, in the knowledge that they may provoke debate: that is why I am making them. Firstly, there is not always, not even nearly always, a coincidence between a culture and a language, whatever meaning we may give to the first term. It would be easier in relatively simple and smaller societies, and in conditions of scanty intercommunication. In Classical Greece, for example: wherever Greek was spoken, we can be sure that the non-linguistic aspects of culture — plastic arts, architecture, worship, politics — were also substantially Greek. At least until the Hellenistic and Roman period, when many urban sectors that were hardly Greek in culture knew and spoke the Koine which worked as an 'international' vehicle, a little like English today. In the majority of so-called tribal societies, we can also have the same margin of probability: if you speak Nambya, we know how you bury your dead; if you speak Sindebele, we know how you build your hut and what sort of celebration you have on your wedding day. But we cannot be so sure when talking of such great and complex domains as, for example, the Roman world: everywhere Latin was the learned, urban and official language, and in all imperial provinces you would find one 'learned' architecture, and the same administrative structure; but between Egypt and Britain, for example,

the differences in ethnic substratum and all sorts of other differences were so visible that it would make little sense to affirm that Egyptians and Britons shared one and the same culture. We could talk in similar terms of the culture and cultures of medieval Europe, united by the Church, by Latin, by Romanesque and Gothic architecture and by so many other things, but progressively separated by different languages that gradually gave rise to various literatures and communicative domains more and more coincident with the territory of each language. In the fifteenth century, Catalan culture was first and foremost a regional expression of Christian Western European culture; no different, in this respect, to Italian, Castilian or French culture. But, at the same time, it had developed a range of features that appeared especially in those territories where Catalan is spoken, such as some characteristic aspects of commercial relations, governmental institutions, or the same architecture, that years later was named Gothic. And further, there is a literature that, whether or not it has specific contents and forms, is distinguished from others by the language in which it is expressed.

But Medieval Europe was made up of open spaces, unstable borders, and peoples who were not states with precise administrative limits. In the modern and contemporary world, conditions changed progressively, for better or for worse: territories closed themselves off with rigorously guarded borders; languages — not all of them, of course — became an instrument and the expression of states; and some states, with their language closely following their power, spread beyond their original limits. Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, even though we do not always remember this, Europe was made up entirely of expansive monarchies and empires, both internal and external ones. And in each imperial domain there stretched, by varying means, a sovereign language, which was invariably the language of the sovereign, or the people identified most directly with him or her: Turkish or Russian, German, French, Spanish or English. Because of this, I do not know that we can talk about a Turkish culture that reaches from Anatolia to the Danube, a Russian culture occupying both Turkistan and Finland, or a Spanish culture from Barcelona to Chile.

It seems like wanting to talk for talking's sake, but it is not. For example: in what sense can we talk about, a Romanian or Macedonian culture in the eighteenth century, when in the regions that later would be called Romania and Macedonia the written languages were not Macedonian or Romanian but rather Ecclesiastical Slavonic, German or Transylvanian Hungarian, the Greek of traders or the Turkish

of the imperial administration? Perhaps we could talk about them, about Romanian and Macedonian cultures, but then it would only be an 'anthropological' culture (an inexact expression), a popular culture without the 'learned' dimension, and in any case *not* national cultures. At the other extreme, what have the cultural expressions of postcolonial Mexico, Peru and Argentina got in common, apart from sharing precisely the past of colonies of the same empire, and sharing afterwards the same written language? What I mean is: what sense is there in talking about a 'Hispano-American culture' if it has to include equally the Incan, Quichuan, Guarani, Mayan and Aztec past — and present? It makes little sense, but there is some sense in it: above all it makes sense in that part of culture that we call literature. And the same can be said of a German culture: does it include Austria and Switzerland in the same sense as Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg or not? And is French culture also French in Quebec and Martinique, Belgium, Haiti and the Republic of Geneva? As Fuster would have said talking about the nation, 'the question is a sensitive one'. And the answer is not a simple one. Depending on how and where you look at it, it is the same culture (Rousseau is a 'French' thinker, Mozart is a 'German' composer, T.S. Eliot is an 'Anglo-Saxon' poet...); equally, depending on how and where you look at it, it is not (Amiel is a Swiss philosopher, Schönberg is an Austrian composer and Byron is an English poet). We can complicate things even more, and ask to which culture does the music of the Catalan composer Isaac Albéniz belong — *La Alhambra*, *El Albaicín*, *Rapsodia Española*... —, the Neapolitan painting of the Valencian Josep Ribera, called *lo Spagnoletto*, or the ceramics and pottery produced in Alcora in the eighteenth century by French master craftsmen: whether to Catalan or Spanish culture, or in the latter cases, Italian or Valencian culture. The answer, I leave to the followers of the many forms of non-dialectic nominalism who still inhabit the world. In any case, wanting to talk now about *one* culture as coincident with *one* language would be too long and complicated, and if we wanted to say anything more than clichés, we would have to specify what we mean by 'culture', and where there are coincidences and where there are not. Let's leave that then, and talk about literature.

Let's talk about literature, because if it is not clear whether for every language there is a culture — or what 'culture' means in this case — it is true that every written language produces a literature, and only one, and that is very important. I cannot avoid, not even now, clarifying a couple of obvious and indispensable points. Firstly, that I will understand by 'literature' here the whole of the written output that

is not rigorously instrumental and which has a minimum of aesthetic pretension. A definition like any other, possibly useless, and which simply aims to consider *literature* as, whether 'good' or 'bad', the sermons of Saint Vincent Ferrer or the verses in the pamphlets for the *Falles*, the Valencian celebrations of Saint Joseph, but not the phone book or the instructions for a washing machine. Secondly, it is true that it can make some sense, even more than geographical or political-administrative sense, to talk about Bolivian or Ecuadorian literature, Swiss or Belgian literature, and Andalusian or Valencian literature: within a given territory something in common can always be found, whether it is the subject matter the authors write about — in one language or more than one —, whether it is the colouring given by its historical or geographical frame, or whether it is the particular colour or flavour of the language. But at the end of the day, despite all the distinctions you like, with all territorial or whatever type of variants taken into account, *a literature is a literary language*: English, Latin, German, Spanish or Catalan literature. And this means that all the speakers of the same language with a certain level of literacy and formal education, can *read* the same 'literary products' as their *own* products, not as an 'external' production which one can access through knowing *another* language, and in some cases as not one's *own* production, but as something incorporated (through translation) into one's own language. And so, to read a literature as one's own it is not the subject matter or place that matters, it is not the vocabulary or linguistic variant that matters: what matters is the common literary language, as such and only as such, and defining a space that separates the external from the internal. Like the members of the Academy of Motion Pictures in Hollywood, who give an Oscar first to a film in English, and then to a film not in English. Like the Australian reader who will not consider Shakespeare a 'foreign' author. Or the Spanish reader — academic, teacher, minister, editor or monarch — from Spain, who every year thinks of the Cervantes prize as the great prize of *our literature*, that is *Castilian* or *Spanish* literature. According to its statute, or some would say 'law', the Cervantes prize cannot be for a writer in Catalan — for Spaniards that would not be 'ours': it is not 'Spanish literature', it is external, and from this perspective it is *foreign* —, whereas it clearly can be and is for a writer from Mexico or Peru: this is 'internal', *ours*, and Spanish.

It is not certain then, that in Veracruz, Lima and Alcalá de Henares the majority of inhabitants share one and the same culture that flows over oceans and mountains, nor even that the language of their respective working-class areas is mutually

comprehensible, but it is certain that the people who are more or less ‘educated’ (those who have a few years of schooling, those who read newspapers...) share the same *literature*. And that they only consider as *theirs* one literary language: only one, and the same one. We must remember, even though it is not directly (or is it?) our subject matter here and now, what has been, for a few centuries, *the* literary language effectively shared by the more or less ‘educated’ population of Lleida, Barcelona, Valencia, Alacant and the capital of Majorca: it was the same one that they shared with readers in Caracas, Buenos Aires and Seville. The language of the Cervantes prize. That is why I have said that it is so important to understand that every written language has a literature, and only one: because sharing a literature as one’s own involves, and forgive the apparent redundancy, sharing one and the same written language. And that involves — and again please forgive the possible tautology — considering *the same* language as common, as one’s own. And along with language, it goes without saying, there is much more: a sense of assumed identity (of *being*, in a vague or clear way, the same thing as the readers and speakers of that language, of belonging to the same mental domain, the same domain of shared references, the same ‘moral territory’); and a sense, or non-sense, of abandoned identity, of ‘lost consciousness’; of *not being* that thing that defines the unwritten and unread language, or of being so only in an accidental, insubstantial and secondary way. To clarify: when, from the sixteenth century onwards, the few people in our country who were literate began to write, and above all read, in Castilian, that does not only mean that they entered into a ‘Spanish market’ (the market of publishers or travelling theatre companies, for example), but they also entered into a *Spanish domain* (Castilian-Spanish, to be more precise) of identity: an identity that becomes more and more ‘national’, or is presented and assumed as such. I mean to say that reading, and writing, in Castilian meant progressively, and ever more so as ever more people did it, assuming as *their own* authors of Castilian literature, thinking that Cervantes and Quevedo were great writers ‘of ours’ — how many streets and squares have we named after them in our towns and cities? —, and rapidly going on to consider equally as ‘our own’ don Pelayo, el Cid Campeador, Hernán Cortés and Pizarro: look again at street names! And simultaneously, in parallel, inevitably, there was the slow dissolution of the perception of a culture in the Catalan language — Catalan, Valencian — as one’s own, with our own classics, models, national literature and all the rest that ties in with it. I am not saying anything that is not perfectly well known: not writing, and above all *not reading*, became not knowing, not feeling.

If there was a clear vision that was held from the outset by the men — some of them, but not all! — of the *Renaixença*, the Catalan rebirth, it is precisely the idea that Joaquim Rubió i Ors expresses, in 1841, in the prologue to some poems he published under the pseudonym *Lo Gaiter del Lobregat*: ‘Catalonia can still aspire to independence; not political independence, since it carries little weight compared to other nations, but rather literary independence’. *Literary independence*, indeed: an idea that is more revolutionary, and ‘newer’ and more current than it seems. Afterwards would come a certain mental and moral independence, projects of cultural independence, and other concepts and programmes to overcome various dependencies. It seems that, as in so many other comparable cases in Europe, one must begin with literature. Which is precisely the thing that nobody, or at least nobody with any weight or influence, did in the timid Valencian rebirth: ‘literary independence’, put simply, was neither imaginable nor thinkable there. Because ‘separating’ from Spanish literature went further than the urban elite, incorporated body and soul into Castilian-Spanish culture (and which culture, if not this one?), could have imagined; what *independent* ‘Valencian literature’ would they have been able to produce? Let’s be thankful they remembered the medieval fantasy of ‘Limousin’, which at least guaranteed a certain correspondence with the poetry written in Barcelona and Majorca; and from that ‘Limousin’ came a *Catalan* recognised as our own literary language in the *Rimes* of Wenceslau Querol, and a more intense relationship between the ‘literary Valencianism’ of the first third of the twentieth century and the literature produced in Barcelona; all of which made the first grammatical reunification of 1932 possible with the ‘Normes de Castelló’, which were substantially the norms of the Institut d’Estudis Catalans. Here was born a small tradition, slight but continuous, which survived until the revolution of Joan Fuster. It is from that that we all come, and thanks to all that at the end of the twentieth century in the *País Valencià* there is a literary language which is the same as that of Ausiàs March, Tirant, Maragall and Llorenç Villalonga, and not only that of Calderón de la Barca, Azorín and Vargas Llosa, as was fully expected a century and a half ago, or a century ago, or three quarters of a century ago. This is a partisan summary of history. And now, what can happen?

What can happen is that *blavero* blackmail — the expression is a harsh one, and I am sorry, but it blatantly presents itself as such: as blackmail and as *blavero*, that is irrationally anti-Catalan — begins to have, in Valencia, more effects than it seems on the use and consumption of literature. The ‘new Valencian nationalism’ of the

sixties and seventies began to work with books, bookshops, publishers and grammar courses: it surely could not have been any other way. There, the large or small number of people who have (re)incorporated themselves mentally and civically into the national community have done so through reading: and assuming the consciousness that what they were reading was Catalan, or if it was literature, it was Catalan literature. The Valencians who earned a 'moral independence' with regards to Castilian-Spanish culture (and therefore identity), have done so on the whole through Catalan literature: substituting, in the consideration 'ours' and 'national', el Mio Cid with Ramon Llull, Don Quixote with Tirant lo Blanc, Platero the donkey with Maragall's *La vaca cega*, Delibes with Rodoreda, Alberti with Andrés Estellés, and Ortega with Fuster. And if we have achieved a minimal degree of 'normality' — compared to a hundred or fifty years ago — it is because Valencian writers, including myself, have assumed and made good use of a literary tradition — and language — that was not reductively Valencian: in Valencia, take out everything that (as literature, or as an equivalent 'learned' production) has been produced in the past forty years *within* this wholly Catalan domain — the domain of written and read Catalan — and you are left with nothing, or virtually nothing. Apart from, of course, production in Spanish, which as such is part of a different domain. Put a different way: nobody has proven yet that a 'non-Catalan Valencian literature' can exist: Valencian in Valencian, of course, not in Castilian. The mental restrictions and the attitudes that this concept of *non-Catalan Valencian* literature or language necessarily implies are enough to block any literary solvency. They are, as Lord Bacon of Verulam would say, 'a wonderful obstruction of the mind', and with an obstructed mind it is not easy to create literature.

What can exist, it seems, is a literature thought and created above all for a Valencian audience, and in the knowledge that it will be consumed by another audience with difficulty (it does not even try, even for the school market). I am talking about Valencian authors and their immediate audience, but the same thing can be applied to many authors from the Principality of Catalonia, to many editors and a huge number of books published for example in Barcelona: they are perfectly localist, barely regional, but the difference is that in Barcelona they do not know nor are they aware of this. And it is not a matter of language or dialect, but of perspective: Valle-Inclán, Cela and Torrente Ballester have written many books in a curious 'Castilian-Galician', or Spanish stuffed with Galician words and phrases, but they were not thinking of an exclusively local audience, not in the least. Nor do

South-American authors think that when they write with turns of phrase, variants or vocabulary from their country or region. Nor the North Americans when they write in the English of Alabama or Tennessee. The problem, in our case, is completely different. It is that getting readers, from the beginning, used to this reduction of perspective can eventually create a reductive perception: that, for example, in Valencia only Valencian authors can be perceived as 'ours' or our own, and only those works that follow the Valencian variants of the language. Which are the ones I use, by the way: I again insist that the problem is not in the language — and definitely not in the generous allowances made by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans! —, but in the reduction of the domain.

Ours is a narrow and fragile domain, and ours is a convalescent and delicate language. Surely we cannot resist the blows and pressures that Spanish and French resist without great risk (English resists them all, from India to Canada: they find no problem with it, or at least not *yet*). We can resist, in the literary language, a certain pressure and a certain dispersion in morphology and vocabulary, but only up to a certain point, that is up to the point where the perception of writing and reading *the same* language is lost. That is, up to the point that the readers feel they are reading a language that 'sounds' or is perceived as distant and strange. The cure, as I see it, is not in reduction but expansion: I mean, not in reducing *all* of the written language to only one of the normative or lexical possibilities (it is not necessary for everyone to write 'serveixi', 'galleda' and 'noi' instead of 'servisca', 'poal' and 'xiquet!'); nor in reducing it to the variant of the territory of every author, however important the territory is and whether it is called Majorca or Barcelona: there are authors from Barcelona who use a language that would be equivalent, *mutatis mutandis*, to *madrileño cheli*, the dialect of working-class Madrid, or the *porteño* dialect of Buenos Aires that Borges hated so much, and they suppose that it is normal and standard, not local and dialectal. When I talk, then, of expansion as opposed to reduction, I am referring to a certain moderation — at least when not writing 'realistic' dialogues or giving local colour — as much in uniformity as in dispersion. Expansion means using some standards that allow a sufficient degree of variation so as not to stray too far from the general territorial modalities, but which do not end up being perceived as *distant and strange* outside their own territory. Now then, a certain degree of 'strangeness' is inevitable: it is not easy for 'serveixi' and 'galleda' to be perceived initially as close and 'their own' to those who say 'servisca' and 'poal'; but such things, and more extreme things, happen with other literary

languages, and the effects are not seen as dispersion and barriers to understanding, but rather as extension, vitality, and 'wealth'. Look at Spanish, and observe how they supplement and extend their official dictionary. Observe the meetings and decisions of their twenty-something academies.

And here we come to the other meaning of 'expansion' against 'reduction': the field of reading habits, and so the circulation of books, and so the publishing market. That is, and to finish, that the unity of the literary domain, the domain of the written language, and definitively the unity of a domain that is much more than the language, depends amongst other things (but it depends essentially) on the *circulation of written culture* in the various normalised variants of the one language. It depends on the maintenance of one sole market domain, where it is equally easy and *normal* to find and read a novel, an essay or a study, a book of poetry or a translation, published in Barcelona or Vic in the 'Catalan' variant, in Valencia or Alzira in the 'Valencian' variant, or in Majorca or Manacor in the 'Majorcan' variant. Where reading the *Divine Comedy* in 'Valencian' is perfectly normal for readers in Catalonia, to put forward an interesting example. It seems basic, it is basic, but there are some signs in the opposite direction: in the direction, on behalf of authors and editors, of washing their hands of the sector of the market — that is the sector of readers, the sector of the common domain — that does not correspond to their own territory. This has already come into effect with regards to the school market, and it is a bad sign: a bad sign if the Catalan boys in Girona do not read books that talk about 'xiquets' in 'Valencian', and if Valencian boys in Castelló cannot read stories containing 'nois' in 'Catalan'. It is not a question of norms or names, but books. And here I remember a little story that I have told in public more than once. A few years ago, I was buying the paper, in Castelló, at a news stand where they also sold material for a local school, and a girl asked: 'Have you got the book we've got to read in Valencian?', and the assistant gave her *La plaça del Diamant*. This is the question and this is the answer to the question. I think I have made myself understood. And I would like the girl, the school, the assistant and the book to act — in whatever variant you like — as an example and a lesson.

A lesson in this meeting of academic Catalanists and Catalanophiles, from England and North America, and also from the territories of the language that we study and brings us here, where as well as congratulating ourselves on the fifty years of an exemplary Anglo-Catalan Society, it is also worth thinking about the present and future state of the domain of this language that is the object of love and study of

your society. Because the Catalan that we write and speak, the written language, is the most important and solid document that proves we are what we are: it is the only document we can never lose. Congratulations, and thank you for the undeserved attention you have paid to my words.

Translated by Richard Mansell, 2005