

## **PROFESSOR JOSÉ DAVID FERREIRA \***

### **JOÃO LOBO ANTUNES**

One rarely celebrates the departure of someone we are so fond of in such a joyful manner. The reason is, surely, because this is a tribute from a School to a happy Professor. I said School and not Faculty, because I do not wish to confine his teaching just to this building.

Friends, disciples, fellow travellers, people from lands to the north and south of the equator came to his party in a generous pilgrimage, because this teacher has travelled the world and made friends around the globe.

The noblest tribute to a man of science is surely to talk about science, and, in his case, about its living form, since we are talking about Biology. His friends used the language specific to the subject they cultivate and to the knowledge they convey to illustrate their contribution.

I shall use only the language of “the pure abundance of the soul” that Nemésio spoke about.

His name will forever be associated with the introduction in this country of a research technique that became a powerful and indispensable instrument for biological research, particularly its primordial unity - the cell. Those initiated into its secrets gathered around it, creating a society which, under the guise of worshipping an instrument – the electron microscope – met to share the wonder of a new world. Moreover, the importance of making evidence visible has been central to the progress of science since the Enlightenment. On the other hand, progress has always depended, and increasingly depends, on a technology industry at the service of research, which Dyson called craft industry. Deep down, it is the expression of the fruitful partnership that emerged in the *homo habilis*, and stemmed from a curious mind and hands with five appendices that seem to have gained autonomous intelligence.

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\* Speech made at his retirement ceremony, in his capacity as President of the Scientific Council.

I read a few days ago that the unlocking of the human genome is to be passed on into the blind hands of robots. They will express the ultimate library of our genetic code and reduce it to an alphabetical sequence, thus proving the Evangelist right when he guaranteed, almost two thousand years ago, that in the beginning was the Word. By introducing the electron microscope, David Ferreira assured the tradition of modernity that the Institute he had inherited from Athias, Chaves, and Celestino da Costa had always preserved. And this was a refreshed modernity underpinned by international conviviality and free exchange of ideas and techniques. But, at the same time, he knew how to keep the teaching excellence bequeathed to him by a man that the revolution treated unfairly. For this reason, today I remember the exceptional educator that Xavier Morato was, for whom the act of teaching always had the dignity of a solemn mass. His classes were true master classes who marked those who attended them. Times are different now, but his group, which is the most fertile in scientific production, is also the one that is best remembered by students of this School.

Accordingly, David Ferreira received two legacies and now bestows them to this Faculty, with added value.

It is true that the Medical Biology taught in the past has now become Cell Biology, that electron microscopy now has children and grandchildren, and that Embryology, which puzzled us through the confusing ruffle of its leaflets, is now Developmental Biology, showing us how flies, chicks, and humans originated in an ancient common trunk. And what has all this to do with the millenarian acts of diagnosing, treating and preventing? Probably, it has everything to do with it. Everything that his disciples teach today is much closer to medicine than the science he embraced when, in innocent apostasy, he considered quitting the profession he had trained to practice. And he gradually grew closer to it, paradoxically, because David Ferreira persisted in the defence, often vociferously and irately, of the independence of basic science from the arrogant supremacy of clinicians. Nowadays, it is molecular biology, biochemistry, and

neuroscience that will possibly lead to the resurgence of the School and so counteract the cultural decline of the profession.

His happiness as a Professor was further accentuated when, not so long ago, he left to work in the Rector's office of the University of Lisbon. His career was a surprising sequence of right decisions: he did not miss a note; he did not miss a step. He just came in, and exited, with an extraordinary vision of opportunity and a precise diagnosis on how to make the best use of opportunities. For this reason, he comes to the legal end of a career on top, with the full peace of mind of those who fulfil their duty, never rejecting the luck he ultimately deserved.

Finally, please forgive me for getting this off my chest, and for making a confession with some embarrassment.

I will miss you Professor! I will miss not seeing you in the boardroom, right opposite the highest chair in which the School sits me, because during our meetings, there was always an uninterrupted flow of silent understanding, an unmeasured complicity, and often a trace of malice exploding in your open and boisterous laugh. And in this solemn and circumspect university, few of us laugh and make others laugh.

My dear friend:

The heroes of antiquity had poets who celebrated them and ensured their eternity. Our epic poets, Camões and Pessoa, also knew how to exalt our national heroes through the unique inspiration of their geniuses. I know that you particularly appreciate a poet who was also a great science teacher, Rómulo de Carvalho – António Gedeão or António Gedeão - Rómulo de Carvalho, depending on the alchemical reaction of his talent. So, I investigated if he had ever thought of you, a navigator of present times, immersed in the discovery not of the distant unknown, but of the proximal invisibility. I found a prosaic poem, which he called "Poem of the Guys from the Ships", whose last two stanzas read as follows:

I cast the keys of the world

that others called their own.

But I was the one who plunged  
into the background of the dream

I taste differently

I taste myself and it is salty.

No one is born with impunity  
on the beaches of Portugal.

The person we are paying tribute today is a happy Portuguese man who reached port safely.