Jose Yglesias: "I Am a Gallego"

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JOSE YGLESIAS: “I AM A GALLEGOL*  
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translated from Galician by Ana Varela-Lago

The story begins in a public library in Fort Worth-Dallas (Texas), where I was taken by my friend Zunilda, searching for the book through which she had discovered Galicia. Zunilda had read that book when she was living in Chicago and she never thought that she would end up meeting a flesh-and-blood Galician, as I never thought that I would meet an American writer to whom Galicians were a theme, an atmosphere, an intimate landscape.

In the library’s computer I entered that mysterious, yet full of resonance, name: Yglesias, Jose. Title: The Goodbye Land. The screen told me how to get it. The book, now out-of-print, is one of my most precious photocopies. My goal since then has been to translate it into Galician, something that will happen if the “bad fairies” do not interfere.

The Goodbye Land is the story of a man searching for his roots – the hallucinated and hallucinating narration of an American who decides to discover the land of a father whom he barely knew. For Yglesias is the son of a Galician emigrant who falls in love and marries in Tampa (Florida) where he worked in a cigar factory. A place of strong labor activism and solidarity, as shown by the 1920 strike and, later, its support for the Spanish Republic. But that man falls very ill and decides – so it is with Galicians! – that the air and the food of Galicia would cure him. As a resident alien, he had to return to the United States within a year, so he boards a ship in Vigo to go to Cuba and during the trip he falls ill with typhoid fever. It is in a Havana hospital where Yglesias sees his father for the last time, for shortly thereafter the family returned to Tampa while the father was sent back to Galicia where he would die years later.

In the summer of 1964 Jose Yglesias comes to Galicia as a detective of life and finds in Miamán (Ordes-A Coruña) relatives who put together the pieces of the past. He gets in touch with the Galicia of Franco and learns to appreciate the ways of these people who are as rooted in the wet and dark earth they step on as if they were trees. His book deals with emotion and discovery and it clearly shows his profound respect for our language. From the conversations and the situations experienced with his Galician relatives in Miamán, Santiago and Vigo, we can see both the miseries and the greatness of a simple people, at times brutally rooted in the landscape. It is like an etching portrait without tremendismo [a technique employed by several 20th-century Spanish novelists, giving an accumulation of gory detail in a heavy and relentless manner], as real as the very country that still lives on-religious and sacrilegious, conservative and at the same time able of the most vitally progressive attitude, bacchic but suddenly filled with a disturbing sobriety, tremendously generous and yet interested because their interest is in direct relation to that degree of mistrust always hidden in a little corner of the melancholic heart of a gallego.

At the end of the book, Yglesias promises to return and, in fact, his book The Franco Years dates from the time of the political transition in Spain. This time it is a set of articles about the nationalities and regions of Iberia, and its chapter 13 is titled “Galicia: The Unknown Nation.”

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Here, he again tells the American reader about our language, our culture, our political reality at that time. He interviews Ramón Piñeiro, Doctor [of Medicine] García Sabell, Professor Xosé Manuel Beiras, Don Antonio Fraguas. He talks about the Partido Galeguista [a Galician Nationalist Party] and the Galician Popular National Assembly, about the Galician Studies Seminar, and about all that was lost with the military uprising of 1936. He talks about the Galaxia group, about the Europe-ism started by the so-called historical galeguismo, about the translations of Heidegger and Joyce into Galician in its time....

When I got the letter from Yglesias in my Texas apartment, I could read warmth and galeguismo through the English language. He said that he [used English because he] was finding it difficult to express himself in Spanish. Moreover, since he could not write in Galician, he preferred to do it in English. He was telling me, in case I did not know it, that Hemingway had sent dispatches from Vigo when he worked for a Toronto journal. He asked me whether the trolley was still in use that used to run on the coast from Vigo to Bayona for 2 pesetas at that time. He was full of morriña [melancholy], warmth and pride in being a gallego.

In his last novel, entitled *Tristan and the Hispanics* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1989), which accompanied that precious letter, one of the characters says in English: “I’m a Gallego.” And later on: “My mother had the good sense of marrying a man from Galicia.”

I must admit that these things soften even the hardest heart.
I remembered then, what Jose Yglesias used to tell about his first meeting with Ramón Piñeiro. Don Ramón shook his hand and praised him for his book on Galicia. Our American friend confessed his surprise, since *The Goodbye Land* was not known in Spain. It was then that Beiras showed him a long article about the book which included extracts from the book translated into Galician, and which had appeared in the journal *Grial* in the 1970s. “It was not author’s vanity,” he said “it was seeing my work written in the language of my father which brought tears to my eyes.” He learned then that his name was Xosé.