

ACHILLES AND THE LUSITAN TORTOISE

"Have patience" and "Tomorrow"
are two inseparable locutions in the Portuguese tongue.
Princesa Maria Rattazzi, *Le Portugal à vol d'oiseau*

Every time I settle in a new city (and they have been many) I try to understand what seem to me its particular qualities, those features that appear as immediate impressions during the first days or sometimes hours. The restlessness of New York, the staidness of Milan, the melancholy of Buenos Aires, the exuberance of Paris, the superciliousness of London, were a few of the aspects that struck me soon after setting foot on what were for me all places that I had only known in the pages of my books. Gradually, these strident traits of my geographic caricatures faded, or became more nuanced, and were eventually replaced by deeper, more complex imaginations. Something similar occurs when I meet a person for the first time, and the tone of voice, the style of dress, the aesthetics of a face, shift into less capricious considerations of the person's thoughts and emotions. Both sets coexist, of course, but one becomes the shadow of the other.

The Baroque assumed this coexistence of features, the obvious and the hidden ones, as an artistic device. In poetry, architecture, fine crafts, the equivocal richness of the visible universe was brought to the foreground, deliberately burying the core ideas around which the volutes and trimmings were woven. Duplicity became commonplace in all artistic representations. As an emblem of *vanitas*, or of the deceit inherent to the things of the world, the flesh and the devil, the double or perhaps multiple nature of everything allowed the artist or poet to look at and show several sides at once, as in those images carved into cathedral façades and depicted in everyday objects showing, for instance, a beautiful woman on one side and a

rotting corpse on the other. The scholar Ana Hatherly, in a talk at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Paris, in 1989, commenting on the iconographic tradition of the *vanitas* theme in Portugal, quoted a seventeenth-century poem by Eusebio de Matos in praise of a lady's beauty as one side of the theme. Bernardo Vieira, his colleague, perhaps his friend, set up a mirror to Matos's poem by following its lines but describing not the beauty of the living body but the corruption and decay attendant to all flesh. In 1651, Father António Vieira, brother of Bernardo, in a sermon had stated plainly: "the mirror is a silent demon."

Following Father Vieira's warning, I've learned to distrust the impressions granted by the "silent demon" of a city on a first visit, and to wait until other sights, other encounters, other incursions, allow me to see a different cartography of the place. Today, locked down in my apartment in the neighbourhood of Misericórdia in downtown Lisbon, it is not the physical city that offers itself for my exploration but another, less tangible one. The guides of Lisbon that I found long before my arrival depicted a city that existed time ago or should have existed. Antonio Tabucchi's *Pereira Maintains*, Saramago's *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Miguel Barrero's *The Poet and the Rhinoceros*, Leopoldo Brizuela's *Lisboa: A Melodrama*, Cees Nooteboom's *The Following Story* made up a jigsaw puzzle of instructive and illuminated pieces. But its attendant traits, however credible on the pages that I eagerly turned, are no longer those of Lisbon today: my Lisbon drained now of tourists, shops shut, restaurants locked up, bars silent, streetcars almost empty. The Lisbon that stretches out like a yawning cat outside my window is not Saramago's soggy city nor Tabucchi's unquiet one. The mood is different.

And yet, some aspects remain unchanged. The inevitable Pessoa, trying to define a significant trait of his fellow Portuguese, imagined it to be a certain

provincialism. "If, by one of those comfortable devices by which we simplify reality in order to understand it, we wish to summarize the most noxious Portuguese quality in a syndrome," he wrote in 1928, "we will say that this quality consists of provincialism. The fact is a sad one, but not peculiar to us. Many other countries suffer from the same disease, countries that consider themselves civilized proudly and erroneously. However, he noted, an essential feature of the particular Portuguese provincialism is, "in the higher mental sphere, the incapacity for irony."

This trait, selected by Pessoa almost a century ago, I find to be still true today. If the Portuguese were to cultivate the ironic eye, what rich material they would have in their bewildering and pervasive bureaucracy! What modest proposals would a Jonathan Swift produce concerning the plodders in the Customs Office! What *Candides* would a Voltaire compose about the apparent Portuguese inability to tend their many disheveled public gardens! What unreachable castles would a Kafka build on the ever-lasting delays of the Portuguese postal services before reaching the intended destination! True, there are glints of irony in writers such as Eça de Queiros, in Saramago, in Gonçalo Tavares and in Teresa Veiga. But these are not enough to create a pervasive ironic atmosphere as a reader often encounters in English or French literature. Perhaps the delicate Portuguese courtesy, at least towards foreigners like myself, that insists on calling everybody "Excellentissimo", prevents the Portuguese from being ironically hurtful. Irony is not kind. No Portuguese I've met sees the irony in the fact that the national dish – *bacalao*, cod, prepared in 365 different ways, one for each day of the year—has to be imported from distant Newfoundland, only to be salted with salt from Aveiro in Northern Portugal. No Portuguese friend of mine perceives irony in the fact that, in Portugal's avowedly egalitarian society, one can live at the corner of Poço dos Negros (Black Men's Well) and Travessa do Judeu (Jew's Impasse). No

Portuguese writer I know would ever dare come up this advice from Dorothy Parker to a young aspiring scribbler: “If you have any young friends who aspire to become writers, the second greatest favor you can do them is to present them with copies of *The Elements of Style*; the first greatest, of course, is to shoot them now, while they’re happy.” When a Portuguese friend told me that, at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Portugal was known as “the tortoise”, I remarked that she had missed the irony in the moniker, and reminded her that Achilles thought quite highly of the tortoise after the celebrated race. Pace Pessoa, there’s something comforting in living in a society that avoids irony because, in doing this, it also avoids inflicting gratuitous pain. That, in these times of suffering, is a good thing.

Of course, there are several other traits that I gradually have come to discover in my newly adopted home, hidden traits that are deeply intertwined, like the roots of certain trees that seem to be standing separately on the ground’s surface but are connected by a tangle of underground webs. For instance, the Portuguese avoidance of irony, which does *not* mean a lack of humour, lends their talk, in my experience, a certain earnestness, a certain respectful consideration that is conducive to reflective exchanges. The Portuguese don’t strive to best one another when exchanging opinions, as is most often the case among Argentinians or New Yorkers. There is a paused rhythm in the Portuguese language (I’m talking about the Portuguese of Portugal here, not that of Brazil) that generously admits pause for thought in the speaker and allows for the development of ideas in the interlocutor. A conversation in Portuguese takes much longer than the same conversation would take in French or Italian, in which the flow proceeds from interruption to interruption. The Portuguese don’t jump in when someone else is talking: they wait politely for you to finish your sentence. I, who have the abominable habit of interrupting, recognize this as simple good manners.

This unhurried pace seeps into everything in Portugal. In a short text, Pessoa complained: "The slowness of our lives is so great that we don't consider ourselves old at forty. The speed of vehicles has taken the speed out of our souls. We live too slowly and that is why we get bored so easily. Life has become a rural area for us. We don't work enough and we pretend to work too much. We move too quickly from a point where nothing gets done to another point where there is nothing to do, and we call this the feverish rush of modern life. It is not the fever of haste, but the haste of fever. Modern life is a restless leisure, an escape from an orderly pace through restlessness." What Pessoa saw as negative, I think can be seen as positive. This slow flight, this feverish haste, which in so many countries is deemed a fault to be violently corrected, is by and large accepted in Portugal as salutary.

The impatient English imprecation, "Move on: I don't have all day!", the ironic riposte to "I'm coming!" given as "So is Christmas!", the rude demand "I want this yesterday!", have no easy translation into Portuguese. Even the pessimistic view of the future described by the philosopher Eduardo Lourenço as "a kind of slow apocalypse" tempers the final catastrophe with that very Portuguese adjective. "The poor arrive late at the rich man's table," Lourenço said in reference to the late integration of Portugal into contemporary Europe. "Compared, however, with other countries of similar traditions, we are sitting at the table of the rich, but perhaps at a corner of the table." But is that a bad thing? This image, of being at the corner of the table, is one that keeps creeping into conversations with my Portuguese friends about Portugal. "Portugal is a pea compared to the apple of the New York," a friend told me. My answer, that if it was a pea it was the pea that the princess felt under one hundred mattresses, didn't impress him. There's I think a certain modest pride in considering oneself as an active participant but, at the same time, small.

In our present period of confinement, during which Portugal had the misfortune of being, statistically and for a couple of months, the country in Europe with most COVID cases and deaths, citizens were ill served by the slowness in making clear political decisions, by unconscionable dithering in regards to practical procedures, inaction that glutted hospitals and delayed the distribution of the vaccines. From an existential viewpoint, however (if existence is still in the cards), we may be well served by the modest, slow, elegiac, reflective Portuguese quality that allows us to consider our existence in time while locked down in space. The English language lumps both conditions into one brief verb, “to be,” but in Portuguese, Hamlet’s conundrum has to be stated much more specifically. While the weeks drift by and the days of the week blend featureless one into the next, while the geography of our prison cells conjures up repetitive *voyages autour de ma chambre*, in Portugal at least we can consciously assume our condition of being (*ser*) in time, slowly existing, while constrained to be (*estar*) in a single space.

Slowness is an essential quality in the act of reading. And yet, the Portuguese, while boasting of a high literacy rate (95.48%), are not voracious readers. In 2019, the majority of over seven thousand surveyed students admitted to having read less than three books in the preceding twelve months; 21% said that, during this period, they had not read any books at all. At the same time, most Portuguese will say that poetry is important to them, even if the sale of poetry books is dismally poor. Perhaps this is because poetry, in Portugal, is understood as a quality inherent to the national identity, not as much a reading activity *per se* but as a *saudoso*, melancholy, state of mind. Maybe because every poem becomes in time an elegy, and elegies require a slow-moving cadence, the Portuguese often feel that this poetic quality fits their commonplace notion of *saudade*, melancholia,

a notion that in turn becomes, according to Eduardo Lourenço, an “expression of the excess of love of all that deserves to be loved.” It is moving and revealing that the first words in a Galician tongue eerily close to modern Portuguese, preserved in a twelfth-century Latin chronicle, are the lamentations of Afonso VI, grandfather of the first king of Portugal, after losing his son at the battle of Uclés in 1108, “Oh my son! Oh my son, delight of my heart and light of my eyes, solace of my old age! Oh mirror of mine in which I used to see myself and in which I took so great a pleasure! Oh my heir, now gone. Knights, where did you abandon him? Counts, give me back my son!” No irony there.

To forego a sense of irony, to feel proudly small, to act with deliberate restraint, are rare and (for a foreigner) puzzling qualities. Bureaucracy, which in most countries is an excuse for kick-backs and privileges, is in Portugal nothing but an accepted obstacle race, a very slow race, more like a hobble than a sprint. Regulations, when one can understand and follow them, are set up to delay the course of any action, whether it is to obtain an official document, to get an artisan to build some promised shelves, or, God help you, to get a parcel out of Customs. And yet, things end up happening, I suspect because of an inherent sense of honour, of feeling obliged *sine die* to keep your word: after several months, after you’ve lost hope, without a word of apology but with a charming smile, a friendly person tells you that the document is finally ready, the shelves stand proudly on your wall, the parcel is either returned to the sender or, if the stars are kind, it reaches you, older and I hope wiser for the experience. For all this you require patience. I suspect that Griselda was Portuguese.

Patience is a virtue (if indeed it *is* a virtue) intertwined with the notion of time. Cardinal José Tolentino Mendonça, the Vatican librarian and a superb poet, pointed out that we all live “under the dictatorship of chronological time”: that we

are all literally devoured by Chronos, the Titan who ate his own children. In Portugal, Chronos chews with measured deliberation, meditating on each mouthful. This relaxed rhythm colours everyday life. Preparing the *bacalao*, which W. H. Auden suggested that when tough “tastes like toe-nails, and the softer kind like the skin off the sole’s of one’s feet,” entails a two-day desalination labour before the actual cooking. Crossing the city by tram is a delightful experience unless you are late for an appointment. Climbing up or down the steep streets is excellent for your metabolism but cannot be speed-walked without risking a heart attack. And the pace of Portuguese history has this rhythm as well. In 1871, the Portuguese poet Antero de Quental noted that “the decadence of the peoples of the Peninsula in the last three centuries is one of the most incontrovertible, most evident facts of our history.” Three centuries is a long time for a decay to set in: in Berlin and Paris, decadence happened in just a year or two, sometime in the mid-thirties; the decline of the American Empire spanned merely the four dark years of Donald Trump’s regime. Quental complained that the inherent slowness of Portugal delayed the arrival of revolutionary cultural changes, and yet, a century later, it has proved beneficent in delaying the arrival of noxious tendencies as well. After the war, various extreme right-wing movements became vociferous in France, Italy, Hungary and several other European countries in the eighties and nineties; in Portugal, hardly anyone had heard of the right-wing politician André Ventura before the creation of the right-wing party Chega in 2019. The revisionist movement that led to the tearing down of monuments in memory of controversial historical figures achieved popularity in the United States at least as early as 2017 when statues of Christopher Columbus were vandalized in Baltimore and in New York; calls for the removal of monuments erected in memory of the seventeenth-century baroque sermonist Antonio Vieira for his lack of concern for African slaves while at the same time defending the rights of native people in Brazil, were inaudible in Portugal until June of last year. And the North American academic

ensorship of university teaching that obliges literature professors to warn their students if anything in the text they will study is likely to offend them (such as the the rape of Lucretia, the incest of Oedipus, the depictions of Africans in Luis de Camões and Joseph Conrad) has fortunately not yet reached Portuguese classrooms. Sometimes tardiness is a blessing.

Everywhere and at all times, we are faced not only with a single devouring deity that cuts short our days and lengthens our nights. Cardinal Tolentino adds that along with Chronos, "the non-conformist Greeks [...] had another conception of time, a kind of vertiginous reckoning, an unalterable continuous line that traps us in its web." This dual identity of time can therefore be experienced not only as Chronos the devourer, as time inscribed in ancient sundials as *omnes vulnerant, ultima necat*, but rather as a productive, receptive time, "time of", "time for." And Tolentino reminds us that, in these days of confinement and ever-gnawing time, Christ's parable about the lilies of the field is eminently applicable. The sluggish Portuguese time, creeping along the centuries from the mythical Odyssean foundation of Lisbon to now, might find during this pandemic an unsuspected virtue: that of reflection, the paused consideration of the miracle, in spite of everything, of being still alive. Neither we nor the lilies were promised immortality: merely the grace of existing for one extraordinary moment, from cradle to grave, until whenever the end might come.