

Words for a city

José Saramago

There was a time when Lisbon didn't go by the name Lisboa. They called it Olisipo when the Romans arrived there, Olissibona when it was taken by the Moors, who immediately began saying Aschbouna, perhaps because they couldn't pronounce that barbaric (Latin) word. But in 1147, when the Moors were defeated after a three-month siege, the name of the city wasn't changed right away; if the man who would become our first king had written to his family to announce the news, he would most likely have headed his letter Aschbouna, October 24, or Olissibona, but never Lisboa. When did Lisboa start being Lisboa in law and in effect? At least a few years would have to pass before the birth of the new name, as they would for the Galician conquerors to begin to become Portuguese....

One might think these historical minutiae uninteresting, but they interest me a great deal; not just knowing but actually seeing – in the precise meaning of the word – how Lisbon has been changing since those days. If cinema had existed at the time, if the old chroniclers had been cameramen, if the thousand and one changes through which Lisbon has passed over the centuries had been recorded, we would have been able to see Lisbon growing and moving like a living thing across eight centuries, like those flowers that we see on television opening up in just a few seconds, from a still, closed bud to a final splendor of shapes and colors. I think I'd love that Lisbon above all else.

In physical terms we inhabit space, but in emotional terms we are inhabited, by memory. A memory composed of a space and a time, a memory inside which we live, like an island between two oceans – one the past, the other the future. We can navigate the ocean of the recent past thanks to personal memory, which retains the recollection of the routes it has traveled, but to navigate the distant past we have to use memories that time has accumulated, memories of a space that is continually changing, as fleeting as time itself. This film of Lisbon, compressing time and expanding space, would be the perfect memory of the city.

What we know of places is how we coincide with them over a certain period of time in the spaces they occupy. The place was there, the person appeared, then the person left, the place continued, the place having made the person, the person having transformed the place. When I had to recreate the space and time of the Lisbon where Ricardo Reis lived his final year, I knew in advance that our two concepts of time and place would not coincide – that of the shy adolescent I used to be, enclosed within his own social class, and that of the lucid and brilliant poet who frequented the highest planes of the spirit. My Lisbon was always that of the poor neighborhoods, and when, many years later, circumstances brought me to live in other environments, the memory I always preferred to retain was that of the Lisbon of my early years, the Lisbon of people who possess little and feel much, still rural in

their customs and in their understanding of the world.

Perhaps it isn't possible to speak of a city without citing a few notable dates in its history. Here, speaking of Lisbon, I have mentioned only one, that of its Portuguese beginnings, the day it was first called Lisboa; the sin of glorifying its name is not such a dreadful one. What would be a grace matter would be to succumb to that kind of patriotic exaltation that, in the absence of any real enemies over whom to assert one's assumed power, resorts to the facile stimuli of rhetorical evocation. Exalted rhetoric, which is not necessarily a bad thing, does however bring with it a sense of self-satisfaction that leads to confusing words with deeds.

On that October day, Portugal – still barely begun – took a great step forward, a step so decisive that Lisbon was not lost again. But we will not allow ourselves the Napoleonic vanity of exclaiming: "Eight hundred years look down on us from the height of that castle," and pat ourselves on the back for having survived so long. . . Rather we recall that blood was shed, first on one side and then the other, and that all sides make up the blood that flows in our own veins. We, the inheritors of this city, are the descendents of Christians and Moors, of blacks and Jews, or Indians and Orientals, in short, of all races and creeds considered good, along with those that have been called bad. We shall leave to the ironic peace of their tombs those disturbed minds that not so long ago invented a Day of the Race for the Portuguese, and instead reclaim the magnificent mixing, not only of bloods but above all of cultures, that gave Portugal its foundation and has made it last to this day.

In recent years Lisbon has been transformed, has managed to reawaken in the conscience of its citizens that strength that hauled it out of the mire into which it had fallen. In the name of modernization, concrete walls have been erected over ancient stones, the outlines of hills disrupted, panoramas altered, sightlines modified. But the spirit of Lisbon survives, and it is the spirit that makes a city eternal. Entranced by that crazy love and divine enthusiasm that inhabit poets, Camões once wrote that Lisboa was "...a princess among other cities." We will forgive his exaggeration. It is enough that Lisbon is simply what it should be – cultured, modern, clean, organized – without losing any of its soul. And if all these virtues end up making her a queen, well, so be it. In our republic, queens like this will always be welcome.

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