

The Splendor and the Critical Demon

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on Eduardo Lourenço. *A Nau de Ícaro seguido de Imagem e Miragem da Lusofonia*. Lisboa: Gradiva, 1999.

In Bildern besteht der ganze Schatz menschlicher Erkenntni.

(In images the entire treasure of human knowledge is contained.)

J. G. Hamann, *Aesthetica in Nuce*

Eduardo Lourenço's latest collection of essays focuses on the idea of a symbolic return to the fatherland, as well as on a bizarre dream, according to which it is possible to rebuild the lost empire of Portugal in what is called the "community of Portuguese-speaking countries." The prevailing mood of the book is a mixture of skepticism, disenchantment, and passionate description of a decaying world. Lourenço longs for a "beyond-the-grave" kind of culture, where literature, more divine than religion itself, was always the means to rescue history from its lost time. He implies that his kingdom does not belong to this present world—he longs for a culture fascinated by death, a culture of anxiety and epic melancholy. The search for the "substantial presence of death" pervades these essays, be it through the analysis of the scale of values and the phenomena of alienation arising from impersonal kinds of culture, which manifest a total blindness to man's inner particularities, or through the abysses of which Raul Brandão, José Régio, and Guimarães Rosa wrote. All in all, ranging over themes such as the weight of Europe and the lightness of America, the evaluation of utopias and their unavoidable unpredictability, imagination as an embodiment of human life and a cryptic lament for the disappearing twentieth century, this is an impressive book, which calls attention to the long career of one of Portugal's most important contemporary thinkers, someone who should be much better known in the United States.

One of Lourenço's rhetorical strategies is to forge an image in which he places himself outside of his own *Zeitgeist*. His generation is not his generation. He does not want to belong to an impossible reality. Yet, in order to grasp that impossibility, he has to be aware not only that he is real, but also that he is part of our present. He does not want to identify himself with the

games and explosions which make up the occurrences of the present time. But he lives with them. And, by living with them, he becomes part of that present. Lourenço laments the loss of the idea of culture as the epitome of human knowledge. Nevertheless, by analyzing that culture, he bestows on it an impressive content, turning into reality something which was only apparently imaginary. It is more or less true that Buchenwald or Hiroshima are historical facts solely to the generations born and raised before the sixties. It is also true that Lourenço, as well as Vergílio Ferreira, Jorge de Sena, and Nuno Bragança, illustrated the anxiety of those facts, regarding them as instances of apocalypse. But today's ghosts are a metamorphosis of yesterday's ghosts. The world continues to be out of joint. Music took over the role of literature, but the Portuguese never cultivated music that much. The banality of musical expression in Portugal is offset by the reinforcement of the status of dance, architecture, painting, and sculpture. Therefore, the self-created image Lourenço cannot escape overlaps past and future, positive and negative dimensions. This ambivalence of chaos and order he calls splendor. Given that culture abandoned Schiller's ideal of the aesthetic education of humankind and is now seduced by economic power, there then seems to be only one solution for preserving the specificity of Portuguese culture: "We need a critical, ironical demon to help us live [...] our culture" (21). Lourenço's cultural utopia is a device to protect the distinctiveness of Portuguese culture from global homogenization. But this protection must, in turn, be protected from the notion that the world is nothing more than the Portuguese homeland. For a long time, the Portuguese were condemned to be nothing other than Portuguese. Now it seems that they want to be everything but Portuguese. This is the paradox of culture's excessive seclusion, on the one hand, and of its excessive openness, on the other.

The critical demon inside Lourenço tells him that most of the time—with the exception of a few writers, since literature remains the chief cultural imaginary in Portugal—the Portuguese refuse to dream. They simply accept the banality of reality without challenging it. Other times, however, they dream, and these dream-like images look bigger than Portuguese life. For example, they think Brazilian people like the idea that the Portuguese adore them. As a result, they try to feed a socio-political ghost called "Lusofonia" (the world as seen by the Portuguese and their descendants). They do not realize that this new dream is condemned to be a fiction, for the only people interested in this community are the Portuguese themselves. The image built by the political

engineers is so deformed that it is now more and more transformed into a mirage. The ironical demon goes on and undermines the idea that Brazil is to the Portuguese (though not for all of them) a paradise on earth. Portuguese identity seems to rely on this notion of Brazil as a paradise, whereas Portugal is far from being included in Brazil's imaginary. The reason for this absence lies on the Portuguese side: when the emigrants arrived in Brazil they denied their origins and subverted their roots; they adopted the new continent and lost themselves in the new territory among new people. That is the reason why "[i]n Brazil, Portugal is everywhere and nowhere" (157). In Brazil, at every corner, there is always something to remind us of Portugal; when we take a second look, however, the first image reveals a strangeness, a kind of archetype which is uncannily out of focus. One cannot but agree with Lourenço when he declares that Portuguese emigration did not generate "its Elia Kazan to illustrate its images" (48). Under these circumstances, imposing a (political) self-portrait after the fact is absolutely useless. And here we may find a reason for the failure of the artificial concept of "Lusofonia."

It is nowadays a hackneyed image to affirm that Portugal reached the highest moment of its historical glory in the sixteenth century. In accordance with Lourenço, one of the most impressive symbols of that moment may be seen in Pieter Breughel the Elder's *The Fall of Icarus*. In this picture, there is an old Portuguese vessel, a bulky freighter, which in a way contemplates Icarus' fall, asserting its commercial and cultural status, but also foreseeing its own fall, two or three centuries later. This vessel is the destiny of Portugal, drifting around the world. In the last decades of the twentieth century, after being lost in Brazil, in India, and in Africa, the vessel found the way back to the Portuguese port. Portugal re-adopted its European condition. Like Icarus, Portugal wanted to fly too high and, in the end, it suffered a downfall. Why, Lourenço asks, did the Portuguese have to arrive at such a tragic destiny? "To end, like Icarus, surrounded by the indifference of gods and men, punished for having accomplished, in its name and in the name of the others, a dream which was beyond its own possibilities?" (44). The adventure is over, the empire is nothing more than a shadow in the forest of history. Its heritage is a long quay where dreams are unloaded. The eternal present, because it subsumes an attitude of longing for a self-glorified past, is an obstruction to the future. The return to Europe is inevitably affected by what the Portuguese were, as well as by the ruins they left scattered in remote places. As far as economic, technological, and political-administrative processes are

concerned, Portuguese is European through and through. But the same cannot be said about the cultural and symbolic order. It is certain that Camões and Pessoa emphasized the boldness of decentralization, both in a real—the quest for new landscapes—and in a symbolic direction—the Portuguese port as a starting point to attain the occult side of this world. But the mythified memory of the past, overloaded by unaccomplished dreams, continues to place the Portuguese in the ship of fools, “navigating in the sea of memory, turned into a fairy-tale” (109).

Once Europe was the main axis of the world. Nonetheless, nowadays European time does not regulate the time of the world. As Lourenço acknowledges, Europe is no more the privileged actor of history. During the last five or six centuries, history was European, but at the moment what remains is an echo of a lost dialogue between an adventurous people and the critical images created to guide them in their destiny. It is the burden of the European past that clouds over the Portuguese future—the past is the golden mask of the present carnival of ideas. In his writings, the portrait Lourenço gives of himself is of someone who is not able to deliberately detach himself from contemporary Portugal. With all its ambiguities, Portuguese contemporary thought simultaneously deflects and commands attention. As seen by Lourenço, the world is a huge airport—we rush to catch a plane, but we do not see each other, we undergo a type of self-conscious blindness. Like Oedipus, we are condemned to be alone. And yet Lourenço finds a way to give some meaning to the solitude one finds in oneself in the middle of a crowd: the critical image Lourenço forges about himself shows him enduring a cultural solitude, a reminiscence of the seers who built and enforced the conception of Humanism. In this retreat, culture becomes once again the arena in which the adventure of human knowledge is exhibited. Cultural solitude invents a new light for Portuguese culture; it gives shape to a future which comes unexpectedly, because it cannot be contained within petrified ideas of identity. Rejecting non-critical notions of identity, Lourenço resuscitates Portuguese culture as “a simultaneously bright and obscure struggle to invent a new figure to a society that is in a continuous process of metamorphosis and is being inhaled by the future” (42). This is what I consider to be Lourenço’s skeptical optimism. Despite the existence of a past which paralyses the present, the latter contains a means to bring the great authors of the past back to life, liberating them from the pile of ruins in which they were imprisoned. Paradoxically, the future needs the past—the re-

connection with the "dead who did not die" is the task of the present. The search for the origin of that mystery is the role of culture.

The past has to be invented in order to confer some meaning on the future. Invention and re-connection are not synonyms of the longing for the European vessel, a grandiloquent piece of decoration. In other words, without imagination there is no future. This is what some of the most active American artists are realizing at the present; they are inventing a past to be idealized in the future. Lourenço admits that America is already the future, because the present in America is a vertiginous feeling toward the new, it is something difficult to be grasped. Artists such as Matthew Barney, in cinema and installation art, Chris Offutt, in literature, or David Neuman, in dance, are creating a future of the past which is our own present. It is possible to discern in Lourenço's writings a sort of hope in the Portuguese literary imaginary for reinstating the melancholy of "Portuguese time" in the secret and mystery of a resurrected European culture. To do that, the starting point should not be far from the idea of cultural solitude, which leads to the creation of critical self-knowledge. The cultural past is not an untouchable relic—to be actually appraised, it needs to be analyzed through comparisons. The interpretation of tradition pushes for the use of methodological devices different from those that have already been applied. It is as if Portuguese culture were the princess who will not awake unless she is kissed, but Portuguese kisses might not be the only solution to set her loose from her endless sleep. Isolation does not give total meaning to Portuguese culture; it has to be challenged by other artistic tendencies. This is the cultural drive of the "Portuguese time"—the unpredictability of the future: "We do not know where we are going, and that does not matter. Not by accident, though with no true purpose, we have a feeling of being symbolically ubiquitous and oneirically universal, without really leaving home" (16).

Eduardo Lourenço defines art as the attempt to turn what we are, dream, and do, that is, the uncanny in our life, into a familiar expression. Cultural solitude allows us to elaborate a process of self-gnosis. The artistic images we conceive take us on a creative pilgrimage into ourselves—they favor self-reliance but they also put us in touch with death: "Each form of art contains in itself its own death" (27). Each image, while holding a specific knowledge about ourselves, shows the violence of the time in which it is assembled. In one of the most thought-provoking moments of this book, Lourenço resolutely declares that the most original expression of Portuguese culture are

the baroque churches—there, images of paradise can be found amid golden walls and the illuminated smiles of the angels. The ubiquity of the angels' eyes reveals an irony not unlike the one we can find in Lourenço's style of writing. The crux of this book lies its baroque-like transparency: like the cathedrals adorned by the exuberance of the angels' flights, what you see is what you see; but you always see more the more you look.