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Rapid, the shadow of peace, between hinge and door

I'm borrowing the title of a beautiful novel by Vergílio Ferreira (1916-1996), a most distinguished novelist and essayist and also founding member of Portuguese PEN. He meant that shadow as a memory of light moments of happiness, which we most of the times are only able to recognize when it is gone. But we also may experience the memory of dark moments to stress the sunshine that we feel after such moments in our breathing chest, and that makes us sing a secret hymn to sheer life. So is peace also often experienced, out of an oppressing, depressing realm, back to the simple and clear lines of life which are so easy to recognize but often also so difficult to put into words.

But peace is more than just no-violence, though absence of violence may be seen as a threshold of peace. What does peace have to do with dreams?

If it is almost evident to me that daydreams are affected to what Ernst Bloch called *das Prinzip Hoffnung*, the principle of hope. But it is by no means clear to me that night dreams would be definitely bound to turn into nightmares. I think that most of us even love the night atmospheres, and find them suitable not only for disphoric sceneries but also for open-eyed dreams of a better world, while we speculate between books and the computer screen, between cat purring under our working lamp and jazz music turned low because of the neighbours, a soft saxophone within imaginary smoking spirals. There we may also find terrible arena fights between hope and anger. Then we may realize how paralyzing hope can be, how mobilizing anger can disclose itself.



Contradictions lurk and sit everywhere. We may have blissful and hopeful day visions, scenes of a possible better life, as well as we may experience not only nightmares but also stimulating night dreams, as projections of our daily wishful thinking. Dreams are no linearly issue, but most complex. That's why they are an inspiring source for literary images, both in poetry and fiction.

However, there is a perspective according to which light and darkness must be strictly differentiated: All forms of repression and tyranny need a conspiring dimension in the dark, which means in private secret domains, apart from the lights of the public realm. But soon we notice how these realms of light and darkness cannot really exist without each other. So we also know that they melt in a borderline that is similar to the sea level, where the smaller visible part of the iceberg emerges from its bigger invisible part. They stick intrinsically together, such as a totalitarian regime blends light and darkness, private conspiracy and public presentation.

But even in the middle of the political darkness, where the state of hope touches a threat of despair, there always may be daydreams of a better world, based on experiences that have been made elsewhere or in former times. Such experiences, or the report of them, allow us to tell that some dreams could possibly come true someday at the places where we happen to have been born, because they have become reality elsewhere. However, there are situations where we fancy to be dreaming the reality itself. Then we often exclaim that "we must be dreaming", but it is also possible that we do it both in a positive and in a negative sense.

I can tell you my own experience. As a daydreaming, eighteen year old girl from the middle class, I fled the Portuguese dictatorial regime after the secondary school, in order to make my studies abroad. Though I had friends, in the Portugal of the sixties, who had troubles with the political police, I did not have the sensation to go into the exile. My grandfather, a freemason and humanist, showed me that there could always be a narrow path where one could pursuit a civic life with dignity, also under a dictature.



It was therefore not directly a political persecution, but rather a suffocating atmosphere that pushed me out of the Lisbon village – it was almost a village or a small town in the sixties, where I left it, with old yellow tramways and double-decker buses. Girls had to wear skirts and uniforms at school. We all knew that in each corner, at each table of those beautiful cafés in the city, there could stand or sit an agent of the political police. Literature and cinema of the fifties and the sixties had shown me that another world existed, a world with more freedom of expression and more life choices, without having to wait for family favours or to carry the consequences of expressing my own opinion. A world with more glamour and mobility, a cosmopolitan world.

I was a student in West Berlin, having been engaged in the wild sixties, when I heard the news one morning, on the 24th April 1974, about the movement of the April captains in Portugal and the huge support of a population that was fed up with a rotten regime. My first reaction was to say “It must be a dream”, and though I stuck to the radio and TV news during all that day, it happened that I only really believed what was happening on the next day, when a Brazilian friend congratulated me slapping on my back, so to say as a sign to come back to a reality that I never have dreamed before. Later on, having read a lot about the factors that have led to the Carnation Revolution, I understood again that the immaterial dimension of many of those factors was made from the same stuff dreams are made of – dreams of a better world. That made just a small push necessary to bring a frail building into fall.

Thirty-six years after this revolution, most of those beautiful cafés in the Lisbon city have been replaced by banks – political freedom needs its economical support. In our days it would just bring a café to its ruin if there were still the old possibility of sitting a whole morning or afternoon at a table reading the paper or discussing the daily life and drinking just one espresso. But we cannot forget the permanent paradox of life, of literature, of culture. The Portuguese poetry of the twentieth century has a high quality partly because there has been censure and many messages were obliged to circulate through the flower,



durch die Blume, using the well-known German expression. But in this way they also reached the receivers often as an explosive “condensation”, *Dichtung*, therefore in a process which is similar to Freud’s *Traumarbeit*, dream work.

Dreams circulate in our communication, as well in our literary work. I would even say that in their volatility they may begin by fitting themselves to the empty spaces between the reality facts and objects. But at the same time by doing so they contribute to reconfigure what seems to be so indefectibly factual and objective. We all incorporate our dreams, both daydreams and night dreams, in a dimension that is not always conscious to ourselves.

What has peace to do with all this? Well, we know since the Greeks that both war and peace are also ambiguous. The most common aspects connoted with peace are positive, such as peace of mind, civilized and urban communication. On the other hand, most live testimonies give us the image of war as sheer hell, but not only: we have even war tourism, and since the Gulf wars we know how the possibility of exercising an “embedded journalism” contributed to raise the adrenalin levels. And we have also experiences of rotten peace, graveyard peace, in corrupted or totalitarian regimes.

Nowadays we live with war images; we eat them during dinner because they may even contribute to reach higher shares at prime time. The danger of this situation has not only been analyzed by media researchers: we feel it every day precisely by noticing that our capacity of empathy with sufferance may probably vanish with it. We cannot reach a hand to the children in Gaza or in Haiti, and if we could do that we would perhaps get more troubles in our busy existence. City life is monochronic, we have to do just one thing at a time, what has been put into the agenda. Therefore we try to appease our troubled conscience by making donations, by signing petitions.

We mean therefore to live in peace, in the daily struggle of our urban life. But we know that ever instant this situation may change. Out of the apparently most peaceful situation the most unexpected forms of violence may emerge, challenging our endurance, our capacity of conflict to deal with them. We can just fancy how many accumulated



frustrations and nightmares have built the support, during a long time, of many sudden attitudes of violence.

But we also know that the inverse situation is possible, that means we have experienced, or read, or seen in pictures or on TV that in the middle of a brutal struggle there may be gestures of kindness, of mercy, of humanity. I remember that wonderful picture by B.Z. Goldberg and Carlos Bolado called “Promises” (2001). There we see how seriously and concerned Israeli and Palestinian children are brought to talk with one another, to ask their parents inconvenient questions. Children, has Goethe once said to Eckermann, are the greatest realists. At the end of this independent documentary, the Israeli children bring their parents to a dinner invitation by the Palestinian family of their new friends at the West Bank.

There must be perhaps a childish impulse to produce conditions for peace, a naïve gesture made of a precise will, a will not to forget but rather to go beyond heavy memories. This is the sense of the words of Ernst Bloch in his *Prinzip Hoffnung* (Principle of Hope): *Denken heißt Überschreiten* – thinking means going beyond. And it was a Portuguese poet and scientist, António Gedeão (1906-1997), who wrote in the fifties a marvelous poem, “A pedra filosofal” (“Philosopher’s stone”). As soon as it has been put into music by the singer Manuel Freire in the sixties it rapidly became a resistance song against the oppressive atmosphere of the dictatorship: I quote the last lines:

“They neither know nor dream, / that dream leads life, /and always when a man dreams, / the world springs and goes forward, / as a colour ball / between the hands of a child”.

Or between hinge and door, as rapid as a shadow. But not less vivid.

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