

A resurrection in Lisbon

In these days of melancholic confinement, when the future seems even more uncertain than usual, I turn instinctively to books that have long offered me comfort and consolation. Among these dog-eared companions are *Alice in Wonderland*, Gramsci's *Prison Diaries*, the poems of Miguel Hernández, Plato's *Republic*. And reading Plato's strange book today, with its mixture of banter, political digressions, questions of education and ethics, and storytelling, I came once more upon two of the great Platonic fairy tales, the Myth of the Cave and the Myth of Er. And it occurred to me that a possible connection between the two might be found in reading them as the beginning and the end of Plato's understanding of the story of our lives. The Myth of the Cave tells us that we suppose to be reality is nothing but the projected shadows of real things on the cave's wall. The Myth of Er promises an Afterlife in which we will travel to a new world, meet the souls of great people and converse with them. The illusory reality of the present is thus redeemed in the imagined future; Plato seems to tell us that the perceived misfortunes and labours of our present life will find their true meaning after our death. This kind of intellectual resurrection that Plato hoped for, need not (because, after all, it is told as a myth) be taken literally. But the hopeful idea of restoration remained with me. Perhaps Plato, who had lost so much throughout his long life, was telling his future readers that loss is only a preamble to finding again.

In the early months of 2015, I lost my library. That is to say, I was forced to leave France, sell my house, pack my books, and send them to Montreal where, thanks a generous offer by my Quebec publisher, they were stored in a large warehouse. Knowing what had happened, people from around the world kindly tried to find a home for my books so that the library might come to life again. In New York, Quebec City, Mexico, Istanbul, even in a small village near Naples, sympathetic readers started conversations about the possibility of relocating my library, but nothing came of their wishful plans. I had become resigned to losing my books forever, and accepting that my library had followed the fate of her Alexandrian elders.

And then, in February of 2020, out of the blue, came an invitation from the Mayor of Lisbon to come and have a talk about a project he had imagined. With an interest in cultural matters vastly uncommon among politicians, the Mayor thought that my library was exactly what Lisbon needed. Lisbon has an excellent system of libraries, but they are mostly concerned with the Portuguese culture. My library represented several other European languages, as well as good research material on the History of Reading which is my main subject of study. The Mayor wondered whether I would consider donating my library to the city of Lisbon, and the City would house it in a municipal building, and give me the position of director. He suggested we call this Espaço Atlântida: The Center for the Study of the History of Reading. I couldn't believe that he was truly making the offer.

Chesterton wrote that «the most incredible thing about miracles is that they happen». This proved to be true. Six months after my meeting with the Mayor, I



find myself in Lisbon, having signed my books over to the city, after the Mayor announced, in a public ceremony on September 12 2020, the creation of Espaço Atlântida. The building chosen for the Centre is the nineteenth-century palace of the Marquês de Pombal, on Rua das Janelas Verdes. Over the years, the beautiful palace, decorated with splendid blue tiles and delicate murals, had suffered several incarnations, and then fell into disuse.

The renovation work is estimated to take somewhat over two years. In the meantime, the Centre will organize readings, seminars and lectures, in partnership with other Lisbon cultural institutions such as the Casa Fernando Pessoa and the Saramago Foundation. The Centre will be open to everyone, students and ordinary visitors, scholars and curious readers. Its motto will be Flaubert's "Read to live!".

And an Honorary Board that includes distinguished figures from around the world, such as Margaret Atwood, Roger Chartier, Robert Darnton, Carla Hayden, Richard Ovensen, Salman Rushdie, Olga Tocarczuk, and the Vatican Library director, Msgr. José Tolentino de Mendonça. I will feel, as William S. Gilbert once said, «like a poor lion in a cage full of Daniels».

Turning a private library into a public one is not an inconsequential gesture. The great scholar Aby Warburg, who defined himself as «amburghese di cuore, ebreo di sangue, d'anima Fiorentino», after opening his private collection of texts and images to the public, suffered a nervous breakdown and had to be interned in a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland for three painful years. Opening your private library to other readers is dangerous: it allows foreigners to enter your mind and to bear witness to your most secret passions and desires and fears.

Every day now, I walk past the building that will lodge my library and touch the stone façade in superstitious awe and a sense of unmerited benefaction. I feel guilty of the fact that, in the midst all the suffering due to the Covid epidemic and to the political greed manifest in the war in the Ukraine, I should be given the chance to begin a happy adventure. My library, when it was set up in France, represented for me the world itself, and everything that could be known about it, much like the inhabitants of Plato's cave thought that the shadows they saw were the reality of material things. And like shadows that are doomed to vanish, my books disappeared into their boxes, and only the memory of them remained, piecemeal and uncertain, in my unreliable mind. But now, thanks to the generosity of the City of Lisbon, they will step out of their graves and stand once more on their shelves, ready to declare, from the day of their resurrection onwards, their belief in miracles.

Alberto Manguel

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