

Hurrah for the radiophone, the metallic sympathy of the Unconscious!



Fernando Pessoa, *Triumphal Ode*

The Book of Disquiet

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A NEW DIRECTIONS EBOOK

As in the hours during which a storm is brewing and the noises in the street speak in one solitary voice.

The street puckered beneath the intense, pale light, and from east to west, the grubby blackness trembled as a boom of thunder rolled out like a great echoing cackle of laughter ... The harsh sadness of the brutal rain only made the dark air more intensely ugly. Cold, warm, hot — all at the same time — everywhere, the air felt wrong. And then, in the ample room, a metallic light drove a wedge into the repose of our human bodies, and, like an icy shock, a gravelly sound beat down upon us, slicing through everything to create a single large silence. The sound of the rain dwindled, as if adopting a gentler tone of voice. The noise in the streets grew worryingly quiet. A new, swift, yellow light veiled the silent darkness, but there was just time to catch one's breath before the fist of sound suddenly echoed out from somewhere else; as if bidding an angry farewell, the thunderstorm was beginning not to be here.

[...] with a slurred, dying whisper, dark in the growing light, the rumble of thunder was moving off into the far distance — somewhere near Almada — [...]

A sudden splintering, a blaze of light, exploding inside minds and thoughts. Everything stopped. Hearts stopped. Like sensitive souls. The silence terrifies as if a death had just occurred. The sound of

the rain growing louder brings a sense of relief like tears copiously shed. The air is leaden.

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[1930?]

A kind of looming anticipation hung in the air like a dark hope: even the rain seemed intimidated; a dull blackness bore down upon us. And suddenly, like a shout, a terrifying day broke. A light from some fake hell filled everything, every mind, every corner. Everyone was stunned. Then came a deep intake of breath because the blow had passed. The brutal rain was joyful in its almost human noise. Hearts resumed their normal rhythm, and even thinking made us dizzy. A vaguely religious feeling filled the office. No one was who they were, and the boss Vasques appeared in the doorway in order to think of saying something. Moreira smiled, still bearing on the outskirts of his face the yellow of sudden fear. And his smile was saying that the next thunder clap would probably be a long way off. A cart trotting noisily past drowned out the sounds from the street. Involuntarily the phone shivered. Instead of withdrawing to his room, my boss Vasques went over to the phone in the big office. There was a moment of repose and silence, while the rain fell nightmarishly hard. Then Vasques forgot about the phone, which had stopped ringing. At the far end of the room, the

office boy stirred into life like some cumbersome object.

A great joy, full of repose and liberation, took us all by surprise. We resumed our work feeling almost lightheaded, and were spontaneously pleasant and sociable with each other. Unbidden, the office boy flung open the windows. A fresh, damp smell entered the room. The rain was falling only lightly now, almost humbly. The noises from the street were the same, but different. We could hear the voices of the drivers of carts, and they were the voices of real people. In the next street, the clear, clanging bells on the trams seemed to join us in our jollity. A chuckle from a lone child sang out like a canary in the washed-clean air. The light rain was fading.

It was six o'clock. The office was closing. From the half-open door of his room, my boss Vasques said: "You can all go home now," and he said this as if he were bestowing on us a commercial blessing. I immediately got to my feet, shut the ledger and put it away. I ostentatiously replaced my pen in its inkstand and, going over to Moreira, addressed him with an optimistic "see you tomorrow" and shook his hand as if he had just done me an enormous favor.

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[1930?]

From the very beginning of that hot, deceitful day, dark, shaggy clouds had hung over the oppressed city. Above what we call the estuary, those dark clouds continued to pile up, cloud upon cloud, and they and the vaguely rancorous streets — at odds with the angry sun — gave off a sense of imminent tragedy.

It was midday and, as we left the office to have lunch, a sense of foreboding seemed to weigh upon the pale air. Scraps of ragged clouds grew still blacker. The sky near the castle was a clear but ominous blue. It was sunny, but not the kind of sun you could enjoy.

At half past one, when we were back in the office after lunch, the sky seemed clearer, but only over the older parts of the city. Near the estuary it was slightly overcast. To the north, however, the clouds had become a single black, implacable cloud, advancing slowly, reaching out its black arms and its blunt ash-gray talons. It would not be long before it covered the sun, and the sounds of the city seemed to grow muted in expectation. To the east, the sky was or seemed to be clearer, but the heat there was more oppressive. We were even sweating in the relative cool of the office. "There's a big storm coming," said Moreira, and turned a page in his ledger.

By three o'clock, the sun had been entirely obscured. We had to turn on the lights — a sad thing in summer — first, at the back of the big office,

But all dreamers, even if they don't do their dreaming in an office in the Baixa, or in front of a balance sheet for a textile company — each of them has an accounts book open before them whatever it may be, whether it's the woman they married or administering a future they've inherited, whatever it might be as long as it clearly is.

Everyone has a boss always ready with some inappropriate joke and a soul out of touch with the universe. Everyone has a boss and a boss's girlfriend and a telephone call that always comes at an inopportune moment just on the edge of the splendid fall of evening and mistresses now revealed as mistresses are speaking on a girlfriend's phone to say that they're at a chic tea party like all the other ladies.

All of us, we who dream and think, are assistant bookkeepers in a textile company or dealing in some other merchandise in some other Baixa. We draw up the accounts and make a loss; we add up the figures and pass on; we close the account and the invisible balance is never in our favor.

Though I smile as I write these words, my heart feels as if it would break, would break the way things break, into fragments, into shards, into so much rubbish to be dumped in the dustbin and carried shoulder-high to the eternal dustcart of all municipal councils.

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[1929?]

From my fourth-floor room looking out over the infinite, in the plausible intimacy of the coming evening, at my window opening onto the beginning of the stars, my dreams — in rhythmic agreement with the distance before me — set off on journeys to unknown or imagined or simply impossible countries.

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[after 31 May 1929]

Funeral march

Hieratic figures from unknown hierarchies are lined up waiting for you in the corridors — fresh-faced, fair-haired pageboys, young men in [...] a scattering of glinting blades and helmets and lofty adornments, somber glimpses of dull gold and silks.

Everything that the imagination infects, imbuing all ceremonies with a funereal solemnity that weighs on us even in victory, the mysticism of the void, the asceticism of absolute renunciation.

The Ganges also flows down Rua dos Douradores. All ages exist in this narrow room — the mixture the multicolored shifts in manners, the distances between different peoples, and the vast variety of nations.

all, from the visible invisibility of everything to the wood (on the bleached window ledge on which I rest my left hand) that is slightly rough to the touch where the old paint has blistered.

How often, though, have my eyes longed for this peace from which now, were it easy or polite, I would flee! How often, down there among the narrow streets of tall houses, have I thought I believed that peace, prose and certainty could be found here, among natural things, rather than where the tablecloth of civilization makes one forget the varnished pine it rests on! And now, here, feeling healthy and healthily tired, I am ill at ease, trapped and homesick.

I don't know if it's only to me that this happens or to everyone for whom civilization has meant being reborn. But it seems that for me, or for people who feel as I do, the artificial has come to seem natural and the natural strange. No, that's not quite it: the artificial has not become natural; the natural has simply become different. I detest and could happily do without cars and the other products of science — telephones and telegrams — that make life easy, or the by-products of fantasy — gramophones and radios — which, to those who like them, make life fun.

I'm not interested in any of that; I want none of it. But I love the Tejo because of the great city on its banks. I enjoy the sky because I see it from a fourth-

floor window in a street in the Baixa. Nothing in the countryside or in nature can give me anything to equal the ragged majesty of the calm moonlit city seen from Graça or São Pedro de Alcântara. For me no flowers can match the endlessly varied colors of Lisbon in the sunlight.

Only people who wear clothes find the naked body beautiful. The overriding value of modesty for sensuality is that it acts as a brake on energy.

Artificiality is a way of enjoying naturalness. What I enjoyed about these vast fields I enjoyed because I don't live here. Someone who has never known constraint can have no concept of freedom.

Civilization is an education in nature. The artificial provides an approach to the natural.

What we must never do, however, is mistake the artificial for the natural.

In the harmony between the natural and the artificial lies the essence of the superior human soul.

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[1931?]

Nothing grates more on me than the vocabulary of moral intent and social responsibility. For a start, I find the word "duty" as disagreeable as an intruder into my home. And as for the terms "civic duty," "solidarity," "humanitarianism" and others of the same ilk, they are as repellent to me as a pile of rubbish

