

Roots Drinking the Skies

Letter to a friend

Dear friend,

I write from a house, in *Trás-os-Montes*, which was once my family's home. Here fire, love and life were kindled; here, my grandmother Cândida cried for her children behind the letters that arrived from “ultramar”. I lived in this house until the first hairs of my beard sprouted. Clouds passed over it with the patience of the years, until one day winter crouched there and it almost died on us. I try to raise it again, to bring it back to life.

I keep imprecise memories, but clean as rain and linen. In the morning, the music was made of birds and falling water; at night, of the bleating of the sheep on the way back to *Curriça* (fold) and of the distant chirp of some owl. The bell and the Hail Marys marked the rhythm of the days. Now, I do not hear silence, but memory, that meta-landscape made of other sounds and vibrations, an invisible line that connects the present to the past.

I see myself as a branch that continues with deep roots. I know that this house will outlive me. Through the window I see the same trees that, for years, seem to have been accompanying me. I like trees. I fix my gaze on the bare trunks and branches. They persist standing, as if waiting for better days or a new spring. In their verticality, the trees connect the lowest to the highest. Stretched between the sky and the earth, they resist winds and rains, hail and snow, untimely felling attempts. Through the roots, they suck the earth, through the leaves, they drink the sun and the colour of the days. It is now, in winter, the season of goodbye and long retreats, which, naked and stripped bare, show their most intimate structure. Their branches are “roots drinking from the heavens”. From that time come the most substantial learnings of myself and of the world.

I look at the bookshelf. What will happen to my books? The one, with the thin spine, on the third shelf, does anyone know the reason why I bought it, the subtleties of that copy? I don't need to open it to repeat a certain passage by heart. This one: “For the character of a human being to reveal truly exceptional qualities, one must be lucky enough to see it in action for many years. If this action is devoid of selfishness, if the idea that guides it is of an unexampled generosity, if it is undoubted that it does not want any reward and, moreover, still leaves visible marks on the world, then we are, without a doubt, facing an unforgettable character.”

I think of her, and I think of you, perhaps of the same character without calculation. Friendship is a rare thing. It escapes the arbitrariness of pacts, it has no exact declination, it is not of the order of the will or even of the decision. It ignores ages, it is beyond physical presence, words or spaced silences. Perhaps the category of miracle explains it.

Kilometres lie between us. Yesterday was a yogurt I gave you – and you couldn't finish it. Your hands and the effort to keep your eyes open won't leave my mind. I feel an anticipated, almost tangible “saudade”. In you I see that it is possible, that something blossoms behind us. We have all said it in other words and ways: your life is a clear word, a pact of mercy, forgiveness and trust. At your side there are no chased or banished. And so many bear witness to this – I would even say everyone who knows you. I like your voice without incisive authority, your boyish and enraptured poet's speech: “There is beauty in all things! Even on the grains of sands of the ground of this beaten earth!”. I like your writing: what is peripheral, tiny, inglorious or invisible to the eye, your words reveal it with disconcerting simplicity. And it is as if the world recreated itself.

I turn my eyes to the old paintings in this house, and to the reproductions that, over the years, I have been adding to them. What painting is that in which each brushstroke is charged with light, sound and colour? Symbolist, impressionist or both? Spiritual manifesto of modernity and religion without dogma? In any case, the same transfiguration of Nature as a temple, the same displacement of the sacred from cathedrals and churches to Nature, as an altar of faith – “Nature is the last church, in which our spirit, tormented and sceptical, still kneels to pray”.

Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot, Jean-François Millet, Constant Troyon, realist painters of the nineteenth century, are like evangelists of the modern soul and sensibility. And notice the so daring as beautiful equivalence between art and spirituality: *Millet's Angelus* is placed on an equal footing with the *Flos Sanctorum*, the book of the lives of the saints.

I look at the *Angelus* as a revelation, or as if I were entering the painting and, a little apart from the peasant couple, in communion with them, kneeling and praying, with Junqueiro by my side; or even as if it evoked my childhood – the many sunsets and the touch of the Trinities, Uncle Lele standing still, with his head uncovered, hat in his hands – and all together (the nominees and a few others: Rilke, Novalis, Thoreau, Caeiro, Sophia, Torga), in the still-luminous sacredness of the *Trás-os-Montes* landscape, we prayed “with all the voices of Creation”.

Where did your memories go? Some, as many as I was able to keep, remained in me.

He will continue to hide behind the fruit, and we will continue to look for him among the trees...

When I have forgotten everything, what will I still remember? Will I finally be able to tell you the name?

What is left for us, to be thankful? To give thanks for the house, the fire, grandmother Cândida and her preserved letters; to thank the trees that wait for me at the window; to thank you for the books and passages that I know by heart; to thank you, friend, for your voice without authority and the beauty you discover in the grains of sand on the ground; to thank for the paintings and the sunsets, for Uncle Lele with his head uncovered.

Is giving thanks the most enlightened way of thinking? Do you think with me? One of these days we will talk.

Henrique Manuel Pereira