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REVISITING LISBON IN THE BOOK OF DISQUIET

Keywords: *Lisbon: What Every Tourist Should See; The Book of Disquiet; the beautiful; the sublime; double aesthetic; Rua dos Douradores; cicerone; bookkeeper*
Abstract: *This paper explores the strikingly different representations of Pessoa's native city offered by the lordly cicerone of Pessoa's guidebook* Lisbon: What Every Tourist Should See *and the lowly assistant bookkeeper of his modernist masterpiece,* The Book of Disquiet*. For the cicerone, Lisbon is a magnificent imperial city whose treasures vie with those of other European capitals; for the bookkeeper, it is a neighborhood limited almost exclusively to the Rua dos Douradores, the drab, somewhat louche street where he lives and works. The tedium of his daily life is never relieved by the inspiring sight of a magnificent historical monument or an impressive public square. In place of such touristic attractions, we find frequent mention of such utterly worthless places as the office in which he works, the restaurant in which he meets the stranger, the tavern across the street, the fourth-floor rented room from whose window he gazes, and the barbershop in which he learns of the barber's death. Despite these differences, however, both Lisbon and The Book fulfill – each in its own distinctive way – the aspiration to which Soares gives voice when he wishes that "there could at least be a paradise made of all this, even if only for me." As I shall demonstrate here, the cicerone presents Lisbon as a beautiful paradise, made of magnificent things that one need only see in order to admire, while for the bookkeeper it is a rather dismal place that will, however, be rendered sublime by the immense poetic gifts that Pessoa–renowned as "Portugal's four greatest poets"–has lent to him.*

The title of my paper is likely to call to mind two of Fernando Pessoa's most famous poems: "Lisbon Revisited 1923" and "Lisbon Revisited 1926." The relationship between these two poems has, indeed, long been a staple of Pessoa criticism. What I actually have mind, however -- as my italicizing of the name of Pessoa's native city is meant to suggest – is the entirely overlooked relationship between *Lisbon. What Every Tourist Should See,* the guidebook that Pessoa wrote for visitors to Lisbon and his prose masterpiece, *The Book of Disquiet,* whose narrator Bernardo Soares writes, not for tourists, but for "millions of souls resigned like my own to their daily lot, their useless dreams, and their hopeless hopes" (16).

There are, to be sure, striking differences between the two works: one written in English, the other in Portuguese; one filled with useful facts about the city in which Pessoa was born, the other described by its narrator as a "factless autobiography"; one clearly organized in such a way as to follow step-by-step the itinerary chosen for the tourist by his guide the other a chaotic collection of fragments with neither a

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beginning, nor a middle, nor an end. One is written by a lordly cicerone who feels perfectly at home in Lisbon and who takes obvious pride in the many treasures with which he will beguile the tourist; the other is written by a lowly bookkeeper who describes himself as feeling like "an exile where I'd always thought I was a citizen" (Text 39)

Both *Lisbon* and its revisiting in *The Book* do share in common, however, the vision of Lisbon itself as a *virtually uninhabited* city, an experience to whose proprietary pleasure Bernardo Soares pays tribute in *The Book*:

> This is one of the strangest sensations that the fortuity of encounters and absences can bring: that of finding ourselves alone in a place that is normally full of people and noise, or that belongs to someone else. We suddenly have a feeling of absolute ownership, of vast and effortless dominion, and – as I said – of relief and serenity. (Text 409)

As I shall be attempting to show you this afternoon, the Lisbon "owned" by the cicerone who conducts the tour is a *beautiful* city made of a variety of things – buildings, statues, and public squares – whose effect depends solely on his calling them to our attention. The *sublime* city to which Soares the bookkeeper lays proprietary claim, on the contrary, is created entirely by the profusion of *words* with which he describes it.

The cicerone's presentation of Lisbon as a beautiful city is evident from the opening lines his guidebook:

> For the traveller who comes in from the sea, Lisbon, even from afar, rises like a fair vision in a dream, clear-cut against a bright blue sky which the sun gladdens with its gold. And the domes, the monuments, the old castles jut above the mass of houses, like far-off heralds of this delightful seat, of this blessed region." (11)

The beautiful Lisbon of the guidebook is filled with examples of public squares, statues, buildings, and other man-made objects whose instantly recognizable beauty commands our admiration. We are told early on, for example, that The Tower of Belém is "a magnificent specimen of sixteenth century military architecture" (11) and later learn "it is with astonishment and a growing appreciation that the stranger beholds its peculiar beauty" (61). The Praça do Commercio is proudly described as "a vast space, *perfectly square*, lined on three sides by buildings of a *uniform type*, with high stone arches" (15). The Santa Justa Elevator "always *compels great admiration* from tourists from everywhere." (17)

Having in mind the idea that -- unlike beauty, which causes pleasure directly -- the sublime begins as a *painful experience* that becomes pleasurable only after it has been transformed ("sublimated," as it were) by the imagination, let's now how differently our bookkeeper describes his Lisbon:

> Misfortune would sometimes strike me there, and there I would also experience great joys. And nothing about me would be real. But everything would have a sublime logic; it would all pulse to a rhythm of sensual falseness, taking place in a city built out of my soul and extending all the way to the platform next to an ideal train, far

> away in the distance within me . . . And it would all be vivid and inevitable, as in the outer life, but with an aesthetics of the Dying Sun. (Text 114)

and:

> Since the dull beginning of the hot, deceitful day, dark clouds with jagged edges had been ranging over the oppressed city. Towards the estuary they were grimly piled one on top the other, and as they spread, so did a forewarning of tragedy, in the streets' vague rancor against the altered sun. (Text 183)

Unlike such touristic sites as the Tower of Belém, the Praça de Commercio, and the Santa Justa Elevator, Soares describes the Rua dos Douradores, where he lives and works, in a way that eminently qualifies it as a place that could produce in us – initially, at least -- a painful experience:

> Yes, I distinctly see – with the clarity of reason when it flashes in the blackness of life and isolates the objects around us that make it up – all that is shoddy, worn-out, neglected and spurious in this street called Douradores which is my entire life: this office that's sordid down to the marrow of its employees, this monthly rented room where nothing transpires but a dead man's life, this corner grocery whose owner I know in the way people know each other, these young men at the door of the old tavern, this toilsome uselessness of the unchanging days, these same characters repeating the same old lines, like a drama consisting only of secrecy, and with the scenery turned inside out . . . (Text 187)

For obvious reasons, the cicerone does not make the Rua dos Douradores a stop on the tourist's itinerary. On the other hand, the Rua Ouro – whose allusion to gold is shared by the name of Soares's street – does, for equally obvious reasons, achieve mention in *Lisbon*:

> Let us choose Rua do Ouro, which, with its commercial importance, is the main street of the city. There are several banks, restaurants, and shops of all kinds in this street; many of the shops, especially towards the upper end of the artery, will be found to be as luxurious as their Parisian equivalents (17)

There is, to be sure, nothing luxurious about the Rua dos Douradores. However, its name, which translates as "gilders" and recalls a time when it was populated by Jewish goldsmiths, evokes – not golden objects that we might, for example, find in some of the chic shops that line the Rua Ouro – but the number of places in which our bookkeeper alludes metaphorically to the gilder's craft. For example, he expresses at one point his desire "to goldenly stagnate in the sun, like a murky pond surrounded by flowers" (Text 45) and tells us that "In my dreams I learned . . . to gild, with the sun of artifice, the dark corners and forgotten furniture" (Text 173).

This led me to wonder if it was the associations of its *name* as much as unappealing physical aspect that influenced Pessoa's choice of the Rua dos Douradores as the setting that Soares would sublimate by doing with words what the gilders once did with gold. I suggested this possibility to Madalena Lobo Antunes, a

Facebook friend in Lisbon currently writing a doctoral dissertation on *The Book*, who pointed out that along with the reference to gold in "doura" the name Douradores also contained the word "dor" (meaning "pain," "anguish," or "trouble"). Thanks to this discovery of a double-meaning that had until then escaped my attention, I suddenly realized that the key to our grasping the sprawling, disorganized mass of fragments that Pessoa left behind at the moment of his untimely death may be in this otherwise negligible detail –not only a street that no tourist would notice, but an easily overlooked monosyllabic word contained within its name.

The transformation of something potentially repellant into an object made sublime by the writer's imagination appears quite explicitly in a number of places in *The Book*. In the course of mentioning his inability to derive a philosophy from the various thoughts that occur to him, for example, Soares explains that "Lucid vague thoughts and logical possibilities occur to me, but they all dim in the vision of a ray of sunlight that gilds a pile of dung like wetly squished dark straw, on the almost black soil next to a stone wall." (Text 58) At another point, he describes his life as "tatters of nothing tinged by a distant light, fragments of pseudo-life gilded by death from afar with its sad smile of whole truth" (Text 216). And in Text 453, he observes that "the light strikes things so perfectly and serenely, gilding them with sadly smiling reality. And all the world's mystery descends until I see it take shape as banality and street."

The sublime Lisbon that we find in *The Book* is only minimally described in a way that would allow us to identify it as the city in which Soares lives and works. Public squares, buildings, monuments, etc. with which *Lisbon* is so replete are replaced by subjective experiences that illustrate the "double aesthetic" – whereby pain is transformed into pleasure -- inherent in the name "Douradores." Here are just a few examples, chosen more or less at random:

> I like to roam unthinkingly through what the city is changing into, and I walk as if nothing had a cure. I carry with me a vague sadness that's pleasant to my imagination, less so to my senses. (Text 181)
> On the city's northern side, the clouds slowly coalesced into just one cloud, black and implacable, creeping forward with blunted grey-white claws at the ends of its black arms. (Text 183)
> In that flash, what I'd supposed was a city proved to be a barren plain, and the sinister light that showed me myself revealed no sky above. (Text 262)
> . . .above the rooftops of the interrupted city, the blue of the always brand-new sky closes the mysterious existence of stars into oblivion. (Text 439)
> All else that I see in the city is dark, save where feeble reflections of light hazily ascend from the streets and cause a pallid, inverse moonlight to hover here and there. The buildings various colours, or shades of colours are hardly distinguishable in the blackness of the night; only vague, seemingly abstract differences break the regularity of the congested ensemble. (Text 441)
> Above where I'm standing there are branches of trees, and all of the city's sleepiness fills my disenchanted heart. Lisbon by moonlight and my weariness because of tomorrow! (Text 480)

Having chosen as our own "cicerone" the distinction between *Lisbon*'s single aesthetic of the beautiful and *The Book's* double aesthetic of the sublime, we may continue our exploration of the contrasting effects that they produce by noticing the

frequent allusions to Portuguese royalty in *Lisbon*. Arriving at the Pantheon, for example, his guide informs the tourist that "on the right lies King Joao IV, founder of the Braganza dynasty, which began with the revolution of 1640, prepared by forty noblemen, led by the great patriot Joao Pinto Ribeiro. . . .In the middle lies Dom Pedro IV, who was King of Portugal and Emperor of Brazil; there are two crowns of the urn, representing the two countries over which he reigned" (28). Later, he will mention

Alfonso de Albuquerque: "that great historic figure, the greatest of viceroys of India and the founder of modern imperialism" (62).

References to royalty do occur in *The Book* as well; however, in place of illustrious figures from Portuguese history, we find *imagined* personages "taking place in a city built out of my soul," to recall Soares's phrase. The sublime aesthetics of what Soares calls "the Dying Sun" is clearly at work, for example, in his description of himself as as "a feudal lord of swamps at twilight, solitary prince of empty tombs" (Text 216), as "Prince of the Great Exile, who as he was leaving gave the last beggar the ultimate alms of his desolation" (Text 55). In Text 300, he announces that "the palace of the prince I never was is now ruins in a distant past" which may recall his lamenting in Text 22 that "Everything about me belongs to a glossy prince pasted, along with other decals, in the old album of a little boy who died long ago."

We notice as well the way in which the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime applies to the treatment of elevated places in both works. In *Lisbon*, we learn, for example, of the pedestal on which the statue of Pombal will be placed that "it will be 36 metres high, commanding five large avenues which meet on that spot" (22), that from the courtyard of a particular church "a magnificent panorama of the city and river may also be enjoyed, almost as fine as the one from Senhora do Monte" (27), and that he St. George Castle "is built on an eminence which commands a view of the Tagus and of a great part of the city" (34). In *The Book*, on the other hand, Soares enjoys from the vantage of his nondescript fourth-floor rented room, not simply an impressive, but a boundless panorama: "Behind me, where I'm lying down, the silence of the house touches infinity" (Text 31); "I throw an empty matchbox towards the abyss that's the street beyond the sill of my high window" (Text 102); "I step over to my window overlooking the narrow street, I look at the immense sky and the countless stars, and I'm free, with a winged splendor whose fluttering sends a shiver throughout my body" (Text 46).

Likewise, the statues mentioned in *Lisbon* are all of prominent historical figures whose achievements we are meant to admire. We learn that "In the center of the square [Praça do Commercio] stands the bronze equestrian statue of King José I, a splendid sculpture by Joachim Machado de Castro, cast in Portugal, . . . The pedestal is adorned with magnificent figures depicting the rebuilding of Lisbon after the great earthquake in 1755" (16). In *The Book*, however, statues provoke an experience of unease, as when Soares tells us that "A statue is a dead body, chiseled to capture death in incorruptible matter" and when he advises (in the passage entitled "Our Lady of Silence"), "May your acts be the statue of renunciation, your gestures the pedestal of indifference, and your words the stained-glass windows of denial." Similarly, in Text 61, he describes, not the statue of an important historical figure, but the "unique and haughty statue of our Tedium, a dark figure whose inscrutable smile gives its face a vague aura of mystery."

Military campaigns are likewise described in ways that provoke either unalloyed pleasure or pleasure mixed with trepidation depending on where they appear. In *Lisbon*, the cicerone informs us that "During his reign [King Carlos] Portugal obtained several brilliant victories in Africa – those of Mouzinho de Albuquerque over the rebel chief Gungunhana in Mozambique, and those of Major Roçadas over the Cuamata tribe in Angola" (29) and that the Tower of Belém "is indubitably one of the finest monuments in Lisbon and one of the most expressive memories of Portuguese military and naval power" (60). In *The Book*, Soares's descriptions of military exploits emphasize *powerlessness*, but in such a way as to confer upon them an aura of sublimity, as when he declares: "How many Caesars I've been, but not the real ones. I've been truly imperial while dreaming, and that's why I've never been anything. My armies were defeated, but the defeat was fluffy, and no one died. I lost no flags" (Text 102) and when he envisions "the troops of a disbanded army whose commanders had a glorious dream, which in them – now trudging through the scum of marshes – has been reduced to a vague notion of grandeur, the consciousness of having belonged to any army, and the vacuity of not even knowing what the commander they never saw had ever done" (Text 59).

We notice a similar transition from the beautiful to the sublime in the presentation of the maritime history of Portugal. In *Lisbon*, the Tagus River is described as "forming one of the largest natural harbors in the world with ample anchorage for the greatest of fleets" (11), the Praia do Restello as "famous as the point from which the ships sailed forth for the Great Discoveries" (60), the Geographical Society as "an interesting colonial and ethnographical museum, which comprises naval relics, models of galleons and national and African boats . . . specimens of fibre textiles and of such like stuffs, products of Angola, Mozambique, Macau, Timor, etc." (35-6), and the Tower of Belém as "one of the most expressive memories of Portuguese military and naval power" (60).

In Text 125 of *The Book*, Soares describes his own voyage of discovery in ways that lay claim to his being an explorer of an even higher order than his Portuguese ancestors. He begins with the bold assertion that

> Your ships, Lord, didn't make a greater voyage than the one made my thought, in the disaster of this book. They rounded no cape and sighted no far-flung beach – beyond what daring men had dared and what minds had dreamed – to equal the capes I rounded with my imagination and the beaches where I landed with my . . . . .

After distinguishing between the "Real World" that was discovered "Thanks to your initiative, Lord" and the "Intellectual World" that will be his domain, he claims that his quest will pose the greater challenges:

> Your Argonauts grappled with monsters and fears. In the voyage of my thought, I also had monsters and fears to contend with. On the path to the abstract chasm that lies in the depths of things there are horrors that the world's men don't imagine and fears to endure that human experience doesn't know. The cape of the common sea beyond which all is mystery is perhaps more human than the abstract path to the world's void.

He returns to this claim towards the end of the text: "I, far away from the paths to myself, blind to the vision of the life I love, . . . I too have finally arrived at the vacant end of things, at the imponderable edge of creation's limit, at the port—in—no—place of the World's abstract chasm."

In *Lisbon*, beautiful paintings are housed in various museums, including the Artillery Museum, which the cicerone describes as "indubitably the most remarkable one in Lisbon" (30):

> The paintings, signed by master like Columbano, Malhoa, Velloso Salgado, [etc.] . . sculptures by Simoes de Almeida (the nephew), Oliveria Ferreira, Sousa Rodrigues and others; the gilt inlaid-work and other decorative elements – all these render this museum a remarkable store of masterpieces, which no visitor to Lisbon should miss seeing" (31).

In *The Book*, this showcasing of beautiful paintings and their eminent painters is replaced by painterly images of Lisbon itself, some of which are likely to remind us of the role played by the Alps as a source of the sublime among Romantic writers and painters: "The city's uneven mountainous mass looks at me today like a plain, a plain covered by rain" (Text 69); ". . .on the frozen avalanche of overlapping rooftops it is a greyish white, damply tarnished by a lifeless brown" (Text 434); ". . and the whole ensemble is staggered in diverse clusters of darkness, outlined on one side by white, and dappled with blue shades of cold nacre" (Text 435).

Among the contrasts between the beautiful and the sublime effects produced by *Lisbon* and *The Book* respectively, perhaps the most intriguing has to do with the treatment of death in both works. *Lisbon*, on the one hand, contains very few references to death. Those that we do find have to do largely with the beautiful tombs that contain the mortal remains of prominent Portuguese figures. We learn, for example, that Prince Alfonso lies "in a sumptuous silver coffin weighting over six hundred kilos" (29), that the Church of Sao Roque contains several tombs of noteworthy figures (42), and that the Almeida Garrett Chapel contains "the tombs of Luís de Camoes and Vasco da Gama . . . In the upper part of this chapel is the tomb of King Sebastian" (58)

The cicerone likewise recalls that The Convento do Carmo was founded by "the great constable Dom Nuno Alvares Pereira . . . [who] died and was buried there; he was afterwards transferred to the Egreja de Sao Vicente . . . in March 1918 he was taken to the Monastery of the Jerónimos, when again he was transferred to the little church of the Third Order of Carmelites, where he now is" (41) and that it was in the Baptism Chapel of the Monastery of the Jéronimos that, on the 21st December 1918, the body of Dr. Sidónio Pais, President of the Republic, was set; the body being followed to the monastery by a crowd of many thousands, in a moving and heart-felt demonstration" (56).

In keeping with *Lisbon*'s aesthetic of the beautiful, the cicerone's references to the horrendously devastating earthquake of 1755 focus, not on the event itself, but on the reconstruction that followed. The tourist learns, for example, that the Town Hall contains "a great picture by Lupi representing the Marquis de Pombal and the reconstruction of Lisbon effected by him after the great earthquake" (14). The

monument to Pombal "will represent the great statesman, on his pedestal of glory, contemplating his formidable work – the reconstruction of Lisbon after the great earthquake" (22). The Church of St. Dominic "was built after the great earthquake" (35). The Church of Sao Roque "was rebuilt after the Great Earthquake" (42). At the entrance of the *Museu de Arte Antiga,* "we may see an enormous picture in glazed-tiles (*azulejos*) representing Lisbon in the seventeenth century, that is to say, as it was before the 1755 earthquake" (67).

Very few of the monuments to which the cicerone calls attention bear actual signs of the devastation wreaked by the earthquake One of the very few exceptions is the Convent of the Church of Madre de Deus, which "founded in 1509 . . . is an abundantly restored structure (30) on which "the several earthquakes from which Lisbon has suffered left their traces" (32). The cicerone also regrets at one point that that the Lisbon Cathedral, which had been damaged by several earthquakes, has been "very badly restored, since its present state shows the lack of a definite plan on the part of the several 'restorers.'" (32)

In *The Book*, the word "earthquake" occurs only twice and not in connection with the actual earthquake of 1755. At one point, Soares describes himself as being "like a man who wakes up after a slumber full of real dreams, or like a man freed by an earthquake from the dim light of the prison he's grown used to" (Text 39); at another, he declares that "For me, the difference between an earthquake and a massacre is like the difference between murdering with a knife and murdering with a dagger" (Text 133). "Ruins" occurs more frequently but, again, never in reference to Lisbon itself. Rather, Soares describes himself as "the ruins of buildings that were never more than ruins" (Text 61) and the act of writing as "herbs collected from among the ruins of dreams" (152).

Soares says at one point "We all know that we die; we all feel that we won't die" (Text 473). The double-vision implied by this ambiguous observation runs throughout *The Book*. Rather than making merely oblique references to death such as one finds in *Lisbon*, Soares constantly confronts it directly but in such a way as to distance himself from its initially terrifying aspect. His acute susceptibility to thoughts of his eventual extinction, appears, for example, when he reflects that "each new autumn is closer to the last autumn we'll have, and the same is true of spring or summer; but autumn, by its nature, reminds us that things will end" (177). Such thoughts can also be provoked in the absence of any identifiable cause: "Sometimes I feel, I'm not sure why, a touch of foretold death" (41). Perhaps the most poignant of these reminders occurs when Soares transforms various signs of daily *life* into a cluster of *memento mori*:

> The day will come when I see no more of this, when I'll be survived by the bananas lining the pavement, by the voices of the shrewd saleswoman, and by the daily papers that the boy has set out on the opposite corner of the street. I'm well aware that the bananas will be others, that the saleswomen will be others, and that the newspapers will show – to those who bend down to look at them – a different date from today's. But they, because they don't live, endure, although as others. I, because I live, pass on, although the same. (Text 170)

On the other hand, what Soares calls the "visceral logic" that rejects the knowledge of death emerges throughout *The Book* precisely at those moments where we experience the presence of what Soares calls "*truly* static things . . . woven by eternity" (304; my emphasis). The appeal of aesthetic stasis – in contrast to the physical inanition that it so closely resembles -- is also sublimely expressed by Soares's imagining "if our life were an eternal standing by the window, if we could remain there for ever, like hovering smoke, with the same moment of twilight forever paining the curve of the hills . . . If we could remain that way for beyond for ever! If at least on this side of the impossible we could thus continue, without committing an action, without our pallid lips sinning another word!" (97).

In a similar vein, his description of the effect produced on him by the contemplation of stained-glass windows reminds us of the sublime's double aesthetic in the sense that it evokes in his imagination thoughts of both eternity and death: eternal stained-glass windows, hours of naïve design and coloration executed by some artists who for ages has slept in a Gothic tomb on which two angels, their hands pressed together, freeze the idea of death in marble" (289).

I'll conclude my paper by inviting you to think of both *Lisbon* and *The Book* as--for the time being, at least -- equally *timeless* works, although for quite different reasons. *Lisbon* survives because the cicerone is highly selective in what he shows to the tourist – only those aspects of the city that, redounding to its glory, are likely to elicit the admiration of the visitor. That Lisbon is still essentially unchanged from the city that Pessoa himself once knew. As Tony Frazer says in his introduction to *Lisbon*, Pessoa "loved the city, knew all its corners, and scarcely left it after his early years there, following his school-days in Durban. The book can still be used as a guide today. (8).

While *Lisbon* will have perennial value for us as long as the city whose cultural treasures it so lovingly describes is not destroyed by an earthquake like the one that demolished it in 1755, *The Book* will survive, not because of the cultural *treasures* whose beauty it celebrates but because of the cultural *predicament* that it succeeds in sublimating. Here is the predicament as described by Soares himself:

> The generation I belong to was born into a world where those with brain as well as a hear couldn't find any support. The destructive work of previous generations left us a world that offered no security in the religious sphere, no guidance in the moral sphere, and no tranquility in the political sphere. We were born into the midst of metaphysical anguish, moral anxiety and political disquiet. (Text 175)

For as long as this defining experience of lost security – which is, for Soares, both a cultural and a personal catastrophe -- persists, *The Book of Disquiet* – which has been so aptly described as both a modernist masterpiece and a self-help guide for losers – will likewise endure.

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