

Resisting the Myth: Perceptions of Lisbon in Contemporary Portuguese Fiction

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1. Introduction

The city of Lisbon has often been depicted in literary works and has been the setting for some of the best pieces of Portuguese literature throughout the centuries. But ever since Baudelaire stated that Lisbon was "a city crafted in marble," (212) and certainly since the Swiss director Alain Tanner's film "Dans la ville blanche" (1983) the idea of Lisbon as the "white city" has become widely accepted. Lisbon has become a symbol of *saudade*, *fado* and a certain charming backwardness and frozen in the myth of a "city of water and light," a myth that has been largely propagated by literature. This view has not only become prevalent abroad, though. Portugal and its writers have contributed to this phenomenon, too (Alexandre Herculano, e.g., called Lisbon "cidade de mármore e granito" (16). On the one hand they developed this image in an attempt to articulate and combat their pain about the nation's lost glory, on the other hand they have cultivated it as a useful image to arouse the interests of prospective tourists. This tendency to see Lisbon solely in terms of clichés is, however, as I pointed out, a relatively new development.

Going back to medieval historiography, we find a completely different approach towards Lisbon in Fernão Lopes: in his *Crónicas*, the city is featured as a polymorphous being, defined by its inhabitants. And it is featured as a personified being that can enter into a dialogue with the author. These features become even more prominent about 500 years later, not only in the poetry of Cesário Verde and Gomes Leal but also in some of Eça de Queirós' novels, e.g. *Os Maias* or *A Capital*, where the city once more is described through the behavior and the customs of its inhabitants.

This is the literary tradition in which, in a certain way, the contemporary works to be discussed in this article, stand: *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* by José Saramago, *Lisboa. Livro de Bordo* by José Cardoso Pires and *Era bom que trocássemos umas ideias sobre o assunto* by Mário de Carvalho. In these works Lisbon regains its colors. The city is freed from the clichés surrounding it and assumes a new, multi-colored personality. The authors are looking for a Lisbon far from commonplace perceptions and portray it with its inhabitants as the setting for concrete Portuguese

historic moments. Still, the city is always more than a mere place of action. It helps in establishing the protagonists' identities. Their experiences of the urban space seem to function according to secret unwritten laws and the geography of Lisbon triggers their need to think over their own standards and values. All this happens in very different ways in these three very different novels.

It is worth mentioning that all of the three authors play with the metaphor of the "colored city" as opposed to the myth of "white Lisbon." José Saramago transfers the action of his novel into the year 1936, the time of Salazar's dictatorship, and in his novel Lisbon appears as a "cidade cinzenta" (12). José Cardoso Pires pronounces himself decidedly against Tanner's simplified view and depicts his Lisbon in a mixture of ochre, green and blue; borrowing these colors from other artists and other times in order to mix them together in a new, personal and intimate image (10). And finally Mário de Carvalho presents contemporary Lisbon as a polychromatic, chameleon-like being: "[...] os rosas-suaves, os verdes-esbatidos, os amarelos-doces, em milhentas tonalidades que não fazem mal à vista" (17). He also consciously sets this colorful image against Tanner's concept and uses it as a metaphor for the different notions and strategies of life that coexist in the city. Another feature that all of the three works have in common is their dialogue with the memory of the place, also the literary memory; the dialogue with the myth. Focusing on this dialogue I will find out to what extent the confrontation with the city of Lisbon has triggered some kind of reflection upon the past, especially the recent past, in the respective authors and upon their identity as (Portuguese) writers, and how these reflections are expressed in the literary works.

2. José Saramago

Many critics have dismissed the role of Lisbon in *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* as that of a rather unpleasant setting, where in the end hardly anything happens, except that it is constantly raining. I argue, though, that the many interesting readings of this novel to be found in secondary literature are tightly interwoven with the urban experience of the protagonist, e.g. the new view on history, the predominant role of the female characters or the imitation of orality.

Teresa Cristina Cerdeira da Silva describes what Saramago does in *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* as follows:

É o Reis espectador da vida que o romance quer confrontar com o espectáculo de 1936, para testar até que ponto se consegue ser 'sábio' diante de uma Europa conturbada e agonizante, de valores

degradados, onde a liberdade começava a ser um sonho cada vez mais inatingível. (104)

However, this literary "experiment" does not only apply to the fictitious confrontation of a personality with a specific historic moment. Saramago also exposes Ricardo Reis to a specific geographic space: the city of Lisbon. And the geography of this city, with its hills and vantage points on the one hand and the maze of little, narrow streets and alley-ways on the other hand naturally allows different perspectives on the urban space and different ways to experience it. It might be useful for further consideration to take a closer look at what the French philosopher Michel de Certeau wrote in his work *L'invention du quotidien. 1, Arts de faire* on the occasion of a visit to the platform of the World Trade Center in New York:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. (152)

And further:

Is the immense texturology spread out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer. The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. (153)

In this reading one can discover much of what Ricardo Reis feels when confronted with Lisbon: the desire for "distance," to be a "celestial eye" and the urge to escape from a world that keeps the individual imprisoned. But what does de Certeau mean when he talks about "practices" that need to be forgotten in order to implement this panoramic, god-like gaze on the city? Let's have another look at his text about New York:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk -an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in these intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. (153)

Many of de Certeau's observations find a parallel in *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*. Ricardo Reis reaches Lisbon by ship. His "father," Fernando Pessoa, has passed away a few weeks before. The author is allowed, though, to wander around in the city for another nine months in a half-dead state before he finds eternal rest. These nine months provide the last opportunity for Ricardo Reis to draw back from his identity as heteronym, and therefore to retreat from Pessoa, in order to be able to survive as an autonomous human being. He can reach this aim only through taking the initiative and taking on responsibility; he needs to develop emotions and to become closer to his surroundings. His way after the disembarkment at the Cais do Sodré, however, leads him further and further away from the scenery of the ungraspable city, teeming with people, up to the Alto de Santa Catarina, from which he has a distanced, panoramic view that can be compared to Michel de Certeau's view from the World Trade Center and which complies with his stoic philosophy of life. But hand in hand with this spatial displacement, all hopes are shattered that Reis will be able to prevent his own failure together with the final death of Pessoa.

Even the very beginning of the novel hints at the fact that Reis is not dealing with a Lisbon "made of light and water," one that embodies nothing but a vague longing. In Saramago's reversal of Camões' statement in the *Lusíadas*, Lisbon now is "[o lugar] onde o mar acaba e a terra principia" (11). It is unambiguously pointed out that he is dealing with a doubtlessly earthy version of the city, and even at the point of his disembarkment Ricardo Reis senses that something is awaiting in this city: "A alfândega é uma antecâmara, um limbo de passagem, que será lá fora" (14). Instinctively he asks the taxi driver to bring him to a hotel from which the sea can be seen. That is how he ends up in the Hotel Bragança, the first stage of his stay in Lisbon. Thinking in terms of the vertical spatial arrangement of the city, it is positioned half way up the Rua do Alecrim, right between the low-levelled harbor and the high-levelled Alto de Santa

Catarina, where Ricardo Reis is going to move into his apartment later on. For the moment, however, he chooses a hotel, a place that is located between the private and the public space. In this indefinite situation Reis has made a decision neither about his withdrawal from the world nor about his affirmation of life.

Taking the hotel as a starting point, Ricardo Reis goes for his first strolls in Lisbon, which make him a pedestrian in de Certeau's sense: he dives into the city and through his movements becomes a part of it without being able to grasp it as a whole. The sensations he experiences when confronted with this constantly fluctuating organism are overwhelming for him:

Respira-se uma atmosfera composta de mil cheiros intensos, a couve esmagada e murcha, a excrementos de coelho, a penas de galinhas escaldadas, a sangue, a pele esfolada. Andam a lavar as bancadas, as ruas interiores, com baldes e agulheta, e ásperos piaçabas, ouve-se de vez em quando um arrasta metálico, depois um estrondo, foi uma porta ondulada que se fechou. Ricardo Reis rodeou a praça pelo sul, entrou na Rua dos Douradores, quase não chovia já [...] ver as altas fronteiras de cinza-parda, as fileiras de janelas a mesma altura, as de peitoril, as de sacada, com as monótonas cantarias prolongando-se pelo enfiamento da rua, até se confundirem em delgadas faixas verticais, cada vez mais estreitas, mas não tanto que se escondessem num ponto de fuga, porque lá ao fundo, aparentemente cortando o caminho, levanta-se um prédio da Rua da Conceição, igual de cor, de janelas e de grades, feito segundo o mesmo risco, ou de mínima diferença, tordos porejando sombra e humidade, libertando nos saguões o cheiro dos esgotos rachados, com esparsas baforadas de gás, como não haveriam de ter as faces pálidas os caixeiros que vêm até a porta das lojas, com as suas batas ou guarda-pós de paninho cinzento, o lápis de tinta entalado na orelha, o ar enfadado de ser hoje segunda-feira e não ter o domingo valido a pena. A rua está calçada de pedra grossa, irregular, é um basalto quase preto onde saltam os rodados metálicos das carroças e onde, em tempo seco, não este, ferem lume as ferraduras das muares quando o arrasto da carga passam as marcas e as forças. (44)

A struggle begins between Reis, who wants to keep his detached composure, and the city. Again and again he feels an urge to go out for extended walks, which in the end form the "trama deambulatória" (Cerdeira da Silva 104) of this novel. At the same time he is always overwhelmed by a sensation of panic once he perceives that he is nothing

but a little gearwheel in the big machinery of the urban space. He seems to sense dimly that for a pedestrian there is no escape from the constant shaping and re-shaping of the city. He calls a taxi in order to go back to the hotel, thus retreating to a room that is, at least partly, private. He is conscious, though, of his split attitude towards Lisbon and he tries to suppress his urge to withdraw from the threatening city by means of a taxi.

During his walks he is also confronted with the crowds of people that, according to de Certeau, define the nature of the city. One can distinguish differences, though, between Reis' totalizing gaze when he observes the crowds from above and his inability to make himself an integral element of this "unconscious poem" when he actually forms part of such a crowd. The gaze from above poetizes the masses and leads to a metamorphosis, as can be shown in the scene in which Reis looks down on a sea of people who are waiting for the New Year in front of Rossio Station: "Caiu uma bâtega rápida, abriram-se guarda-chuvas, carapaças luzidias de insectos, e como se a multidão fosse um exército avançando sob a protecção dos escudos, postos sobre as cabeças, ao assalto duma fortaleza, indiferente" (76). Reis is unable to become a part of this human army. He senses a strong distance between himself and the people and is disgusted by the carnal presence of the masses:

[...] este odor de cebola, alho e suor recozido, de roupas raro mudadas, de corpos sem banho ou só no dia de ir ao médico, qualquer pituitária medianamente delicada se teria ofendido na provação deste trânsito. (69)

The people also grasp instinctively that Ricardo Reis is not one of them, since they immediately make room for Reis and we see "o chapéu cinzento de Ricardo Reis avançar tão facilmente por entre a mole humana, é como o cisne do Lohengrin em aguas subitamente amansadas do mar Negro" (68). In this context it is of importance to point out that the city of Lisbon in *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* also stands for the setting of the politics of the Salazar regime. This regime has incorporated the urban culture into its own discourse, thus trying to ban the potential threat that the uncontrolled masses pose to any system. Michel de Certeau considers this a futile undertaking:

The city becomes the dominant theme in political legends, but it is no longer a field of programmed and regulated operations. Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city, the ruses and combination of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer. (156)

José Saramago's depiction of the organization of the city is based on a similar model. He, too, focuses on the inhabitants who create and write the city through their actions, and presents their actions on two levels: on the one hand, the anarchic society that is carnivalesque in the sense of Bakhtin—the street culture and on the other hand, the artificial society of the masses, organized by the state, which tries to incorporate aspects of the urban culture of Lisbon into its self-image, thus suppressing the subversive traditional culture and replacing it by a state-organized, meaning-controlled, culture. An example of this would be the attempt to turn the traditional, and therefore for the system threatening, culture of the fishermen from Nazaré into a lifeless piece of art in a drama with the title "Tá Mar." Another one is the party's rally in the bull-ring, a place that is usually seen as the setting for traditional, popular festivities that lack any state organization or interference. In clear contrast to these controlled events, we find spontaneous stagings of carnivalesque subversiveness that are related to everyday practices, a subversiveness that finds its release for example in the tradition of throwing litter on the street on New Year's Eve:

As pessoas deixaram livres os passeios, sabem o que vai acontecer, dos andares começa-se a atirar lixo para a rua, é o costume [...] Pela Rua do Ouro abaixo o chão está juncado de detritos, e ainda se lançam janela fora trapos, caixas vazias, ferro-velho, sobras e spinhas que vêm embrulhadas em jornais e nas calçadas se espalham, um potezinho cheio de cinzas ardentes estoirou disparando fagulhas em redor, e as pessoas que passam [...] gritam para cima, mas isto nem são protestos, o uso é geral, resguarde-se cada qual como puder, que a noite é de festa, de alegria foi o que se pôde arranjar. (77)

But here, too, Ricardo Reis is not able to join in. For him, the spectacle serves as a *memento mori*: at the very moment in which a dressmaker's dummy is thrown onto the street and bursts apart in front of him he is haunted by existential fears.

The hotel is a place in which Ricardo Reis' journey is not decided yet in one further sense. It is in this place that he meets the two female figures, who in the context of his search for identity stand for alternative ways of life: Lídia, the chambermaid with whom he gets involved in a sexual relationship, and Marcenda, the physician's daughter with a crippled hand to whom he feels strongly attracted but who remains unattainable. It can easily be seen that these two female figures correspond with two different ways of experiencing the city. Lídia sneaks into Reis' life just like the city offers itself to him on his walks. Moreover, she is a *pars pro toto* for the

people who populate and continually recreate the urban space. In contrast, Marcenda is the trigger for his journey "further up the hill," away from the city center. She is the reason that initially brings him to the Alto de Santa Catarina, near which Reis rents an apartment. He leaves the hotel, a "lugar neutro, sem compromisso, de trânsito e vida suspense," as he puts it (22). In the loneliness of his apartment he is once again caught up in his distanced, stoic philosophy of life. Although he feels this loneliness, he cannot escape from lethargy. He hardly ever leaves his house, not even for a meal, and keeps watching the Tejo across the Alto de Santa Catarina through the open window. His perception of the city adapts itself to his philosophy. In spite of the other people, who are obviously to be found in this place, too, Lisbon for him seems to be nothing but silence, "um grande silêncio que rumoreja, nada mais" (221).

Once more it is Lidia who keeps visiting him and who brings to him the city from which he is trying to withdraw. She tells him about the latest news in politics, which she mainly obtains from her sailor brother, thus countering the newspaper articles filtered by the regime, which in the meanwhile have mainly begun to mark Reis' contact to the outer world. Still, his journey towards death seems to be inescapable. He gives away his last chance to take the initiative, to act and to take on responsibility when he accepts Lidia's offer not to have to adopt their child that she is expecting. Reis had already realized much earlier that for man, walking means existing: "a partir de certa idade nem nos governa a cabeça nem as pernas sabem aonde hão-de levar-nos [...]" (78). He gives up and follows Pessoa to the cemetery that lies still a little bit higher and still a little bit further away from the city that he can not face.

In *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*, Saramago describes Lisbon as posing a challenge for those who actively take control of themselves and their lives. This affirmation goes hand in hand with the rejection of the poet, who is committed to pure art, and of Pessoa's poetics. At the same time, this book is the manifestation of his own alternative draft: as opposed to the stoic poet Reis, he portrays the city with sympathy as an organism that keeps renewing itself. To a large degree the place withstands the attempt of a regime to instrumentalize it, since the people who create the space keep bringing in their subversive potential. Most of all the city exists in labyrinthic impenetrability and Reis' wish to become the "God of the Labyrinth" fails just like his attempt to read the book he brought with him, which carries exactly this title.

3. José Cardoso Pires

José Cardoso Pires' *Lisboa. Livro de Bordo* differs from Saramago's text even in the choice of genre: the book is not a novel and no protagonist can be distinguished; the narrator and the author blend into one. The work describes a walk taken by Cardoso Pires in Lisbon and can be interpreted as a tribute to his hometown. The description of this walk is interwoven with fictitious elements. Still, similar readings as to the observation of the city can be discerned. In a certain way, in *Lisboa. Livro de Bordo* we follow Ricardo Reis' footsteps in the opposite direction. Cardoso Pires' first view of the city is a fictitious, all-encompassing one. "Sentado numa nuvem" the city appears to him a ship, the log-book of which he wants to write (7). From there he zooms to the highest point of the 'real' city, the starting-point of his journey, from which he tries to develop what a critic called a "geografia sentimental de sítios" (Rodrigues da Silva 17). He is situated on the Alto do Castelo, sees the city underneath and develops through his dialogue with it his definition of the essence of Lisbon:

[...] para mim, panorâmicas e vistas gerais são quase sempre frases feitas ou cenários de catálogo. Claro que ver-te daqui [...] é deslumbrante, não digo que não, e a distância inventa cidades, como muito bem sabemos. Por essa razão é que eu nunca me esqueço daquele aviso que alguém deixou um dia nesta varanda de curiosos: *A Primeira Vista É Para Os Cegos!*, aviso sábio, sem dúvida, mas simples de mais, se me permites, porque mesmo para quem desça da vista geral e mergulhe nos interiores [...] a paisagem tem muito de encomenda. [...] Mas ninguém poderá conhecer uma cidade se não a souber interrogar, interrogando-se a si mesmo. Ou seja, se não tentar por conta própria os acasos que a tornam imprevisível e lhe dão o mistério da unidade mais dela. E que isto aqui não é só luz e rio, sabes bem. Não é só geografia, revelações ou memórias e o restante diz-que-diz dos manuais e dos oradores frustrados. Há vozes e cheiros a reconhecer [...]. (Cardoso Pires 10-12)

Once more, we recognize a classification that is close to Michel de Certeau's theorization of the city. Cardoso Pires also speaks of the difference between the panoramic gaze and "diving into the city." "Coincidences" make the city unpredictable, thus constantly reinventing it. During his walk, these coincidences appear mainly through the memories - whether personal or literary- that sneak into his conscience and start changing the space. This, too, is a phenomenon described by de Certeau.

To Cardoso Pires the city seems to be penetrated by its past. "Vozes, olhares, memorações," as stated in the subtitle of the book, are for him the voices, gazes and memories of the others, those before him, which mix with his own perceptions. The literary myth, this mixture, keeps bringing about their creative occupation with the city. This confrontation involves the concern with the individual past and identity as well as with that of the national, collective.

The "written city," e.g. that of the authors of literature, interferes with the real place. This becomes quite clear when on his walk Cardoso Pires reaches the Chiado. Triggered by his memory, writers from past times suddenly populate the place as shadows, ghosts or lifeless statues. Like on a palimpsest he sees 200 years of cultural life in Lisbon shining through, interfering and mixing with each other. Side by side with these memories of the vibrant center of the literary past we find memories that were of personal significance:

E se [...] me vejo no Largo do Carmo, com o chafariz ao centro salpicado de passarinhos, então alguma coisa muito vertical me suspende por inteiro porque foi nesse lugar que vivi o momento mais comovedor da minha vida de cidadão. Largo do Carmo do ano de 74, quem o pode esquecer? Era primavera e a capital proclamava a Revolução dos Cravos diante dos donos da Ditadura encurrulados num quartel. (75)

Cardoso Pires, who was one of the leading intellectuals in the opposition to Salazar, recognizes Lisbon as the setting for the political revolution he witnessed. Further, in his memories of the artists before him, which are brought about by his experience of the city, his sympathy is also always with those who stood up against the encrusted social structures of the suppressive systems of their respective times. He makes out an imaginary chain from the 17th century to the times of Salazar (from Bocage to himself). And continually remembers these people as people in Lisbon. It is the city that enables them to act according to their beliefs and protects them with its alleys and corners.

However, Cardoso Pires' walk goes far beyond a "dicionário afectivo-literário da cidade" (Rodrigues da Silva 17). He describes the rare mixture of aesthetically transfigured melancholy and a deep-rooted, burlesque slyness that seems to him typical of Lisbon. On his way he portrays the people he meets: old men playing cards or a woman selling lottery tickets who enters a bar represent the population of the city. According to Cardoso Pires their way of speaking forms part of the typical *lisboeta* sound as much as the voices of the poets. He doesn't forget to mention the cats

and doves that appropriate the city and show their disapproval of the officials' attempt to ban the past in monuments by being responsible for the fact that the statue of Chiado "chora diarreia de pombas pela cara abaixo" (62).

Through the example of the statues he also explains how the population creatively appropriates and modifies the urban space according to its own needs. Although there are more than enough monuments to be found in the city, the people of Lisbon invent new ones and fill them with their own meaning. Cardoso Pires gives the example of a statue of a man, who during his lifetime was a pronounced heretic, but was declared a saint by the population and ever since has been worshipped as such. In the same way his description of the bestiary in the Palácio da Fronteira figures as an example of the creative expression of subversive thoughts that unmask the reigning social order in a grotesque, parodic painting.

Cardoso Pires' journey finally ends in a café at the Terreiro do Paço with a view of the Tejo. A circle seems to be formed to the beginning of Saramago's novel, when this view is darkened by a flock of seagulls:

Quando por fim fechamos a página onde líamos a cidade, descobrimos que a vidraça do café está toldada por uma dança de gaivotas em turbilhão e que não há Tejo. Que desapareceu por trás duma desordem de asas e já não é prenúncio de oceano. Então, ternamente, confiadamente, reconhecemo-nos ainda mais ancorados à cidade que nos viu partir. (117)

This, too, seems to be a rejection of the mythical Lisbon as a "city made of water and light" and an affirmation of the earthy character of the metropolis.

Cardoso Pires is looking for a dialogue with Portuguese history by writing about Lisbon, the experience of which he shares with other poets, although the city has obviously changed. Lisbon is the point of contact he shares with these poets, not the historic moment, not the cultural characteristics. It is the medium that makes communication with the past possible. Apart from this significant role of the city for Portuguese writers, Cardoso Pires enhances a second aspect. In an interview he states:

E todo o humor, que é uma das cargas mais importantes que Lisboa tem. Mesmo naquilo a que eu posso chamar a sintaxe urbana de Lisboa, ou seja, a conjugação das ruas, dos relevos e da luz num estilo muito próprio tendente a criar, ou a incentivar, ou a concentrar, o "espírito do lugar." (Rodrigues da Silva 17)

The humor he mentions is the voice of the people in the city and the product of their everyday practices, which unconsciously form and mold

the place through their mere being, thus giving it its unmistakable character.

4. Mário de Carvalho

In the two novels discussed, walking has been established as an important element for the perception and creation of the urban space by the individual. As to Mário de Carvalho's novel *Era bom que trocássemos umas ideias sobre o assunto* (1995), one has to admit that hardly anyone walks in it. Still, this book is an impressive portrait of the Portuguese capital in the 1990s. It seems to be closely related to the novels of Eça de Queirós, which display a certain criticism of urban manners, although with a definite postmodern touch. Mário de Carvalho develops a picture of Lisbon that moves far away from the "white myth" or the legendary past of the Portuguese capital and instead portrays most of all the people who live in it and try to appropriate it.

José Cardoso Pires has been criticized for his portrayal of Lisbon as selective and lacking a certain sense of reality. He justified his text by pointing out that his version was a "Lisboa que tenho na memória" and offered his real opinion of the city today: "É evidente que é uma cidade degradada. É evidente que tem problemas de trânsito terríveis. É evidente que se continuam a cometer crimes e os mais graves, quanto a mim, são da arquitectura" (Rodrigues da Silva 18). This description could have served as a draft for Mário de Carvalho's *Era bom que trocássemos umas ideias sobre o assunto*, had it not been published much later than this book. In it, we encounter Lisbon in the form of a sarcastic comedy of manners. The author depicts the modern city and the people acting in it with delicate irony. Right at the beginning of the novel Mário de Carvalho hints at the fact that his setting is today's Lisbon. He reports on the riots among the population that were caused by the building of a new postmodern, magenta- and lettuce-green-colored building by a culture foundation named Helmut Chang Gomes, an incident that he considers typical of Lisbon:

Sempre que em Lisboa se constrói um prédio de estil com prosápia inovadora, cai Tróia, caem o Carmo e a Trindade, caem dirigentes políticos, caem reputações, as ondas sonoras dos desmoronamentos imaginários ressoam, vibram, enervam, insistem, maçam e só o que não cai é o edifício em causa, como não caiu este. (14)

Nevertheless, this new building is just an outer sign of a change that has started in Lisbon long before. I would like to focus on two aspects that are developed in the novel: the present official attitude towards literature and

the present status of the political left wing and its relationship with the pre-revolutionary past.

The protagonist of the novel, middle-aged Joel Strosse Neves, works for the previously mentioned culture foundation. His job is to write positive or negative responses to petitions. He gives us insight into the culture politics practised by his organisation:

Por exemplo, uma exposição de colchas bordadas à mão pela Marquesa de Valverde, um curso de *ikebana*, ou uma conferência sobre heráldica & armoria, seriam classificados de “dignificante”; um espectáculo da Cornucópia, um recital de versos de Alexandre O’Neill, ou um filme português em busca de subsídio, sofreriam a nota de “interessante mas não prioritário.” Um livro de poesia de um jovem autor seria inexistente. (23)

It can be clearly seen that literature plays a secondary role in the cultural hierarchy of the foundation, especially if it is not yet established, since literature of this sort lacks public appeal. But Joel Strosse cannot change this classification anymore because he is transferred to the library, a place that seems to be nearly dead. It has been years since the foundation last bought books, and his task is to organize what is already there, although hardly anyone is interested in it. In this context he becomes increasingly resolved to give his life a meaning by joining the Communist party. What thirty years ago would have ended in going underground, today is hardly more than an unimportant decision. But for Joel Strosse it is a heroic deed that could give meaning to his mediocre existence. That is why he does not simply enroll, but tries to literally stage his joining.

The following plot, in which Joel, during conspirative meetings, tries to convince old friends who are party members to propose him, gives Mário de Carvalho an excellent opportunity for a detailed study of the fossilized world of the Portuguese Communist party in the 1990s. The members are all Communists out of habit and limit their political commitment mainly to the payment of the monthly fee. They react somewhat astonished at his desire to join the party in these days but nevertheless try to be helpful. In the end the plot is driven into absurdity: Joel’s application for membership is turned down on the grounds of the rumor that he once removed a Communist poster from the exterior of a building. In this rejection the party sees a possibility to overcome its own meaninglessness, which becomes obvious in the party executive’s favourite statement, which gives the book its title: *Era bom que trocássemos umas ideias sobre o assunto*.

In the end, Joel remains a broken man—which seems to be unfair—since he, unlike the comrades, shows at least some interest in the party’s

cause by reading the *Avante!* and the *Ça ira!*... They keep their memories of the heroic times in the underground alive by monthly meetings in a filthy bar, where they drink low-quality wine and sing revolutionary songs. Other bars, the "posh" ones along the Avenida 25 de Abril, serve as "Universidades da Vida" for the young journalist Eduarda Galvão. Her rise, which parallels the fall of Joel Strosse in the novel, stands for a new notion of culture that takes place in lifestyle magazines and places emphasis on arbitrariness and fast success. And Eduarda is successful. Who cares about the fact that she advises the readers of her gossip column to read the modern poetry of a certain Alberto Herder (unfortunately she didn't quite grasp the correct name during the small talk the night before [...]). She is not concerned about the superficiality of her work. She even makes her old schoolteacher fake an interview with Agustina Bessa Luís, since the interview that actually happened demanded too much of her intellectually.

In his vast portrait of society, Mário de Carvalho holds a mirror to today's Lisbon. In doing so, he criticizes the once intellectually productive scene of the political left wing, which has been turned into an alibi for established citizens, as well as the present culture scene that aims for public appeal and inhibits a true renewal of culture.

5. Conclusion

In this article it has become clear that for contemporary authors, Lisbon is more than just the "white city" of melancholy. The old myth has been replaced by a new, vivid one. The city is no longer an emotion, it is the plurality of the people who live in it and the power that radiates from these people. This power can be interpreted as positive and as corrupting an oppressive system like in José Saramago's novel, or as destructive and corrosive for the individual values as in Mário de Carvalho's novel. José Cardoso Pires expresses the energy that the people receive from the city in a more poetical way:

Interrogar a cidade é fácil, isso qualquer turista faz. Mas um tipo só está a viver numa cidade quando se sente interrogado por ela: "O que é que tu tens a ver comigo?," "Porque é que estás aqui?," "Como é que tu te adaptas?," "Porque é que tu não te entendes?" (Rodrigues da Silva 18)

Lisbon is a place where a confrontation with one's own identity is made possible and one where the past can be questioned. This happens when Saramago fictitiously tries out life in Salazar's Lisbon of 1936, when Cardoso Pires during his walk in the city is reminded of his time in the

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