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Losses and Gains

Reflections on a Life

Translated from the Portuguese

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I

Invitation

I AM NOT the sand
where a pair of wings is sketched
or bars before a window.
I am not merely a rolling stone
on the world's tides,
on every beach rebirthing another.
I am an ear clamped to the shell
of life, I am construction and demolition,
servant and master, and I am
mystery.

Hand in hand let us write the script
for the theatre of my time:
my destiny and I.
We are not always in tune,
nor do we always take ourselves
seriously.

Finding the tone

What is this book?

Perhaps a complement to my 1996 essay *Rio do Meio*. I write along the same lines, taking up some of my usual themes. All my work is elliptical or circular: plots and characters peek here and there behind a new mask. I do this because I have not exhausted their potential, and I go on telling them. I shall probably carry on in this way to the last line of the final book.

So what is this book?

I shall not call it 'essays', because the solemn tone and the theoretical underpinning suggested by the term are not my style. Certainly not novel or fiction. Nor is it a teaching – I do not have this to give.

As in many fields of activity, new methods of work and creativity arise that need new names. Everyone will give this narrative the name they wish. For me it is that same word in the listener's ear, which I find so pleasing and use in novels or poems – a call for the reader to come and think with me.

What I write is born out of my own maturing, a path of highs and lows, shining moments and shadowy areas. On this route, I learned that life does not weave a web only of losses but furnishes us with a succession of gains.

The balance of the scales depends largely on what we can and want to perceive.



I meet a friend, a distinguished pianist, and I report that I am beginning a book, but, as always at the start of a new work, I am still looking for the right 'tone'.

He finds that apt, a writer looking for the tone. We laugh, because we find in the end that both of us are looking for the same thing: our tone. The tone of our language, of our art, and – this is true of anybody – the tone of our life. In what tone do we wish to live it? (I did not ask how we are *condemned* to live.)

In melancholy semi-tones, in brighter tones, with speed and superficiality, or alternating joy and pleasure with profound and thoughtful moments?

Only skimming the surface or from time to time diving into deep waters?

Distracted by the noise around or listening to the voices in the pauses and the silence – our own voice, the other's voice?

Will our tone be one of suspicion and mistrust or will it open portals to an endless landscape?

It depends partly on us.

In the instrument of our orchestration, we are – along with genetic or random accidents – the tuners and the performers. Prior to this, we construct our instrument. This makes the assignment more difficult, but much more stimulating.

I sit here at the computer and I think about the tone of this book, which I must find. At this starting point I sense it as a whisper to the reader: 'Come and think with me, come and help me in the quest.'

Although it is a private word, this might at some moments seem a cruel book: I say that we are important, and good, and capable, but I say too that we are often futile, we are too often mediocre. I say that we could be very much happier than we usually allow ourselves to be, but we are afraid of the price to be paid. We are cowards.

Nevertheless, the book must be hopeful: I am one of those who believe that happiness is possible, love is possible, that there is not merely missed opportunity and betrayal but tenderness, friendship, compassion, ethics and delicacy.

I think that on the route of our existence we need to learn this discredited practice known as 'being happy'. (I see eyebrows raised ironically before this romantic declaration of mine.)

Each one on his path and with his particular characteristics.



In art as in human relations, including a variety of loving relationships, we swim against the current. We attempt the impossible: total fusion does not exist, complete sharing is impossible to achieve. The essence cannot be shared: it is discovery and surprise, the glory or damnation of each – in isolation.

However, in a conversation or a silence, in a gaze, in a loving gesture as in a work of art, a narrow window may open up. Together, the performer and his spectator or his reader will stare – like two lovers.

That is how people, skinning knees and hands, end up.

So I write and shall write: to stimulate my imaginary reader – substitute for the imaginary friends of childhood? – to search within and to share with me so many anxieties about what we are doing with the time that is allotted to us.

Since living must be – until the last thought and the final gaze – a process of self-transformation.

What I write here is not mere daydreams. I am a woman of my time, and I want to bear witness to it with all the skill I can:

giving scope to my fantasies or writing about pain and puzzlement, contradiction and grandeur; about disease and death. Regretting the word spoken at the wrong time and the silence when it would have been better to speak out.

I write continually about the way we are simultaneously to blame and innocent in regard to what happens to us.

We are authors of a good part of our choices and omissions, daring or compromise, our hope and comradeship or our mistrust. Above all, we must decide how we employ and enjoy our time, which is in the end always our present time.

But we are innocent of accidents and brute chance that rob us of perfect loves, people, health, employment and security.

As a result my perspective of the human being, of my self, is as contrary as we provocatively are.

We are transition, we are process. This disturbs us.

The flow of days and years, decades, serves growth and increment, not loss and restriction. In this perspective, we become masters, not servants; human beings, not frightened little animals that scurry away without knowing exactly why.

If my reader and I can agree on our reciprocal tone, this initial monologue will be a dialogue – even though I may never gaze upon the countenance of the other who in the end becomes a part of me.

So my art shall have achieved some kind of goal.

Drawing in the depth of the mirror

FRUIT OF MISTAKES or of love,
I am born from my own contradiction.
The twist of the mouth,
the shape of the hand, the trick of walking
(dreams and fears included)
will come from those who have shaped me.
But what I would trace in the mirror
has to be armed as well
according to my desire.

I shall have my pair of wings
whose flight rises from those
who give me the shade where I grow
– just as, under a tree,
a stalk
and its flower.

The brand on the flank

The world has no subsistence without our perception that imbues it with form, without our thinking that gives it order.

It is an astonishing idea: we live according to our point of view, with which we survive or are shipwrecked. We explode or coagulate according to whether we are open or closed to the world.

And what shapes this perspective of ours?

It begins in childhood, with deficiencies not always explicable. Even if we were loved, we may suffer a basic insecurity. Although protected, we may be exposed to accidents and eventualities against which we have no defence. We have to create barricades and simultaneously make bridges to our surroundings and what is in store. All this plot of meeting and separation, conjoined terror and ecstasy, the material of our existence, begins before we are born.

But we are not merely swept on a torrent by default. *We are participants.*

Here lies our potential tragedy: the squandering of a life with its talents cut short if we do not succeed in seeing or if we lack the audacity to change to improve – at any moment, and at any age.

The foundation of this 'we' begins in childhood, raises its walls in maturity and culminates in the rooftop in old age, which is a crowning achievement although generally taken as a deterioration.

In this work our hand joins with the hands of the many who shape us. By breaking free of them with maturity, we shall demonstrate our stature: the person we wish to be, who we think we should be – who we think we *deserve to be*.

In this house, the house of the soul and the house of the body, we shall not be mere aimless puppets but warriors who think and decide.

To constitute a human being, the 'we' is a job that has no days off and allows no rest: there will be fragile walls, faulty calculations, cracks. Perhaps a section will collapse. But the job will also open windows on the landscape and portals to the sun.

What is produced – a habitable house or a sterile ruin – will be the sum of what was thought of us and we think of ourselves, the extent to which we were loved and we love, what others made us think we were worth and what we did to confirm or change this, this seal, signet, or brand.

However this is still too simple: in this mortar are mixed good faith and evasion, seduction and celebration, loving words and invitations refused. We participate in an extraordinary dance of donned masks, behind which we are the object of our own disquiet. Not totally victims or totally masters, with every moment of every day a challenge.

This ambiguity wounds us and nurtures us. It makes us human.

Within the timetable of my existence I shall fulfil the project that was offered to me, gradually taking charge of the canvas and the brush.

In the early years almost everything was the work of the environment in which I was born: family, school, windows through which they taught me to observe – shelter or cage, expectation or condemnation.

Soon I shall no longer have the others as excuse: father and mother, loving or hostile, warm-hearted or indifferent, suffering all the natural ills of the human condition that only as