# JORGE DE SENA

(1919-1978)



Born in Lisbon in 1919, Jorge de Sena led a life of physical, intellectual and cultural itinerancies, which the intense poetic, fictional and essayistic production bears witness to. As a Navy cadet he travelled along the Portuguese-speaking African coast. In Portugal, he dwelled between Lisbon and Porto, the city where he graduated in Civil Engineering, in 1944. He worked for fourteen years at the Lisbon Directorate-General of the Urbanisation Services and at the Portuguese Road Authority, until, for political reasons, he was forced into exile. In 1959, for opposing the Estado Novo [New State] *, he went to Brazil where he got a doctorate in Portuguese Literature, at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Arts of Araraquara. In 1964, Sena left again to a new and definitive exile to the United States, where he died in 1978.

The perspective about Europe in his poetic work derives, not only from the physical, and cultural itinerancy of his life journey, marked by frequent European tours, but also an acute conscience of the political-cultural power of this continent. The cradle of Western civilisation, it appears in his works as a mythical aggregator of peoples, but also showing its hubris in its hegemonic and expansionist will. It is noticeable there is an opposition between the nostalgia for the Greco-Latin past, statues of gods as an indication of voluptuousness and freedom, thought and aesthetics, and post-Roman Empire Europe, marked by the conventionalisms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, often submitted to economic-financial claims and power games.

The sardonic criticism of European superiority and even of a certain gentrification appears as

fierce as it is immense the emotion with which the museums, the squares and the works of art in general (be it a Van Gogh painting, a play by Debussy or a poem by Keats) are evoked throughout this poet's creative life. So, if in 1965, in the poem "Homenagem a Tristan Tzara" [*Tribute to Tristan Tzara*] (2014: 509), Sena criticises the frivolity of a Europe that forgets its great cultural values, in "A uma calista de Milão" [*To a Chiropodist from Milan*], written in 1971 (2014: 617), however, he praises the wisdom of some in the face of the nonsense of so many with responsibilities in  the construction of Europe since the Roman Empire, a period which, in his view, marks the decline of Ancient Greece's cultural values.

"«Eleonora di Toledo, Granduchessa di Toscana» [Eleonora di Toledo, Grand Duchess of Tuscany], by Bronzino" (*idem*: 331), a poem from *Metamorfoses* [Metamorphoses] (1963), clarifies Sena's criticism of a certain mercantilist Europe promotor of intolerance, inequalities, injustice, factors that easily end up in corruption. In it, he outlines the whole history of wealth, slavery, raisons d'État, power, that this continent embodied, from a painting of a woman, Spanish by birth, but Tuscan by marriage to Cosimo I. The imagination and the dazzling images flow from a perspective about the formation of modern Europe: unequal and elitist, where "Christian princes (…) devour one another under / the paternal vigilance of an ethereal Rome" (332).

Given the impossibility of denying the historical evidence, Sena criticises the Anglicisation, the Germanisation and the Gallicism of Europe, for the neglect of diversity that dictated the European formation, as he wrote in 1957, in the text "Sobre a coerência com o cristianismo como exemplo" [On Coherence with Christianism as an Example] (1984: 145-7). Opposing such tendency towards increasing hegemony, Sena stresses Southern Europe's openness, apparent even in the way Christianism acquiesces in updating itself, for example, through the consecration of new saints (*ibidem*). The Cordoba mosque exemplifies such opening, in a homonymous poem included in the book *Metamorfoses* (1963). The aforementioned monument, erected over a forest, goes from a Crypto-Christian temple to a mosque until the 16$^{th}$ Century, when it is converted into a synthesis of disparate cultural references. An identical perspective appears in a note written by the author about the poem "Chartres ou a

paz com a Europa" [Chartres, or Peace with Europe], since this cathedral had been erected over a pagan temple (2014: 804). So, the desired Europe is that which maintains indelible a cultural heritage marked by miscegenation.

*Peregrinatio ad Loca Infecta* (1969) maps Jorge de Sena's biographic routes. The sequence of the parts into which it is divided before the epilogue ("Portugal", "Brasil", "Estados Unidos da América" and "Notas de um regresso à Europa" [Notes of a Return to Europe], respectively) reveals not only the itinerancy that characterised the author's life, but also the consistency of his convictions about the men who inhabit the places he visited. If in the first part, regarding Portugal, there predominate poems that depict one country subdued to an unjustifiable dictatorship, which constrained thought and belittled men, the last part represents the return to a place of exile and exiled, but also a reunion with the defining cultural references of his existence as a man of learning.

From 1970 onwards, as an exiled university lecturer in Santa Barbara, California, he feels, Europe acutely as the place of belonging. Even if in the poem "Em Creta, com o Minotauro" [In Crete with the Minotaur], of *Peregrinatio ad Loca Infecta*, Sena describes his condition of a stateless person, compensating the void with the expression "I am, myself, my Motherland" (2014: 516), the journey across Europe clarifies the *topics* that his work explores, from political intrigue to betrayal, from religiosity to erotism, from the founding myths to the daily life acts. Thus, the repudiation and the admiration for Europe, in paradoxical tension that cements his status of a European exile.

The echoes of Europe in Sena's poetry prior to the exile point, distanced but painfully, towards a continent marked by the carnage of war, evidenced in poems of *Coroa da Terra* [Crown of the Earth] (1946) or of *Pedra Filosofal* [Philosopher's Stone] (1950). The fact that he does not mention the Second World War is part of the perspective of poetry as testimony, according to which, it is important to capture the collective human experience, regardless of the historic-cultural peculiarities (*vd.* Jorge Fazenda Lourenço). When he states "I do not see beds of agony, hospital beds, battlefields" (2014: 129), but he understands "that the voice

asks for help" (*ibidem*), the manifest abstractionism reveals the empirical author's attention to the moment in which he lives and the need to convert it into poetry in order to raise awareness. Thus, the poem aims at, "knowing the world and involving himself in it so as to transform it" (Carlos 1999: 79), especially when facing the unspeakable horror Europe has produced since the beginning.

During the exile, the need to nominate works of art, myths, and European places deepens and it is manifest in books, such as *Metamorfoses* (1963) or *Arte de Música* [Art of Music] (1968). For that reason, when he returns to the European continent, and despite all the contradictory feelings, the enchantment prevails. In the poem "Travessia" [Crossing] (1969: 549), the prosaic tone is broken by the verses' rhythm, conferring intensity to a moment that he does not portray, an ordinary arrival at the Havre harbour, a city without major attractions, because it means arrival in Europe. And to Sena, it remains paradoxically so fascinating, for the testimony and the creative grandeur that writers, painters, sculptors or musicians convey, and, however reprehensible, for the power games, for the greed and for the arrogance it sanctions.

* Information added by the translator: The New State was an authoritarian regime, that followed the collapse of the First Republic and was institutionalised in 1933 with the approval of a new Constitution.

**Brief Anthology**

**"Eleonora di Toledo, Granduchessa di Toscana", by Bronzino**

*To Murilo Mendes*

Pompous and dignified, officially serious,

It is the ideal geometry of prince bankers,

nephews, cousins, uncles from all over Europe,

of kings, landlords and shipowners,

strictly balanced between

sex, devotion and mortgages.

The world is a huge quay of austere intolerance,

to which slaves, pepper, charity dock

in the shadow of columns without Gothic barbarism.

In the firm mouth, as in the severe eye,

or in the ferociously tied hair

or in the immense and multiplying pearls,

or in the dresses embroidered like breasts

protuberating, there is a cold virtue,

a science of not-to sin in confession and in the chamber,

a reserve from distant charm

in which Raison d' État was a haughty stroll

in between the trees of a sandblasted garden,

with rational alleys and grass in golden section.

Undoubtedly the stars presided,

Over an already round earthly science,

to the very proportions that rule the frame.

Palaces, parties, complicated odes,

and processions and scaffolds and the

clarity of a Tuscan sky that lands on the

dust and ruins of imperial Toledo,

all of this condensates in a penetrating

shade of vague ochre where colours oppose each other

like very practical Tridentine theses

elaborated with patience for the eternal rest

of the Christian princes who devour one another under

the paternal vigilance of an ethereal Rome,

guarded by the Swiss, by cardinals and friars.

The grand-duchess – if she was, she was not, whose daughter she is,

whom she was a mother of, in front of such a portrait

it does not matter! – she had herself painted.

But the painting was another thing, a shield,

a coat of arms and a Damascened buckler,

to die peacefully when anguish sprouts,

like a blood vomit, from the simple fact

of having or not having a soul, of there being multiple worlds,

and the Sun rotating or not around the whole earth,

illuminating the crowds, the races, everything,

and the princes and the subjects, in that world harmony,

whose strident silence was heard at dawn

discreetly grinding at the castles' gates.

(Lisbon, 6/6/1959)

*in Metamorfoses* (2014: 331-333)

**Cordoba Mosque**

it had been the stems of small woods

being cut out in the blue sky,

at the top of the hills, or by the water

mirroring in them like the crystalline

undulation of the nymphs. The darting of time

and Christianity fulminated them. They laid

in rest in the middle of the grass, like sexes

sleeping in the thicket revolt; or, still acutely,

useless penetrating desireless

the clouds' humid smoothness.

Rosy,

white, iridescent, they were summoned

to the glory of Allah. They came from everywhere,

crawling, mounting, in cars, converging

to the white city, crossing rivers,

the arid highlands, the pale planes;

and the rains washed away the dust of time

and the small corners.

Raised one by one,

already, from one to the other, the arches folded,

so curvedly overcome, double,

in the tense intensity of reuniting them

in an immense forest, raised and crowned.

And of small woods for, winged fronds,

to be the gods' rest, or of

clear fences in calm triclinium,

come to concentrate in the twilight

in which the *mihrab on one side is a golden* stridence.

Again, a roof is what sustains in the virile

security for what are shafts. But a single roof:

from everywhere came, fulminated ruins,

different supports of gods and men,

to align multiples in the marmoreal and columnar

writing of ineffable glory

of the name which is a horizontal ceiling

over the human desert, cold like the slabs,

smooth like the breeze that twines in them,

cruel like the spark that would take them down,

and ardent like the sun that ripens

the patio’s orange orchards.

They came and they stayed

Exact forest.

Allah departed, leaving the white

city empty, to the dust, the towers from where

hard like bells the voice

of the *muezzin* singing in the afternoon.

But

could someone leave

such a rigid

virile forest: gods translated

and congregated for His glory?

(Araraquara, 7-8/1/1963)

*in Metamorfoses* (2014: 315-319)

**Chartres ou as pazes com a Europa**

In Chartres, oh Peguy, I made peace

with Europe. Not that I was angry,

but I was forgotten. First

lunch in a small hotel in the square

not even a luxurious one, and nonetheless,

on the bourgeois Sunday with the families

«having lunch in town», so much «old France»,

And the servants, happy for serving well,

and the people happy for eating with time,

relish, pleasure, and elegance. From *Réserve*

*Couronnée*, or the abundant and blurred high noon,

I was touched to tears.

I am going gaga, softly and slowly.

Afterwards, Our Lady, Chartres, Middle Ages,

and the peace of this yearning in the soul

and the certainty that this world has to resist

– and will resist – to vulgarity,

to the beasts and the ordinary, to the multitudes, to everything:

like the «veal flambé», like the stained glasses of glory,

like this steeple erected over the Beauce,

such a virile image of the Nôtre-Dame

in the middle of endless meadows

that the centuries of centuries stepped upon

until making of them this horizontal plane of which,

portals of majesty, concretion of faith,

our humanity is stone without return

to formless nature. Such as Goddess-Mother

contained in the crypt transforms herself

in this one of glass rousing ascension

of colours that the light lightens up but does not pass.

Europe, my land, here I meet you

And our humanity so translucid

And so stony in the sombre pillars.

(Chartres, 10/11/1968)

*in Peregrinatio ad Loca Infecta* (2014: 550-551)

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