Salah Stétié

THE SIGH OF THE MOOR

It is known that when Boabdil, the last of the Abencerrages, left Granada definitively, driven out by the reconquest, he gave a final look at his admirable city and, at that precise moment, sighed deeply. That sigh—*el suspiro del Moro*—has come down to us through history and after us will no doubt touch and disturb the sensibility of our descendants until the end of time. However, is it really a matter of Boabdil's sigh only, or is it the one, coming from Adam, of those who have lost Paradise? Here, Boabdil seems to be one relay among others of that lament issuing from the depths of the species and rising, as regret and never-ceasing nostalgia, to the easily-agitated surface of our ocean of domesticity. Since that first garden, we have been the unloved children of this regret and this nostalgia. The angel with the fiery sword changes nothing: he does not have our memory that, alone, makes us every day a little less original and, in doing so, expels us, making us a little more defenseless than we were when we came out of the void. To remember is obviously to lose oneself, and we are at every moment in this vertiginous situation. As Heidegger said, to remember is to contemplate oblivion.

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

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This sigh of the Moor, rooted for eternity between absence and presence at the gates of exile in a confusion of a yesterday and a tomorrow whose increased intensity occurs only at that very moment—that sigh of the Moor, between two thresholds, itself a vertical doorstep, perhaps summarizes in a single breath all Mediterranean philosophy. The sea breeze that scorches at the same time as it refreshes the shores of the ancient basin, in which are reflected thousands of marble fragments, is composed of all the sighs that have come from the many races that settled here or there, erected buildings, fought each other and disappeared. Rarely has a battlefield been more disputed and more bloody—and more the initiator of long injustices—than this sea which was at the same time a civilizing influence, and the lands and countries that give it character and are vet the creators of humanism—of fundamental humanism itself. The Mediterranean, the sea between lands and the mixture of water, precious salt and soil: how much bloodshed for a small portion of this mixture! The Moor's sigh thus adds its weight of absolute suffering, and people and empires and civilizations and gods in terrible outpourings of waves of shadow come to give him shade and weep in him. Boabdil, driven out of the lost Andalusia, a thoroughly hispanisized Moor (he himself speaking almost nothing but Spanish since both his wife and his mother were Spanish), Boabdil has for companions the ghosts of Hannibal and Caesar, Anthony and Vercingetorix and, even more ghostly, Europa and Dido, Agamemnon and Ulysses, Cadmus and Orpheus, all children of exile: "Andromache, I am thinking of you..." I am also thinking of you, my martyrized people, bivouacking today on the threshold of uncertainty at the doors of your massacred homes.

The Moor's sigh will also absorb this latest tragedy until the day of a justice that must be reinvented; undoubtedly, it would be more pertinent to say until it is repatriated.

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This is because, from Caesar to Napoleon, the Mediterranean of codes and laws has been one of the homelands of human

justice, nourished—within its metaphysical moorings—by a philosophy in its closest sense, by the least destructive relationship. The prefiguration of Christ, He who drove the merchants from the temple with a whip, He who stayed with an incontestable observation the hands of those who would have thrown stones, corresponds to the admirable name of Master of Justice. This obsession with justice is perhaps in the image of the Mediterranean landscape, from whatever angle it is seen, clear-cut in the brilliant light, not so brilliant, however, that it does not permit each of our islands to be seen in the distance, as a woman's body is modulated on the horizon, and without dissolving in the heat that is neither Asiatic nor African; that it does not also permit each of our temples to vibrate its formerly white columns or its still black basalt in total visibility. Each of our trees retains its part of darkness and its part of verdure; each of our vines expresses itself in precise bunches of grapes; each of our rivers and precious streams continues to flow toward its inverse matrix without being lost in the viduity of the world or dying by strangulation in the sand; our women are blonde or brunette according to their varying seasons; and Cézanne was permitted to paint and re-paint Mont Sainte-Victoire, the well-named, without neglecting the most subtle nuance of its imposed or earned dryness. This desire for justice that is our natural element, in the truest sense of the word, I believe, initiated the one of the accumulation of men and their possessions on our narrow shores, quickly seized by the imperialism of the great desert to the South or East, by the unexplainable and still-unexplained invasion of the frozen spaces of the North. The Mediterranean world invented the city as we know it, namely, the point of intersection of forces and forms, a force itself detached from all those that gave it birth and a form in which partial forms, suddenly much more significant because they were integrated into a totality, became exalted: the answer, the only known answer, to the uncontrollable expansion of the universe was the city, certainly complex but of an organized complexity. *Urbi et orbi* is the formula for this antithetical complementarity. Athens was opposed to the cosmos but also opposed to other cities as to as many absolute entities: Sparta or Troy. Sidon or Tyre observed Byblos without friendliness. Rome was built

on the ruins of Alba before it tirelessly waged war against Carthage. Antioch was the capital of triumphant early Christianity, thus defying Roman Damascus or Jerusalem. Prestigious cities, solitary stars burning with all their fires, including those that sometimes destroyed them: Alexandria, Palmyra, Petra and others. Later, confronting each other for centuries, would be Rome and Byzantium, Venice and Florence, then Venice and Constantinople, Genoa and Naples, Cordoba and Seville and Granada, all cities that were at the same time states, Algiers and Tunis going so far as to give their names to entire countries. The Mediterraneans were not content with creating these cities: they were reflected in them and reflected them. Plato, certainly, but also Machiavelli and in the 14th century Ibn Khaldoun explained the process of civilization by the never-appeased conflict between city-dwellers and nomads, the men of the cities and those of the tribes, the rooted and the rootless. Moreover, in Arabic as in French, the word for civilization has an urban connotation: *madaniat* is derived from *madinat*, the city, the *medina, oum-el-moudoun* being the "mother of cities," the matrix of all cultural development thus fundamentally bound to urban development and affirmed as such.

One who says "city" says "organized relationships between men" and inevitably says "justice." Other forms of the planification of human relationships are possible within other types of communal organization: they all assume a minimum of distributive justice even though the social structure is strictly hierarchized. Nevertheless, the city is the most propitious to the establishment of a basic equality, against heavily pyramidal temptation. In confrontation with the pyramid—a creation associated with the Mediterranean of which it is one of the most spectacular accomplishments—a harp of columns, as sung by Valéry, will be invented or—it also issuing from a just equality of proportions, daughter of the geometry and the symmetries it will engender—the dome and its mathematical challenge. One after another in their figurative projections, democratic possibilities were unfolded in the city, a space favorable to the birth of democracy. Democracy, always and everywhere combated, in the Mediterranean world dominated and enlightened by the projections I have evoked, is one of the perceptible victories

of this space and, first of all, its victory over itself—over the cosmic anarchy against which the Mediterraneans erected the plans and walls of their monumental cities.

In the Mediterranean world democracy is, like geometry, syllogism or algebra, the consequence of that sense of the obvious that is the strength of Mediterranean man, admirably realistic in a world that is admirably real, death being, precisely through realism, the hollowed-out axis around which everything revolves. Death the equalizer—the other face of justice. Thus, greatly simplifying, we may risk this admission: while in other conceptions of man and the world the gods come to man, if they come, from the most remote cosmic altitudes, the gods of the Mediterranean begin by being all-powerful ontological ancestors before, under the influence of a dazzling intuition, going quietly away leaving humanity on the beach of the universe and, through the reductive means of death, equal and unarmed before a faceless absence that is, for the sons of Abraham, the only representation of the Presence. In the strange dialogue of Mediterranean man with himself there is—an incessant factor of ambiguity—history and trans-history: the real and the unreal that is the other name for the real; justice that through death becomes an injustice more just than all justices; and God, who is also, in his way, the Master of the City. God, with his chosen people; God who, when he comes to tell his people that his kingdom is not of this world, puts on the vestments of this world; God, who is at the center of the empire and through whom all time and all space are magnetized into the annihilating convergence. In the same way, every prophet in the Mediterranean, even if he speaks the truth, does not renounce reality. Tables and Gospels in hand, and the Koran, Moses shook his people, Christ used the lash when it was necessary and Mohammed the sword. People of the Book, they paved the way by force for the Book, and neither did they hesitate, on another level and if there was the occasion, to replace the persuasive action of the syllogism and reasoning by an action still more secret and determinant: a communication in depth with a hidden source that is only reached by closing the eyes to daylight. The soul is a Mediterranean inspiration.

All these ideas and their implementation are given here

somewhat loosely, in the image of the disorder against which, in all its concretizations, the Mediterranean world has always struggled; from which, however, it has always drawn the best of itself—without hesitating to contradict itself in the name of a logic that is more subtle than it seems. The Mediterranean, a divided sea when, due to circumstances, it was no longer *Mare Nostrum*, has always been the place one would not quite qualify as *geometric* but which remains just the same the focal point of all the contradictions of the planet: Orient-Occident, East-West, North-South, in the central conflict that puts them into opposition. This conflict—that could be called structural because of all the centuries it has existed and been manifested in forms that are at times violent, at times latent—*crystallizes* whenever it can for whatever reasons and by so doing maintains, through occasional drives and circumstantial changes (historical, ideological, economic or cultural, that is, also religious), its original virulence.

This virulence, according to sequence and numerous paradoxes, is a curious mixture of this challenging that and that challenging this. Often, it has even happened in the socio-cultural field, the stronger having absorbed the weaker, the latter ends by taking its revenge and devouring its devourer from within. The Mediterraneans are ambitious and do not easily consent to let themselves be written down in the profit and loss book of history. Greece colonized Rome and let itself be colonized by Alexandria and Alexandrianism. Alexandrianism in turn, through the interiorization of the Mysteries, will contribute, if not to Judaism (of which perhaps one day we will know, in addition to what it owes to the religion of Akhnaton, what it owes to Ur and Ugarit, in Mesopotamia, and also to Ebla in Syria) at least to Christianity: the two great civilizing inspirations preparing themselves to be, after having partially brought it about, overrun by the irruption of Islam in the arena of the Mediterranean. The "crusades of the Crescent," if I may be permitted the term to evoke the Islamic cavalcades from East to West, then their counterpart, the crusades from West to East; the commercial routes in both directions that nothing, fortunately, has ever arrested; the wars along the living frontier of one or the other—the Mediterranean—but also those fron-

tiers through which the peoples of the "center" assimilated, through a long digestion, the men, ideas and forms of many places, Asiatic or European, African or Nordic; successive colonizations through fire and the sword but also through theories and techniques of which the southern Mediterranean was, following a gradual process, the objective of the North (and one is always to the south of someone else); the more recent investing of the least hardened cultural identities by the most active among them, ideologically and technologically speaking: all of this means that our spiritual Mediterranean remains, for better or for worse, a large, dilapidated and magic house open to all currents and that, if it wants to avoid the perdition that is lying in wait and whose agents are everywhere, ill-advised children of excess, of immoderation, the most insolent defiance, it must—at the level of its government but also of its wise men—"observe moderation."

It is this same moderation, preserved throughout history, that has permitted that sea and that world to avoid disintegration under the most violent blows coming from all directions and that should have demolished that sea and that world a thousand times. Instead, by a phenomenon that is certainly natural but more accentuated here than elsewhere, in which a melange is produced through antagonisms to permit a new kind of survival of the confronted elements, we see, to take up again and continue the image we used earlier, that in the Mediterranean the sigh is spontaneously converted to a larger intake of breath particularly destined to transform mental space, and we realize that when all violence has been reduced or suspended some have not hesitated to follow in the footsteps of others and to go on even farther—so that a powerful circulation continued at the diversified levels of the real and the imaginary. We see that the Phoenicians, because of some secret fatality ceded, and thus withdrew from history, the secret of their distant navigations, which was a star, to the Hellenes; that the latter made their struggle with the Trojans the subject of their epic poetry and their self-defense against the Persians the object of their dramaturgy; that the Romans took their gods as they came from wherever they came and sent their generals to marry the queens of Egypt when they did not recruit their imperial

dynasty from Syria; that obelisks, sphinxes and pyramids ornamented the squares of Rome which, having trembled before Hannibal, prepared itself to answer the call of a Thracian slave and, later, of an inspired man from Damascus; that the prophet of Islam came not to nullify Moses and Christ but on the contrary to exalt their role as spiritual witnesses by declaring it complete; that the Arabs, installing themselves on the debris of the Roman Empire that they had helped to destroy borrowed from it: the toga, for example, still worn in North Africa under the name of *burnous*; the science of water, aqueducts and irrigation that gave their name to Spanish rivers, *al ray, el rio*; the art of building their habitations around an open space closed off from the street—a conversion of the famous villa whose pools they adopted—and of building around the religious center, extending it through the forum that was a place where men could meet to exchange ideas and news: the city that was intelligently laid out. The mosque did not hesitate to use Doric, Ionian or Corinthian columns from the ancient temples that were still standing though mutilated, and integrated into its decor most of the Byzantine ornamental elements, they themselves most often—another proof of the remarkable osmosis to which the Mediterranean was more open than closed—descended through progressive transformations from some Persian Achaemenid or, farther back in time, from Assyria and Babylon. Moreover, since there was mediation, perhaps it would be pertinent to recall that it was through Arab expansion that Greek ideas, following centuries later the itinerary once traced by Alexander, went as far east as Persia and India, as they would reappear in the West at the heart of medieval Christian philosophy in that Europe so long deprived, before the contagious influence of Islamic philosophy, of one of its original dimensions. Finally, it was through Arab arbitration that forms and techniques from central Asia or the Far East would find themselves, when they reached the Mediterranean, in a symbiosis with the Occident or even, through gradual familiarity, with black Africa. When Senghor evokes the Mediterraneanness of his country and continent, he has precise references in mind. This same fascination with Mediterranean "mediation" is the one that, in my opinion, led Goethe to dream of the East and write his *West-*

östlicher Divan and, dreaming of the South, which dazzled him when he visited it, to write his *Römische Elegien.*

However, there are many, far too many, examples of this fabulous osmosis, similar to the alchemy that gave birth to the only genuine and valid philosopher's stone, to be enumerated. That a Berber would become St. Augustine is, aside from the grace of God, perhaps only a historical-geographical accident, but Avicenna is the direct equivalent of Aristotle; St. Thomas is the privileged interlocutor of Averroes and Ibn el Farid is the immediate spiritual companion of Ramon Lull. Greco-Roman Syracuse is on familiar terms with Italo-Arabic Palermo. Arabic is spoken at the court of Pedro I in Seville while only Spanish, the mothers' language, is spoken at the court of Granada. Greeks and Latins, stones erected all around the Mediterranean, from Epidaurus to Volubilis, from Nimes to Baalbek, from Timgad to Jerash; everywhere, there were synagogues, often decorated in the Arabic style in the Islamic world. Furthermore, there was an ambiguous art, relic of a vanished civilization but somehow still alive, like a sun on the verge of extinction: Mozarab art. Finally, two brilliant examples of lofty and complete tolerance, or, better, of spiritual indication in the meaning we have been looking for: Omar, after his conquest of Al Qôds, "The Holy," that is, Jerusalem, refusing to enter the basilica of the Holy Sepulcher, contenting himself with praying to the one God at the threshold of the sanctuary and justifying his action to his astounded companions, "If I had prayed inside, you would have transformed this church into a mosque after I had left." And Charles V, during his first visit to the mosque in Cordoba, contemplating the baroque church that had been erected at its very center—a mutilation of the splendid perspective of columns —saying, not without scorn, to the one responsible for the architectural and spiritual monstrosity, "You should not have..."

I am also thinking of Santa Sophia, a church that before being completely deconsecrated was transformed into a mosque, and I tell myself that one of the possible victories of the sanctuary was that afterward all the Turkish mosques in Constantinople and elsewhere began to resemble sisters of Sophia. I think that at Damascus, where the marvelous mosque of the Umayyads was first a temple of Jupiter and then a Byzantine basilica, the

crowds of faithful who go there today do not forget to venerate the tomb of Al Khodr*, St. George, who may have been, in spite of his fate in the church calendar, one of the projections of Perseus into Semite-Abrahamite space.

Thus I tell myself that Boabdil's sigh over the lost Andalusia is his weeping for all of that and his affirmation of its immense and enduring significance, beyond the vicissitudes of history and the avatars of destiny.

Because all of Andalusia is lost.

It is lost in principle, it is lost by definition, it is lost by vocation. What is the meaning of Apollinaire's "flash of beautiful lightning that endures"? It would be nonsense, and man such as history has fashioned him since he was driven out of the earthly paradise at sword's point—man needs a meaning, however mutilated and blind it might be, to reconstruct in misfortune that part of himself and outside himself that escapes his grasp and in which, I say, he mysteriously rejoices that it does escape him. Otherwise, what would he do, who pursues some logical end, with the only clear part of him, in him and in the universe? The lesson of the Mediterranean is that man is always at the outposts of man, that in this uninterrupted modulation of consciences and things that is called history, no advance is ever completely made, and nothing is ever completely lost. Moreover, because we once, and only once, knew that Andalusia existed, we know that it will exist, and it belongs to us, having "uncreated" it through inadvertence, weakness of desire perhaps or through inexperience (and excess in experience is one of the kinds of inexperience among the most to be feared)—that it is up to us to re-create it; to the most naive of those among us who yesterday advised us to know ourselves, we answer like the Genoan Christopher Columbus, standing at the prow of his caravel, through tireless questioning of all that precedes the gulf, that is, what is to come. We would very much like to know ourselves, to become reacquainted with ourselves, but we also understand that to reach the East is not to deprive ourselves of going toward the West: this is the price for India and also

*There are some theses claiming that Al Khodr is the Islamic projection of the prophet Elias.

for America. To reach India through the Orient is correct; to reach it by the Occident is still more correct. *Raison d'être*, and undoubtedly we prefer that *raison*, all reason, were in the end *d'être*, to be. Thus God himself was born at the end of a long and ardent philosophical vigil. Let philosophy, which is our skeleton and our frame, close for a little longer the fine unchangeable matter of its philosophical eyes! We say to it, rowing toward the absurd paradise like Ulysses toward Ithaca, his Andalusia, that we have a right to the paradise from which we have been excluded, and that is our armed penchant for justice; we say that toward paradise, which is one of the rare possible meanings of our night, we recognize a duty, which is to conquer and reconquer it without end, and that is our violent penchant for poetry.

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