

t'Serstevens, Albert

(1886-1974)



Born in Belgium, but having opted for French nationality in 1937, the writer, essayist and journalist Albert t'Serstevens began his travels very early on, like Blaise Cendrars, to whom he was close and with whom he kept an intense epistolary correspondence.

From his lengthy travels around the world (Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Spain, Italy, the Maghreb, Latin America, United States, French Polynesia, and Portugal, among other destinations), after his traumatising enlistment in World War I, came the fictional matter for several novels, among which *Tahiti et sa couronne* (1950) and *La grande plantation* (1952), as well as for several travel narratives, impressions and personal notes on the cultures and countries that he covered, at a time when civilizations still appeared to the traveller in their authentic difference and exoticism.

These notes were turned into “itineraries”, published before, during and after World War II, among which is *L'itinéraire portugais* (1940), in which Albert t'Serstevens narrates his lengthy Lusitanian car journey, with his partner, Marie-Jeanne, and their cat, Puma.

This text, by no means intended to be touristic publicity, and whose transcription of Portuguese terms is full of spelling mistakes, namely in the names of places (Bussaco, sagrario, atoum, adeos, ...), puts forth a certain imagery of Salazar's Portugal, voiced in several sharp and detailed commentaries, lacking neither a critical tone nor a certain irony and humour in the discovery and description of places, peoples and customs.

Firstly, the author of the Lusitanian itinerary insists on a radical cultural demarcation between Portugal and Spain, the object of a previous “itinerary”, considered dirtier, more

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disorganized, less noble: “Rien de plus dissemblable que ces deux pays voisins et qui ont une commune origine” (t'Serstevens, 1940: 20). Every description is taken as an additional pretext to disparage Castilian customs in comparison with the Portuguese: “Si la plupart des gosses mendient, ce n'est aucunement à l'espagnole, avec la ténacité larmoyante des ninos [sic] de Valladolid par exemple (...)”. (idem, 63).

It's also important to note a certain mythical vision of the Portuguese nation and its destiny in the world. t'Serstevens, who starts off by alluding to the Atlantic vocation of the country: “J'ai quelquefois pensé que le Portugal pourrait s'appeler Atlantis” (idem, 3), goes on to describe and revisit the interlaced gallery of the main stages of Portuguese History and its national myths, which he even seems to want to explain to the Portuguese: King Sebastian, Pedro and Inês, the epic of the Discoveries, the Lisbon earthquake, the marquis of Pombal, the French Invasions or Salazar's ascent to power: “Constantia meurt. Pedro, libéré devant l'Eglise, épouse sa concubine, union privée, ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui un mariage morganatique. Son père, le roi Alphonse, dissimule son dépit. Ils sont toujours, les hommes de ce siècle, à couvrir le crime sous un air de chaude affection” (idem, 43).

On the other hand, Albert t'Serstevens does not hide his disappointment with the disfiguring consequences on the Portuguese architectural and cultural heritage of the first Republic, which are evident in the fatal musealisation of living faith and art: “Toutes les autres églises de Lisbonne ont cet aspect de monuments profanes que devait leur donner un siècle qui n'avait plus de foi” (idem, 76); an impression which the Batalha Monastery also conveys to visitors: “Les Frères Prêcheurs ont dû l'abandonner, en 1834, et la ruine s'y est mise comme ailleurs. Mais le monument a repris depuis quelques années une signification nouvelle” (idem, 47).

Finally, t'Serstevens manifests a certain admiration for the political and intellectual figure of Salazar, “dictateur malgré lui” e “grand homme d'Etat” (idem, 107), who actually granted t'Serstevens an audience in Santa Comba Dão, and whose austere, selfless and courageous personality left quite a positive impression on him: “Il arrive à Lisbonne, il éconduit les

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aigrefins internationaux. – Merci, messieurs, le Portugal va se débrouiller tout seul!” (idem, 106). When he left the Portuguese dictator, the Belgian/French wayfarer was categorical in his favourable appreciation of both the person and the regime: “(...) servir son pays. Quel est son but? Aucune ambition personnelle” (idem, 113).

But Albert t'Serstevens' “Portuguese Itinerary” also gives away a personal identity inscription of the author, divided between his recently acquired French belonging, constantly reaffirmed by comparison with collective references (“Nos pêches de Bretagne”, “nos gardians”), and the subtle allusion to a common past, Portuguese and Flemish, under Castilian rule, noticeable in regional or folkloric garments. Thus, referring to the cries of the Lisbon fishmonger women, t'Serstevens observes: “Mais je sais bien la mélopée si triste du marchand de crabes et de crevettes, et même je l'ai retrouvée à la Coruna [sic], en galego, ce qui montre que les Espagnols n'ont pas seulement laissé dans les Flandres les Vierges habillées de velours et les géants des processions...”.

Having passed away in Paris, on May 21, 1974, Albert t'Serstevens would never come to know that other “itinerary” of Portugal, the democratic one, born of the April Revolution.

Travels

Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Spain, Italy, the Maghreb, Latin America, United States, French Polynesia, Portugal.

Quotations

The whole country is just a seaside rectangle. These two French barons, Raymond and Henry of Burgundy, who founded the kingdom of Portugal and its first dynasty, wanted to first create, at cost to Castile and Leon, this Atlantic march. The sons of Henry drove back the

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Muslims down to the Tagus, and later down to the southern sea. In 1270, Portugal had taken its definitive shape, a long stripe of north-south shore, its borders limited doubtlessly by political principles but even more so by the ocean's fecundity. (1940: 6) (translated)

This is nothing but the absurd labyrinth of old steep cities. It's yellow, it's white, it's pink, grey-blue, water-green, blood-red, lilac, above a mosaic-like pavement of flat stones, the step of the sidewalks, when they're present, and the edge of the steps of the stairs, in beautiful lines of limestone over a blue background. There are houses here that can't be found anywhere else, both Arab and mediaeval (...). (1940: 78) (translated)

The reorganisation of the country, and even the spirit of the country, is required of this great statesman [Salazar], who didn't think himself as anything other than an economist. He applies to these new questions his meditations and his hard work. His genius absorbs little by little all his entourage. He becomes, with each passing month, without haste, without even wanting it, the head of the government. This takes the exterior shape of president of the Council, but is in reality one of the dictatorships imposed by events, as it was in Poland, in Turkey, as it was formed in France. This is the true dictatorship, such as it was conceived by the ancient republic of Rome, the hard remedy for a state of crisis, the abdication of freedom, of the so-called freedom, for the salvation of the country. (1940: 107) (translated)

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