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ON WHAT IS, PERHAPS, A
VOLUPTUOUS CITY

I am severely tempted by Fez. It is one of the cities I would love to live in, at least for a while. Just long enough to enjoy its labyrinthine character, and to decipher a some elements of its enigma. This is because Fez offers to every new visitor the impression of having been traced out by a capricious calligrapher, writing in a secret language.

I have only visited the city three times, and for no more than a few days at a time, always leaving with a certain feeling of frustration. Each time I was certain there was something I almost discovered and had I only stayed a few more days, or even a few more hours, the secret of its beauty, of its peculiar form, would be finally revealed to me.

But I know that this can't be completely true: I always experience that surge of anxiety when I leave any city. This feeling is shared by my wife, even in Paris, every year, when we are supposed to go back to Mexico. Fighting against that uneasy state of mind, we stayed there almost eight years. We made Paris our second city. And there came the summers in Siena, in the Italian Toscana; and then Mogador, on the Atlantic coast of Morocco, before re-establishing our home in Mexico City.

As a child I lived in the same neighborhood I live now: Colonia Roma. But nearly every six or eight months the family would move to Sonora, in the northernmost Mexico, from where my parents' families came to the capital just before I was born. As a child I also lived in the desert, in Baja California, close to a place then named Villa Constitución, today's Ciudad Constitución.

From my twelfth birthday until my early twenties I lived in the suburban city of Atizapán, an hour from Mexico City by car, or two hours on a regular public bus. Exactly the time it took me to walk from home to my school in the skirts of the city. Atizapán was an old town, which became a suburb inhabited by immigrants from villages who came to be close to the big city. And once there, they reproduced their villages and its life best they could.

During these thirty years of moving I learned to love and hate many things in many cities. And from their differences I learned that the concept of city is not useful enough to describe even two cities.

My work as an editor of *Artes de México*, a magazine focusing on the traditional arts of my country, includes ongoing research on a number of baroque towns, each one of which could be considered a work of art in itself: Oaxaca, San Miguel de Allende, Querétaro, etc. The aim has been to produce a monograph on each. The challenge has been to find what makes a city really different from the point of view of its more perceptive and informed inhabitants or frequent visitors. In the history of the city we look for the facts that produced the actual forms of its streets, squares and buildings: its apparent design. And how people use those spaces: how they gather in their public life or build special spaces for their private life.

Crafts are often a key element to understanding a city. Objects made by artisans for everyday or else for ritual life tell us a lot about the city in many different ways. Crafts can be as meaningful as landmarks. And there are also the oral practices, as in the Place Djemaá-El-Fná, in Marrakech, where storytellers and their audiences gave the square the unique merit of having been declared, in 1997, a site of Oral Patrimony of Humanity by UNESCO.

If there are exceptional or even eccentric gardens in the city, public or private, they may be the expression of the passion that drives its inhabitants to create a place of privilege, for the impulse there is to grow, or build, or to transform a space directly or indirectly linked to their notion of paradise. And there are no two cities that dream the same gardens. (I have written about some of these ideas in my most recent book, *The Secret Gardens of Mogador*).

More than great events in the history of a city we look for the small elements people like or dislike in their urban reality. What this optic gives birth to is another kind of history, one more deeply linked to the senses, one that aims to unveil the perception of a city as a whole.

Not only have I lived in a number of cities and wandered in others, and interrogated some of the Mexican ones so as to build up a publishable sensitive file on each. Most of my life as a writer I have been building a city. For more than twenty years now I have been writing a cycle of novels, poems and short stories set in Mogador, a walled Moroccan port on the Atlantic coast, two and a half hours from Marrakech. Since 1953, its official name has been Essaouira, but people still continue to call it Mogador. Considered one of the gateways to the Sahara desert, it was a “near-island” between two oceans, the one of water and the other of sand. Caravans used to wait until the tide went down in order to be able to enter the city. For many, Mogador was a part of another continent, almost ‘out of Africa.’

This was a unique city indeed, where a Jewish and a Muslim baby could be suckled by the same wet-nurse. A place of meeting between different black Africans from the south of the Sahara and at least three white African groups, the Berbers, themselves parts of two different tribes, and the Arabs. This blend created an “animistic-Islamic” ritual culture known as the *gnawa*, an amalgam of religious practices analog to Cuba’s “animistic-catholic” *Santería*.

Today *gnawa* music is one of the deepest cultural traditions in Mogador as well as in other Moroccan cities, like Marrakech and Fez; there is also an interesting movement of *naïf* *gnawa* painting, produced ritually as a very real invocation of their spirits. Mogador is also a town where talented artisans specializing in carving the thuya tree’s wood, and in silver jewelry, create masterworks. Some of them are the *hamsa* or “Hand of Fatima,” an amulet linking Jewish and Arabic magic traditions within one symbol.

Mogador exists since the time of the Phoenicians who established it as a port for the extraction of and commerce with the purple dye produced by a local mollusk, the Murex. But it only became a true “city of desire” much later, dreamed and transformed into its actual shape by an 18th century sultan. Mogador became an unimpregnable fortified port, designed by a French military architect inspired by the walls of Saint Malo; at the same time it remained fragile, a city buffeted by fierce winds and surrounded by dunes threatening its existence each afternoon.

Until the middle of 19th century, Mogador was a bustling international commerce port, which linked south and north Africa with Europe, and harbored a small but very dynamic European community that conducted commerce with diplomacy. It was the first country to recognize the Independence of the United States and as a consequence the first North American consulate was established there.

The Mogador of my books took material elements of that real city but also from others. The emblematic hammam of Mogador, for example, is borrowed literally from a public steam bath I experienced (rather than just visited) in Fez. Here you undress, and the colored light through the starred glass openings in the roof still cover your skin one layer short of full nudity. As you continue, taking your bath through slightly different rooms, each teaches you subtly the wider and deeper abilities of your perception. A whole-body education more than a bath.

This is the central and key chapter of my first novel in this series, *Los nombres del aire* (translated as *Mogador, the Names of the Air*). It describes a building, with its consecutive chambers of increasing warmth and more complex illumination, as a ritual space of initiation to the awakening of the senses. And it is also a metaphorical image of the whole city as a space of

seduction: beyond that, also a metaphor of the sensual space built by the structure of the novel itself.

In that way, progressing from the materiality of the book to the city described in it, there is a moving spiral, at the same time a map of the city and a diagram of the novel's dramatic line. Reading, walking, wandering becomes the same action. Desiring but specially being open to others' desires become phases of the same availability: being ready for the very subtle but intense exposure to the secret wonders of life.

The terms 'baroque' and 'arabesque' seem to me very useful for describing this urban poetic design. But why? Baroque does not only mean 'too complicated'. Or as an English dictionary defines it more ideologically: "highly ornate and extravagant in design". A truly baroque literary work of art is one that communicates mainly through the senses; here the meaning vehiculated directly by the content of words is not enough. Getting directly to the point is losing the point. Baroque forms demand a greater availability in the reader or the spectator, a more open attitude towards the unexpected, the cunning, the complex, the irreducible existence of several layers of meaning in any phrase or any image.

Baroque is not only a style or a period in the history of art; it was an entire re-ly to the austere Lutheran Reformation, in which our modernity is based. There was even a baroque science, and some of its deductive principles are being revisited by the latest discoveries in fields such as physics.

My hypothesis that the creation of baroque forms was possible in Spain because applied arts there were for many centuries familiar with the techniques and shapes created by the Arabic civilization-- clearly present, as techniques, in Spain and in Latin America even two centuries after the expulsion of the Arabs from the Iberian Peninsula. The arabesque and the baroque, with its intertwined flowing lines, may be related more deeply than it seems. And the baroque way of reading forms--primarily through the senses, accepting multiple messages within each urban sign--could help us face cities that, like Fez, otherwise defy understanding.

Any wanderer, traveler and citizen loves or hates different aspects of a City. If you ask anyone for a very personal list of "things I love and things I hate," in the style of Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*, you will have not only an outline of a place but also a sketch of a human link: the map of another City growing inside the mind. Not to say the portrait of the wanderer possessed by the city. A city like Fez is, for some people, a dream inside a dream.

I like to see and touch the cipher behind the evident, behind the sociological dimension of the city and the country. People are always more than sociologists describe. There are many writings on Fez based on sociological research. Among them, several realistic novels, narrative illustrations of those pre-given ideas many call "reality". None go beyond that basic level. Reading them the impression remains that they only touch the surface of the many layers of life in Fez. So, how to essay a more personal approach to a City like this one, full of mysteries and unique codes behind the evident third-world common ground?

Fez was indeed understood as a sensorial experience by the artist Toni Serra who, in 2002, curated a big show on that city at the Center of Contemporary Culture, in Barcelona (CCCB). With it he produced a CD containing an anthology of the music in the show (*Fes, ciudad interior*. Diputació Barcelona, 2002. ISBN-84-7794-849-6). There was no thematic explanation on the walls: only impressions, images and sounds. The entire exhibition was a dark tunnel, interrupted by a dozen screens where you could see and hear different aspects of the city. The form itself was an important part of the content.

The first screen showed a slow visit to some of the eight big gates in the ancient wall. And you could see the life breathing through those monumental old pores of the city.

The second showed people of Fez talking directly to the camera: they were asked to tell us their most impressive dream, and whether, in their dreams, the city of Fez was present.

In the others you could see and hear different rituals: those honoring Moulay Idriss, the saint founder of the city; those of the Sufi tradition invoking the presence of Mohamed in a ritual known as *Dikr*; those of the African animistic tradition mixed with the Islam and known as *gnawa*, an intense trance music. The tradition of religious music is so important in Fez that they even have a big city Festival in June, dedicated exclusively to it: the *Fez World Sacred Music* (<http://www.fesfestival.com>).

There were images of birds singing at dawn and some of children singing and working in a school; there was also Amid Amour, a well-known storyteller working in a square of the City; a coffee shop owner zapping his radio without pause; a sound landscape of the passage between Fez El Bali and Fez El Jedid, the ancient and the less ancient parts of the city; a Call to Prayer that begins with one *muezzin* alone in the *minaret* of the big Karaouiyne Mosque, then joined by many others from different places, building one by one a polyphony of voices making up another kind of map of the city. I noted one of the dream. It was told by a young Abdelfatah:

"It was a very simple dream but it was powerful. I was six years old, in the Medina with my mother. And you know how intricate the streets are.

For a child of that age it is impossible to find his way if he gets lost. My mother was buying something and I lost her attention. I went into a side-street and found a trap that opened to some stairs underneath. I went down but instead of finding everything dark, there was another city. It was all white and beautiful. I was amazed, and told myself: Now I am a child that can be lost but I will grow up and I will come back to explore it, in the future. Then I woke up. This dream stayed with me. It never faded. It reminds me that there is always another city inside the city." That dream became his personal key for Fez. And since our first visit to Morocco in 1975 my wife Margarita and I came to discover that for some groups their own spaces were strictly that, a city inside the city. The first time we came to Fez we arrived by a regular public bus that went directly to the poor quarters on the hill, behind the main city. There we became guests of a local village teacher we met in the bus. With him and his family we then walked most of the city, talked to the people close to them and many others, visited workshops foreigners almost never see, some with very young children working, and entered some of the religious places usually not allowed to non-Muslims. My wife was able to witness all the labyrinthine existence of a parallel life for the women, invisible to men. Clandestine, even. The women build a city inside the city every day, literally and symbolically. A city of dreams and love, so many times forbidden.

Besides being an Imperial City, Fez was founded by a saint and is still a place of pilgrimage and devotion, a sanctuary. A traditional description could be made through its places of worship, including the Jewish quarters, the Mellah, in "the new city" of many centuries ago, El-Jedid. This kind of description has been done several times. The best is by the Swiss art historian Titus Burkhardt (1908-1984): *Fez, City of the Islam (Fez: Stadt des Islam)*. Burkhardt lived in Fez in the Thirties, was introduced to the Sufi teachings of an old master; then, suspected of political clandestine activities, he was eventually deported by the French Colonial Government. He came back in the late fifties, after Morocco's independence; in the sixties and seventies he became a UNESCO consultant, helping to create a program to preserve the ancient City. He made the first inventory of the monuments in urgent need of restoration. His book was published in 1960 and is still the main spiritual introduction to the City. He clearly links the religious life of Fez to the design of its rich architecture, and ends his book by quoting a dialogue with a friend about the survival of spiritual life in modern Fez. The latter believes in the survival of those religious feelings, but only in a secret layer of the modern urban life.

But beyond the institutional religions, a yet more interesting map of the city and its links to the invisible should include the practice of magic, the parallel medicines: the practices of health and exorcism and protection against "evil eye". In 1975, in a traditional Fez pharmacy, bat wings and lizard heads hanging from the walls, I bought an edition of a handbook of "Sorcery, Medicine and Beauty": *Pratiques des harems marocains*. Published in 1925 by a French doctor, one A.R. Lens, it includes hundreds of magic recipes, from *Remèdes pour empêcher les esclaves de casser la vaisselle*, to *Remèdes pour la femme qui soufflé d'un frond dans le ventre*, including some *Remèdes contra le celibate* and *Remèdes pour que le Mari reset fiddle à sa femme*.

Close to magic should come the food. *The cuisine of Fez*. In Fez, in some friends houses, I discovered the *harira*, a nutritious soup made of many things available. A classical emblem of the *mestizaje* the city inhabitants practice since many centuries ago.

Can a city be identified by its dreams, by its waking movements, by one or several of its sharp sounds? By a light, by a pungent smell? By the legends behind its name? By the accidents in history that finally gave it its actual shape? A city is like a scar of history.

Fez is believed to be an onomatopoeic name: does it really have the sound of the thing it names? A sword in the air? An arrow coming fast from afar?

No. Before being the name of the city, Fez was the name of a river. A story supposedly told by one of the most interesting writers and thinkers who lived in Fez, Ibn Khaldoun, claims that the river was named, in ancient times, after the sound of water running amidst the rocks. Or, more likely, "the sound of an avid hand suddenly dipped into the fast flow, which modestly complained about the intrusion with the whistling exclamation: Fezzz".

Ibn Khaldoun supposed that the 'avid hand' belonged to one of the explorers sent by Moulay Idriss Ist (in the 8th century) to find the ideal location for a new city. A river was found and enthusiastically described as "a lonely crazy goat running and moaning between two mountains."

That is where the city was first established, on the East bank, and it was named after that metaphorical goat made of singing water. The crazy river has now been tamed and, sadly, poisoned. But at first, a few decades after its foundation (in the year 789), it was kept in captivity between two walled cities. At the beginning of our 9th century two important in-migrations

occupied both banks: one, Tunisian from Kairouan and the other, Andalusi, from Spain. They did not always live in peace, and Fez became often not only the moan of the river but the sound of a sharp sword threatening the enemies on the other bank.

The Andalusi quarter is still clearly identifiable on the right bank and the Karaouiyin quarter on the left, each one with its big mosque and madrassa, workshops and markets. They were two different walled cities, meant to be, as Rabat and Salé, two very distinct urban entities divided by the Bouregreg river always running between them. But also divided by a proud and aggressive local identity. Andalusian Fez and Tunisian Fez seemed like that until an enormous wall was built by the sultan Yusuf (also the founder of Marrakech) in 11th century, embracing their differences. Thus they had to fight against a common enemy and finally had to live under one symbolic roof: living under the same sky. Much later, the popular expression “to share a Fez” commemorated those typical red hats, like broken-off cones, of Greek and Turkish origin, once fabricated mainly in Fez. But for some initiated, the phrase also invokes the possibility of sharing a city, its force and its destiny, its sounds and its smells.

Yes, an aggressive and distinctive odor. One of the many high quality crafts from Fez was, and still is, worked leather. Thanks to the existence of the river, with it come the amazing colored workshops where the animal hides are tanned. For many centuries travelers visiting Fez described its odor as one of its main features. I too remember that thirty years ago the smell of Fez could be perceived inside a bus approaching the city even before we entered its walls. And, in that most arabesque way of always offering an answer to our questions, a Moroccan boy on that bus told me laughingly that the name of Fez came as the spontaneous expression of disgust produced the instant you are close to the city and feel that smell. It is not that strong anymore and several projects are underway to dry out the dying pits and make them into public gardens.

Fez, the sound of a wild old river, is also now the sound of another kind of flow. The city, that of the crowded alleys, runs in broken lines between old houses and markets and temples and fountains and unexpected squares, and dead ends, and more, always more. And I am inside that flow, still wandering. Taking notes. Tempted by Fez.
