

Fès, a mystic city?

Fes is often said to be a city of inwardness. The labyrinth of alleys forms but a thin skin that must be penetrated so one can enter the hidden spaces, spaces resembling the shafts of light that flood from above the inner courtyards, the gardens, luxuriant arabesques and geometric sculptures rising alongside their walls. And in which a teeming life is encased: once patrician homes, today these spaces are inns or guest houses. Some have been broken up into a multitude of apartments to house several families; others, abandoned generations ago, simply remain locked. Fès is also a city of a thousand mosques, of hanging shrines, of *zawiyas* (meeting halls where Sufi brotherhoods gather for instruction), of sanctuaries for prayer, meditation, teaching, helping, talking....always inside. Incrusted within the recesses of the alleys, the stalls are as if the skin's pores, while in the open places of the markets breathing can occur: here the inside and outside meet. Is that why, having entered Fes, one feels as if inside a living body? This sense of having suddenly been absorbed into a drawn-out process of digestion going on for centuries, as if one were part of a secret alchemic transformation taking you out of time, then simply depositing you at a street corner where your paths might cross that of an Averroes, an Ibn Arabi or a Maimonides, deep in their meditation? Any detour, any narrow passage can unexpectedly unexpectedly drop you into another dimension. And what if such labyrinths make up one's childhood, a life space where the lines between the physical world and imagination fade?

One doesn't leave this city without a mark. Like a child whose body bears its mother's smell and taste years after leaving the family home, one feels oneself filled by a mute, incomprehensible love for this city, a place where folds of time are layered and entangled yet remain distinct. A city where you are haunted by memory, a memory that haunts your dreams to remind you what is relative and what the essential that mustn't be forgotten.

And what is the essential? Do not let yourself be absorbed by futilities, by a frantic race leading nowhere. For life, you see, is nothing but the short passageway to this alley, where a step or two lead from one dimension to another. What Fès teaches us is this incessant passing from the inward to the outward. She also teaches us that one cannot always live outside. And above all that the only space where one can truly stop, rest, quiet down, is the space of the self.

Now, if Fès is the city of inwardness, does she not run the risk of standing apart from history, of exiting time, remaining but the archeology of the past?

The very inverse, I believe. For it is its ability to arrange itself in its labyrinths, to resist the whirlwind of change, to anchor itself in its inwardness and to patiently await its next date with history that lets it keep intact the power to pass on the experiences she has absorbed over the centuries.

For many years I pondered how this city could open up while remaining true to its nature. With this in mind I proposed the creation of a festival of the world's sacred musics, so that its opening up towards the outside world could proceed through the prism of its inner wealth, thought its spiritual inheritance here somehow shielded from the contingencies of time. Thus she would be able to give to the world that which it so sorely needs--a sense of peace and timelessness. A dozen years later, I thought it important to bear witness to this secret soul of Fès by creating here a festival of Sufi culture, which also houses an international forum entitled "A Soul for Globalization." Having for a time seemed to be just a vestige of the past, today Fès speaks to our future. She reminds us that a globalization void of a soul is an 'outside without inside,' a perpetual flight in which all civilizations and cultures meet their ruin, disintegrating completely or else returning as mere phantoms or caricatures, creating in the meanwhile a world-wide malaise at a cost that is now exorbitant.

The shiver Fès gives us may yet hint at a way out. An antidote to this flight forward, poetry and the quest for beauty may one day, gently, regain the place they deserve--in Fes and elsewhere.

Translated from the French by Nataša Đurovičová