

Anastassis VISTONITS

THE DIAPASON¹ OF TIME
Passing through Fez

The reasons why we visit a place are, as a rule, imponderable. But the stimulus which gives rise to them is due most often to coincidences. It goes without saying that I except here trips for purposes of work. It's one thing to go somewhere because you have to, and another because you want to. The ideal would be, of course, for both to apply, but as time goes by that becomes an ever greater rarity.

I've wanted for some years now to visit Fez, not in order to see what they say is the most representative of the four imperial capitals of Morocco, or to taste couscous, or to see what has remained of the once-flourishing Arab civilisation on the south-western side of the Mediterranean basin. I was responding to a stimulus which came from elsewhere. In Brussels, in 2003 - if my memory serves me - at a congress on European culture which I attended, the programme included music from the festival of religious music which is held in Fez each year.

I was in the semi-darkness of one of those old mould-smelling buildings in the Belgian capital, together with an army of writers, painters, musicians and executives of the European bureaucracy who surround the wearied politicians, bankers, and ambassadors. We were forced to be there: most of us simply to attend, and the less fortunates to describe, in faultless Euro-English, plans and programmes that were never going to be implemented.

After the end of the business we were to hear two singers, one from Israel who would sing traditional Arab songs, and one from Morocco who would, reciprocally, sing in Hebrew. The experience was, to use a commonplace, unforgettable, one of those where you feel that the music is having a physical effect on you, that it is plunging you into a timeless landscape of nostalgia and loss.

I came out of the building overwhelmed, and said to myself that if at the Fez festival such music is heard, then it should be a city which I ought to visit as soon as possible. And so, when the University of Iowa asked me to take part in the meeting which was held last May in Fez, it was as if I had received an invitation to recover that superb feeling of musical undulation in Brussels, multiplied now in a city which I imagined as its reverberation. I had created it within myself without having seen it, without wanting to see it in photographs. Because what I was imagining was a city not of buildings but of sounds, a diapason of eternity.

¹ Di·a·pa·son:Etymology: Middle English, from Latin, from Greek (*hē*) *dia pasōn* (*chordōn symphōnia*), literally, the concord through all the notes, from *dia* through + *pasōn*, genitive feminine plural of *pas*

1 a : a burst of sound <diapasons of laughter> b : the principal foundation stop in the organ extending through the complete range of the instrument c (1) : the entire compass of musical tones (2) : range, scope

2 a : tuning fork b : a standard of pitch

2

What can one offer up of oneself in order to experience a vast metaphor? We do not know how many and what implications of our inner world are concealed in transpositions, so we put something in the place of something else in an endless game with the beyond. We call it metaphor, but we only rarely know the source of the stimulus, what the Romantics called *otherness*, and how it revives the dead utopias of our life.

Fez is certainly a city with its particularities, its stratifications, its points of entry and exit, its orientation, and all the features of colouring possessed by historic places. It is impossible to 'compose' these in a brief stay, in other words to integrate the details into the whole. What you have, in any event, is intuition and the desire to compare. But, again, no city is real in any text, since it itself is what generates the texts insofar as it contains them. A proof of this are the essays which we had written in advance for our meeting—whose subject was *Writing in and beyond the City*—as well as our discussions. Taken all together, these made up an iconic - and universal - city which functions in a different way within each one of us. And yet even today I can't say whether Fez is precisely a city, at least as I conceive it. It is not, of course, an oversized village, nor is it an accumulation of villages (as Edmund White described Los Angeles).

The Fez of 1,000,000 souls gives expression, semantically, to a part of medieval and modern history which, though it has ceased to exist on the northern side of the Mediterranean basin, has been preserved here in the wave of voices. They come, raised on high every evening by the muezzin, from the minarets, scattered in the urban net of the city like radars which don't receive but emit messages - not to the future but to its past, to the dead beyond, to a timeless and dim Paradise, far off, and perhaps somewhat grim. Fez is severe; it isn't Marrakesh. It doesn't have colours, it has shades. But here, as in Marrakesh, it is the voices which vibrate in the firmament. I was right: the diapason was there; nevertheless, this was not the city but the sky above it, the forecourt of the Prophet. And I have the impression that this why for days I couldn't get Elias Canetti's book *The Voices of Marrakesh* out of my thoughts. But the voices of Fez are the voices of the absent, a convention of souls locked up in the great medina in the morning: we'd been warned that if we penetrated alone its inner parts, danger was we would be lost.

I didn't sense this danger either here or in any other city of Islam. No great effort is needed. If you lose your orientation, you raise your eyes, see where the minaret is, and go to meet it. And if for any reason you can't see it, the voice of the muezzin, coming from on high, or the sun glinting on the minaret's topmost point will show you the exit. And so I wandered, when I was alone, in the medina. You note two or three landmarks and the nearest mosque. You never get lost. In the worst case, when your instinct leads you astray, you sit down in the nearest coffee-shop and wait for the muezzin to come out to the minaret if the hour of prayer is near. His voice will provide the way out. As to time, in the East you still reckon it not with your watch

but with the great clock of nature called the sun, which is never wrong and never breaks down.

3

I am not one of those who believe that the past should remain unalloyed. Nor do I believe that the world can be made better by antiquating the present so that historical continuity can be - supposedly - preserved without interruption. Such obsessions give birth to fanaticism, cause and maintain anachronisms, and make the world inhuman. I frequently call to mind Seferis's line from *Three Secret Poems*, which seems to be speaking directly to fate: "everything that has passed has fittingly passed". The acceptance of loss is what helps us face difficulties even if we are resentful over what has been lost, mainly because the sense of the unrepeatability may itself be impaired over time, even within the restricted limit of a decade. Consequently, we always see eternity from a distance, and it is for this reason that the need for self-knowledge, which no writer has completely succeeded in, leads us into the escapade of comparisons, which means, quite simply, that experience is not enough, that there is always something more in things than we perceive.

And so it is not what we do not understand that prompts us to take refuge in the hidden reserves of our inner world, but rather the feeling that we have come too late, that we have arrived after the events after life itself. Then, in order to understand, we begin to compare, to find similarities and differences, influences and composite patterns--often arbitrarily--to create our own region by remodelling the commonplaces of others, which we appropriate and then share. For this reason we repeat monotonously that the act of writing is an expenditure, not to say a paraphrase, of the truth.

Cities are tangible, but our inner world is non-material, and the narrative which we call life, full of interruptions and digressions, is never completed.

Whether the Minotaur, Medusa, or some other monster still lies in wait today at the heart of the Labyrinth, at the centre of the city, at the core of the mind, we will never know. Because now the monster has many faces, and changes names constantly.

4

Those of us who took part in the meeting had within us, I suppose, the secret hope that we would be able to share with the others those things which make up for each of us a notable experience. The venue favoured such an attempt, or rather, mood. Our environment, which served as a charming anachronism, defined the region of thoughts much more sharply than I had imagined. It was as if it created a second language. I discovered its effect later, on my return to Athens--not retrospectively or as a summing up, but fragmentarily at first, and then in a more composite manner.

It is only in this way, I suspect, that we recall precisely those features of a place which make it a piece of our topography, a part of the notional city we develop continuously until we die. This is not Cavafy's 'city of ideas', nor is it a metropolis of

the emotions, but rather this is the material of tangible time which follows us, and which is conveyed by the aura of memory, that is, the sense of the temporary and of the perpetual at one and the same time, the recall of other perceptions as they rise up from the depths, as if the phenomenon of bouyancy were inseparable from the function of memory.

5

Time to turn the page. According to the official data, in Fez we have the biggest city or part of a city in the world where traffic is banned. A claim to uniqueness, the travel guides say. But what are the claims to uniqueness of a city? Not the fact that in the historic centre of Fez motor vehicles are prohibited. There are other places like that. Venice, to take one example, or even Hydra. That one of the trademarks of modern civilisation should be absent from a city is certainly an item of rarity and often makes us reflect how much nearer to the human scale an environment is where what mankind has developed to overcome its natural limitations is absent or has been barred.

But I was struck by other things. For example, the endless shops selling shoes, often one next to the other. For as people here walk a lot - and not only in the medina - they wear out shoes, cover distances, repeat routes, tread the ground infinitely more than we do. And those who walk can't behave as we do when we waste hours behind the steering-wheel of a car, like "sitting-beasts", as the poet Nikos Karouzos wrote with sardonic humour. But then how does their walk differ from ours?

For four days I tried to find evidence of particularity, what we call 'body language', something that isn't, of course, a simple metaphor. A way of walking has, moreover, to do with age, and one of the amusing things is to see how people of different ages co-ordinate their progression as they walk together. The young person dallies, the older one is in a hurry; time is detuned. Etc., etc. Here, though, I observed a scarcely perceptible inner rhythm, a different undulation in the body and the movement of the feet, not slower or faster, but more complicated, particularly in the middle-aged. All this, of course, may be fantasies - but, in the last analysis, why not?

So, millions of pairs of shoes. And if you have to put them on and take them off many more times than we do - before you go into the mosque or before you tread on the carpet you must, of course, take off your shoes - then you have a different relationship with what is trodden underfoot. The soft shoe and the *babouche* are, therefore, more important than Cinderella's slipper.

Now, though the temptation is great, I don't want to start contemplating the shoe as a fetish of metaphysics. For example, 40 years ago in Greek villages - and elsewhere - you didn't go into a house with your shoes on; it was thought a major breach of good manners. "Take your shoes off, you don't live in a stable" - I've heard women say this innumerable times to their husbands when they forgot to take them off when they returned from the fields. But at that time the house had what we could call a religious significance; if I begin to talk about this subject, I shall be greatly distracted.

5

In the First World, where information multiplies at a dizzying speed, the time you are allotted to feel and to go more deeply into things is diminishing. Thus knowledge is thought of as permanent and feeling as instantaneous: that what you know lasts but what you feel disappears and that even the most intense impression is passing. It is, I suppose, one of the anxieties of modern civilization--anxieties which, in essentially oral societies such as this, do not have the same intensity. Here, an impression seems lasting because it is repeated. The voice of the muezzin, the sound of the marketplace, the indeterminate whisper, the dust of the streets and the noises, the particles of light which rub upon the ruins and the old houses.

I have never been on good terms with religion - or, *a fortiori*, with the organised church. The ontological sub-stratum in the poetry of Novalis or Rilke, for example, acts within me as a mythical metaphor for existence attempting to recover its image. (That is why, I think, Rilke wrote *Sonnets to Orpheus*, his best book, together with the *Duino Elegies*.) Nor have I ever identified metaphysics with religion. But who can write off the religious feeling which directly or indirectly affects his life without being described as foolish? As for me, how far can I ignore the experiences of my childhood, when in the city in which I grew up, with a large Muslim community, the daily voice of the muezzin was heard as often as I hear it here?

The analogies - if on a much larger scale - were inevitable. So, dig a little in your past, the paved alleys of the medina, the little laden donkeys, the hawkers with their fruit, their bread-rings, and their warm loaves, say. If we had heard a town-crier, the setting would have been complete. But every analogy which is accompanied by a sense of loss is also a trauma to the memory. In the city where I was born, to take an example, there was before the Second World War a flourishing Jewish community, disappeared after the War, as was the case for almost all Greek-Jews, exterminated in Hitler's concentration camps. As a boy I was in time to see the ruins of the Jewish synagogue crumbling in a section of the Roman wall, crumbling itself. A hundred metres further on, the cathedral was later built - a vast and wretched building compared to the marvellous Church of the Virgin on the opposite side of the road, one of the oldest Christian churches in the basilica style. A little further on, behind the central square, was the city's large mosque. Years had to pass - when I was a child I didn't think of such things - for me to realise how many little Jerusalems there are in the entire Mediterranean basin. And yet we are at the close of the first decade of the 21st century, and it is as if we have not understood anything.

Such things were preoccupying my mind in the building where the city's Jewish school was once housed as I leafed through the mouldy books, their pages stuck together, while the light in the yard was drying some sheets hung out on the line. I thought of the same things later in the Jewish cemetery among the weeds and the untended old graves as the light wind was - or so I imagined - a distant whisper from the voices of the dead, those who were destined to be buried here and whose names on the gravestones would be covered by silence, solitude, and weeds. There are no longer Jews in Morocco. Only these abandoned graves.

The sense of exile that often possesses me was overwhelming.

Was I perhaps a prematurely aged child who was returning to the memories of his childhood, wishing in this way to cancel out the harsh years that followed? I insist every so often in submitting a question to which I know there is no answer.

6

As I have a chronic tendency to create triadic patterns-- a Greek fault (though the more time passes the more I doubt whether it's only Greek) - I made one here as well. On the second evening, in my room, looking out of the window into the inner courtyard of the hotel, empty and silent as if an abandoned estate in Paradise whose animals had died centuries ago: church - mosque - synagogue. What's the difference?

Later, in Casablanca, wandering in the monstrous mosque built by King Hassan, it seemed architecturally to not differ in any way from a classic Gothic church. If you added icons and statues and took away the arabesques, it would be exactly the same thing.

Though they say the Devil doesn't waste his time with unbelievers like myself, regarding us *de facto* as 'his own', he came out of the mosque and appeared before me, flicking his tail: "This thing here holds 12,000 people. Can you imagine what it'll be like when all of them go in there with their shoes off?" he said. "You're an anachronism. We live in the age of deodorants" I replied, and he disappeared.

7

The first meaning of the word for church in Greek - *ekklesia* - was an assembly of citizens, the place where citizens came together (the same as 'synagogue'). And then the gathering of the whole army for an announcement or meeting. Later, it meant the gathering of Christians, the sum total of those belonging to the Christian religion. Then, by extension, the Christian place of worship and the Christian rite. But around the ancient places of worship there were commercial transactions and buying and selling. The Modern Greek word for 'bank' - *trapeza* - comes from the table - *trapezi* - the money-changers of the period set up outside these and on which customers put their coins. And since from the point of view of etymology modern banks are derived from ancient tables, metaphorically - and not only metaphorically - what are they but secularised temples? Even today, at the festivals of the Orthodox churches a *sui generis* trade takes place, daylong markets where small items are traded - not to mention the permanent ones around Orthodox and Catholic churches. This was what Jewish synagogues too had been like--otherwise there is no explanation for the episode of Christ driving out the merchants from the Temple of Solomon. The house of God is not a house of merchandise.

A house of merchandise ... symbols, fetishes, icons, amulets, prayer-books, rosaries, statuettes, embroideries. Outside Christian churches, Buddhist sanctuaries, and mosques, of course, where people eat and drink in the precincts. Eat your food and

say your prayer. From the minaret, the muezzin will address Allah, who has his gaze trained on the city below, his possession - that is why all the faithful are regarded as belonging to him, his chosen, but those who manage the world which belongs to him must be careful. *Allahu akbar*.

8.

At the hotel, we had the opportunity to listen to music of the Sufis. I am not competent to speak on the matter of Sufism and the world of the dervishes. I shall speak only of the impression which the evening made on me.

I'm not at all sure that so-called religious music reinforces religious feeling, and I don't believe that it is enjoyed better by the believer than by the unbeliever. And the things which, in any event, are sorted out in the handbooks have a minimal effect on the psychology and tension of the moment. If the opposite were true, art and personal expression would coexist. Bach wrote religious music but who feels the need to pray on hearing his *St Matthew's Passion*? Bach sat down at the organ, raised his eyes, and saw God. His God, however, is not ours. But his music remains ours, and when it is played, the partitions fall and the heavens open. Then again, what do they reveal to each of us? The orders of angels? The Virgin and Child? The Twelve Apostles? Or perhaps the music of the spheres, the vibrations of Space? And why not all that, and as much again?

In the inner courtyard of the hotel, I heard, in the company of the writers at the meeting, the music of the Sufis, which was sung by a group of young people sitting cross-legged in a circle. It seemed strange to me - and equally fascinating - how close the melody was to the Byzantine equivalent, or even to other, secular, songs - for example, some of our own *rembetika* of a certain period.

The first voice would begin to sing, the second would continue, and then the third, and all together, all together, slowly at first and later fast, triumphally I would say. The music awoke the Seraphim of Islam, and standing around us, the faithful and the hotel employees provided an accompaniment with their own voices, co-ordinated with the swaying of the body, as if they were the chorus in some opera which was conversing with an imaginary orchestra hidden in the heavens. There was another city, not the ideal one, but the one you see only with closed eyes, where you will not enter, or even if you wanted to, they wouldn't let you. It was the iconic city, the image of the real, an image of images.

Nevertheless, the universe of images does not match a city representative of monotheism, whether we are referring to Allah or Jevovah. It is empty space, a universe void and lonely, nobody lives there, and even the old gods are far below - a long way from the surface of the heavenly sphere.

But I mustn't allow my feelings to lead me to wild surmises. The world of late antiquity in any case, seems hopelessly far off from here - at least, that's how it seemed to me on the day when we visited the Roman ruins outside the city. They seemed so alien to the landscape, so lonely; I should add that the mosaics and the remains of the buildings were of no aesthetic interest. Indeed, I wouldn't hesitate to describe them as slightly- to- very kitsch. They would perhaps have suited the taste of

the forgotten legionaries who were sent here, to the foothills of the Empire, to supervise a world which was at that time not the best one could expect. This may account, I think, for the fact that most visitors persistently took photographs of the nesting stork on top of a column, as it were mocking an age in which *esprit de corps* supposedly gave meaning to the imperialist character of Rome, an empire which as its name ('strength') declares, regarded power as its foundation.

9

Analogies are distracting. Nevertheless, great and small similarities and dissimilarities keep the imagination alert. I wouldn't quite say awareness, criticism's first cousin. In every city there is a point zero (not necessarily the one identified by the tourist guides), and this is what the visitor looks for, consciously or unconsciously. Consequently, whatever city we go to, the first thing we want to see is its centre, its core, supposedly; deep down, I suspect however, we are looking not the heart of the city but for the point of departure. It may be beating elsewhere without our knowing it.

The truth is not always contained in the obvious. If I wanted to quote an example, it would be Constantinople. According to legend, when the Emperor Constantine decided to build the New Rome, he determined its beginning and end by walking. So he began walking, saying that the end of the city would be the point where he stopped. The walk lasted a long time, until at one point his aide ventured to ask him when he would stop. The Emperor was not annoyed by this, but looked out at the Sea of Marmara, saw the future city spreading over the seven hills, and replied, smiling faintly: "I shall stop as soon as the one who is walking behind me asks me to". The Unseen, the shadow of History.

I thought about the legend of Constantinople in the great medina as I stood in the internal courtyard of an old and neglected building and looked at the tiny shops housing scores of craft industries, where a host of people who make things by hand were coming and going: saddles and harnesses for horses, kitchen utensils, small-scale artefacts. The building was like a *han*, an inn - and it must actually have been an inn once upon a time - with its balconies all round and the rooms looking out on to the internal courtyard; I had the instinctive impression that this was what inns in Byzantium must have been like, and something like this in medieval Europe. I thought it was something like a small miracle that the feeling of that period had been preserved here. It was not inevitable - and it was not self-evident.

All these small and large establishments, each tight up against the other, a vast hive full of store-owners, customers, and the curious like ourselves, in the same place for centuries now. I shouldn't have marveled. For, if you leave aside the order of magnitudes, in what way does the great medina of Fez differ from the covered market of Constantinople? I think I know one basic way-- or so I would at least like to believe, since it has been confirmed by so many: the fezes here are better than the ones they used to make in Constantinople. In any event, it was from this city that the curious headgear which enthralled so many, both in East and West, took its name.

10

For years now I've had my doubts as to how far the doctrine that science comes from the West and Wisdom from the East correct. There can be no doubt, however, that Fez is a city of the East, even if it is at the north-western extremity of Africa. And as such, it is reminiscent of a solar civilisation, younger than that of ancient Greece, but older than today's. The same is true of Algiers and Tunis, and of Egypt, to mention only Mediterranean countries. But these are generalities and arbitrary thoughts, otherwise how to explain the fact that the crescent features on all the flags of Islam? We shouldn't imagine that the moon above this or any other Islamic city suggests the capital of some forgotten caliphate in which the caliph turned to stone hundreds of years ago, the houris remain motionless among the gardens, and the seraglios and the guards have gone to sleep, leaving their scimitars on the parapet to glitter in the moonlight. I too like the picture, but it is nothing more than a cartoon of the imagination.

The Fez I visited is a city of dust, wind, and sounds, gardens concealed behind yard walls, with cool atriums and the light of an ochre colour which travels over the mosques and the walls of the houses as if it too is looking for the way out of the medina. About its society, or more generally about the society of Morocco, the French influences, the poverty in the mountain regions, and the relics of feudalism - not difficult to see at even a short trip to the villages - I cannot speak. But each time I remember the few things I have experienced, something grips my heart.