

Viagens da Saudade

Coordenação

Maria Celeste Natário

Paulo Borges

Luís Lóia

Organização

Cláudia Sousa

Nuno Ribeiro

Rodrigo Araújo

Porto

2019

FICHA TÉCNICA

Título: **Viagens da Saudade**

Coordenação: Maria Celeste Natário
Paulo Borges
Luís Lóia

Organização: Cláudia Sousa
Nuno Ribeiro
Rodrigo Araújo

Editor: Universidade do Porto. Faculdade de Letras

Ano de edição: 2019

ISBN: 978-989-8969-26-2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21747/978-989-8969-26-2/viag>

URL: <https://ler.letras.up.pt/site/default.aspx?qry=id022id1671&sum=sim>

Anne Twitty*

The Bird of Paradise Longs for Its Home

Abstract: This paper offers a wide-ranging perspective on a widespread phenomenon: the underlying perception expressed in the Portuguese word *saudade* and its closest English equivalents, «longing» and «nostalgia». It traces this sentiment as it has historically appeared, frequently in Sufi sources, and in 20th-century examples from music and film. Poetry in particular, and the arts in general, have been a natural repository for the conger of emotional insights suggested by this term. The paper is intended to suggest further contemplation that may inspire more detailed research into the connection between spontaneous and largely untutored intuition and the numerous spiritual traditions in which these insights have been more fully developed. Ultimately, a contrast emerges between individuals embedded within a living tradition and those who are relatively isolated within a culture that refuses to recognize the true scope of human existence.

Key Words: Intuition, Lament, Origin, Loss, Return.

O Pássaro do Paraíso tem Saudades da sua Casa

Resumo: Este artigo oferece uma perspectiva abrangente sobre um fenómeno generalizado: a percepção subjacente expressa na palavra portuguesa *saudade* e seus equivalentes ingleses mais próximos, «longing» e «nostalgia». Ele traça esse sentimento como historicamente apareceu, frequentemente em fontes sufistas, e em exemplos do século XX da música e do cinema. A poesia em particular, e as artes em geral, têm sido um repositório natural para a mistura de intuições emocionais sugeridas por esse termo. O artigo pretende sugerir uma maior contemplação que possa inspirar uma pesquisa mais detalhada sobre a conexão entre a intuição espontânea e em grande parte ignorada e as numerosas tradições espirituais nas quais essas percepções foram mais plenamente desenvolvidas. Em última análise, emerge um contraste entre indivíduos inseridos em uma tradição viva e aqueles que estão relativamente isolados dentro de uma cultura que se recusa a reconhecer o verdadeiro alcance da existência humana

Palavras-chave: Intuição, Lamento, Origem, Perda, Retorno.

* Anne Twitty is a writer, translator, and interpreter who has dedicated herself to the study and diffusion of the myth and spiritual traditions in many forms. She received the PEN Prize for Poetry in Translation in 2002, and a NEA translation grant in 2006. For some years she was the Epicycle Editor of *Parabola*, which published her retellings of wisdom stories and her original writings.

At the sound of the word «*saudade*», something within us awakes. Perhaps its first appearance reminds of something in the past: a relationship, an experience, a particular place or a particular moment. If we stay with this feeling or if we allow ourselves to pass into a contemplative state, a larger perspective opens up. A further question confronts us: where does this feeling originate? In distant memories? And if so, where do they come from and how should we look for them?

Anyone who explores a personal history will discover a multitude of memories, perhaps sufficient to weigh down the heart. Yet it may be that this crowd of memories are like the trees that, rather than revealing the forest, impede the view. It is for that reason that I propose that we look beyond to search for the origins, not of the word, but of the intuition that gave birth to it. And that may imply a search for our own original state.

Ibn 'Arabi has said that it is the duty of every human being to search for his or her point of origin, adding this warning: «Do not think that you will find it in Baghdad or in Cairo». We could ourselves add: Nor in Lisbon, London, or New York. Ibn 'Arabi invites us to look further.

There are, of course, people who feel perfectly adapted to this earth and remain immune to the nostalgia for another condition. Yet now, as in the past, we find evidence of those in whom the sensation of having come to this world from some other existence, bearing a memory that transcends the terrestrial, persists. In a ghazal that has been attributed to Rumi, the question is expressed in these words: «Who am I? Where am I supposed to be going?». In effect, this signals the beginning of the search that Ibn 'Arabi has urged us to undertake. This search for a fundamental orientation has led to a search for a geographical location, on this planet or some other, as well as to attempts, rooted in the Bible or the Qur'an, to recover the

paradisiacal state of the garden of Eden. More subtle Sufi interpretations have offered us a description of different states of being. We are now just as likely to speak of another dimension.

For the moment, I propose to contemplate this longing, a nostalgia beyond nostalgia, within a series of examples that illustrate some of the varying ways in which the sentiment has been experienced and understood at certain times and in certain places. Most of these examples come to us from the world of Islam, and in particular, from within Sufism, where the basic intuition of belonging to another world found its fullest expression. Hence, the well-known Sufi saying, the instruction: Be in this world but not of it.

However, I would like to begin with a contemporary example that came as an intuition to someone unversed in Sufi tradition. It suggests that some partial intuitions can arrive from an ever-present elsewhere, even without the presence of a full-fledged tradition or a sustaining community of belief.

This spontaneous intuition was expressed in the lyrics to a song by Nina Simone. In an interview a few years before her death, the great jazz singer spoke of how the lyrics of one of her songs had come to her. At the time she was living in a high-rise in Switzerland. Looking down from her window at an orderly queue of students in uniform, she asked herself, «What on earth am I doing here?» In that moment, she says, the word «fodder» suddenly occurred to her, and with it the phrase «fodder in my wings». «Fodder» - she wasn't even sure what the word meant and had to look it up. The dictionary told her that the word refers principally to hay fed to ruminants, and that hay often falls to the ground and mixes with their dung. Speaking to her interviewer, Ms. Simone, elderly by then and emotionally and mentally much afflicted, reflected on her experience:

The words to the song are that of a small bird who fell here to this planet. And she only fell because one of her wings was crippled. She fell in the country, in this fodder... she was crippled. She couldn't fly, but she had a third eye and could see all people everywhere. She would try to get out of the fodder, flying from country to country when she had the strength.¹

The lyrics that came to her begin:

A bird fell to earth, reincarnated from her birth
She had fodder in her wings...²

That was the intuition of Nina Simone, toward the end of the 20th century. As evidence of the illusory nature of temporal boundaries, we may consider the words of the Iranian Sufi Mulla Sadra, who spanned the 16th and early 17th century. When speaking of the knowledge of Unity, he lamented that the people of his epoch were aware only of the exterior aspect of the world, while ignoring the divine knowledge. Directing himself to the ignorant, he wrote: «If you are content with this life, you are like a cow or a donkey with its fodder».

¹ SCHNABEL, Tom, *Stolen Moments*, Acrobat Press, Los Angeles 1988, pp. 160-161.

² The resulting song «Fodder in her Wings» can be found on YouTube in several versions sung by Ms. Simone.

Mulla Sadra says that those beings who look on life with the eyes of a cow or a donkey are content to be imprisoned between the earth and the sky, convinced that there is nothing beyond. «They know the outer aspects of the life of this world, but of the next they are heedless» [Qur'an 30.7]. They have no interest in perceiving the signs of God³.

Then, as now, the impulse to fly, to leave behind the material world, does not arise in everyone, or if it arises, it is often mistaken or unrecognized. It points to something beyond the visible, tangible world. Nina Simone's lament, across the centuries, is an echo of an old Sufi plaint, which occurs in so many forms. One of them: «Alas, that the bird of my soul is unable to fly, on account of one grain of wheat». Again, we find the image of fodder, this time in connection with wheat, widely identified in Islamic legend as the «forbidden fruit» of the Garden of Eden. In notable contrast to Christian traditions, which prefer the apple with its shiny, red, seductive attributes, in Islamic traditions, it is wheat that predominates, wheat, that while it nourishes and sustains the bodily life of both humans and animals, ultimately becomes an obstacle. It sustains the material body and its life on earth, while adding the quality of weight, which makes it more difficult to escape the pull of gravity.

None of the above is meant to suggest that Nina Simone was aware of Sufism or its traditions. Quite the opposite. The inner promptings that accompany *saudade* cannot be limited to a particular tradition or location. However sadly and imperfectly, they come to those who are sensitive in some way to a dimension beyond this world.

Where the support of tradition and of a community of believers is present, the effect of the experience is quite different. In the presence of a sustaining tradition and surrounded by those who share it, the experience enters a receptive world and is accepted as one of a series of shared understandings. A simple yet profound illustration comes to us from the Maghreb, from a traditional source that can be classified under the rubric of King Solomon folktales, though, unusually, it is told in Moroccan Arabic and proceeds from the Islamic rather than Hebrew tradition. Here, it can serve as an illustration of the flowering of this *saudade* within a context in which it is recognized and valued.

The story goes like this: Once King Solomon, who knew the language of all living creatures, particularly the birds, was sitting on his throne. He was considering the paths of knowledge, finding

³ Cf. ERNST, Carl W., «Sufism and Philosophy in Mulla Sadra», *It's Not Just Academic*, SAGE Publications – Yoda Press, New Delhi 2018, p. 231.

all of them useless unless they led to the «origins of the world and to its end». This metaphysic once established, the King, (instructed, of course, in the story of Paradise, the creation of Adam, and the expulsion by the Angel Ridhwan), fell to contemplating an enormous tree within his garden, each of its branches spreading endlessly into a thousand smaller ones. From one of these branches emerged a great eagle.

The eagle flies into the palace, and the King engages it in conversation. The eagle tells him that it retains a memory of the Garden of Eden and that, due to its great age, it has passed a hundred years on each branch of the incomprehensibly enormous tree. King Solomon comes to an understanding. Now, we might say that in that moment, King Solomon perceives that the tree is a metaphor for Time, although that would be to introduce our own sophistication into the story. Let us simply proceed with the plot as it is told, remembering that King Solomon, along with those who told and transmitted this story, believed in the existence of a lost Garden, located somewhere on Earth.

There is no ambiguity here, no doubting, no felt need to search for possible interpretations. The king simply instructs the eagle to fly forth and go on flying until it finds the site of the lost Paradise. And at last it does. It locates the ruins and lets fall a pebble to mark the site. After that, it must return to the palace, where it is venerated and cosseted with the softest bed, the finest food. Yet it remains, head drooping, inconsolable, «plunged in sorrow». Its lament, which could serve as a pure expression of *saudade*:

Outana, ouatani!
Oua la ouasiat al koursi
Oua la raqdi fil quotni

O my country! O my country!
Away with grand thrones
And beds of soft cotton!⁴

What we are discussing is more than an emotional state, it is an irresistible longing, proof against all distraction and temptation. Both the king and the eagle, in this tale, and within the way of a belief so absolute that it does not need to defend or justify itself, know what is being sought, even though the geographical coordinates (again, in our vocabulary, which implies our way of

⁴ TWITTY, Anne, «“O My Country”, A Maghreb folktale, Retold by Anne Twitty», *Parabola*, Volume 10, No. 2, «Exile», (1985).

understanding) have been lost. Our consciousness may add multiple layers of interpretation to that narrative, along with a tendency to resort to the symbolic in order to reduce it to the psychological. Still, the folktale reminds us, just as Ibn ‘Arabi exhorts us: Search for the origin.

The next example I will offer here is from Jalal al-Din Rumi. (One might say «from the pen of Rumi», but for the fact that Rumi did not himself write down any of the *ghazals* attributed to him.) This *ghazal* comes from the respected manuscript of Foruzanfar [D1390]. I propose to discuss it in this context, not as a characteristic poem of this particular poet – I have my doubts about that, which I will reserve for some other occasion – but as a superbly eloquent expression of the longing for a dimension from which the speaker/singer has been temporarily exiled.

Again, what is described is a known dimension, though a supra-terrestrial one, described in Sufi terms as «the home of the Beloved». It is also a dimension beyond the span of a human lifetime: «Thousands of years passed before I began to speak». The one who speaks has been in that true home, knows from whence he proceeded, why he came to earth, and that he will someday return. In fact, there is a pattern of movement here, a double returning. It appears that before regaining his true home, he had been a divine bird, had been lured to earth like a bird fallen into a snare, and having once escaped he now returns, not to remain, but in attempt to alert those similarly imprisoned:

I came here to warn you.
I’ve returned, I’ve returned. I’ve come from the home of the Beloved,
Look, at me, look at me. I am here out of compassion for you...

I was a divine bird, I became an earthly one.
I didn’t see the trap and was suddenly caught in it.

And then a plea:

«Set me free, set me free.»⁵

A heart-broken lament, one infinitely more eloquent than most of our contemporary versions. Yet once more, by way of contrast and similitude, we can find resonance in the 20th century. For that, we may look to a film from 1976: «The Man Who Fell to Earth». The protagonist comes to Earth in disguise, on a mission from another planet. For a while he wanders, bewildered and disoriented,

⁵ From an unpublished translation by Iraj Anvar and Anne Twitty.

until his grasp of advanced technology brings him wealth, power, and their accompanying vices. (Taking into account the historical differences, his might be the story of the Islamic angels Harut and Marut, sent on a mission to earth, who are similarly seduced by earthly ways.) Distracted and sunk in a depressive state, still, our alien traveler retains a longing to return. A government agent intervenes, forcing him to undergo a surgical operation to affix the contact lenses that were part of his disguise to the surface of his own lenses. Now his eyes and thus his seeing --outwardly and metaphorically-- are permanently human, his return impossible. Rather than a story of divine transformation, it becomes, as the title of the film and the novel that preceded it suggest, yet another story of a Fall.

Perhaps the underlying meaning of *saudade* is the perception of loss and the longing to recapture what has been lost. Depending on our own intuitions and level of understanding, as well as on the interpretations our culture offers us, that perception may lead in many directions. Within traditions that offer a prescription, or at least a possibility, of return, the memory of another state may lead to hope and aspiration. If the ways seem to have been barred or the pathways forgotten, to despair. It may be that much of our contemporary sensibility is defined by the sense of an irretrievable loss. When we return to the extraordinary *ghazal* cited above, however, what strikes and uplifts us is the tone of an achieved ecstasy. These are not the accents of the imprisoned bird, nor of one that has had only a vague intuition or a mere glimpse of a lost and ruined Paradise. Nor, indeed, of a soul in despair. In this *ghazal* we hear the full-throated voice of ecstatic certainty. The Home of the Beloved exists, it is still there, beyond time and geography. The Return is still possible.

Bibliographical references

ERNST, Carl W. (2018), «Sufism and Philosophy in Mulla Sadra», *It's Not Just Academic*, SAGE New Delhi: Publications – Yoda Press.

SCHNABEL, Tom (1988), *Stolen Moments*, Los Angeles: Acrobat Press.

TWITTY, Anne (1985), «“O My Country”, A Maghreb folktale, Retold by Anne Twitty», *Parabola*, Volume 10, No. 2, «Exile».