



## **SÃO MIGUEL. A SWEET MELANCHOLY**

**João de Melo**

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Melancholy is an art. Behold how much beauty exists in this only and simple way of saying the four syllables of this word: me-lan-cho-ly. In the Azores, melancholy is a common word for all the islands. But in none as in São Miguel, it comes as a result of the way in which the charm of the landscape is contemplated, to see it from above (when one comes out from the Ribeira Grande towards the Lagoa de Fogo): one braces itself at the top of the hill, takes a step back and is dazzled. What one sees it is not only that giant quarterback, green and nearly plain, that spins with us in circular motion and wraps around the gesture that points above the Ribeira Grande and Rabo de Peixe; melancholy is seen in the gesture itself that explains the green-blue-yellow of the earth and sea, the feminine beauty of the landscape, the stretch of this north-coast, split in half by the Ponta de Cintrão (low and diligent on the left; high and very cropped in the Porto Formoso). The greenness

of the prairie and the forests collide with each other; the whiteness of the houses that reveal themselves along the deserted streets, with jambs of basalt around the doors and the windows, blazes above the numerous greens of the earth, as if it was drawn with chalk. However, the landscape that crashes at our feet, first in a slope from above, then in a haven that spills until it finds the blueness of the sea, it continues towards the fields of cork and lupine as far as the gardens of tobacco and tea. The pleasure and the amazement of so much beauty exceeds our way of seeing, they go beyond astonishment and respiration. It is not possible; there has never been anything so extraordinary in the vision of our eyes, neither in the deepest feelings of our spirit. There is not even a term of comparison between this and the art of the best painters in the world. Not even a single great musician captured from the sea this tangled sound that goes up to the mountains, not even the light that illuminates the silence of the valley, neither the tolling of the bells from far away, nor the chimes that the angels stir among the mists, neither the flutter of the wings of the birds soaring in space.

Nevertheless, only with the memory of the eyes can we see the extinguished track of the aviation of Rabo de Peixe: in the past, there would emerge a hidden noise, which would suddenly burst amid the clouds. From there descended, (yes, from within the clouds) a winged and apocalyptic being that frightened the birds and the cows laying on the grass; a being who was at the same time scary and terrified, who brought with him the melancholy of all the other islands of Azores, and from there he would send it to the lands of America. Not now. Only the prairie unfolds itself in that aircraft floor, the fenced ground of those enclosures often so beaten by the touchdown of the trains, where work and agricultural labour no longer exist. Time has changed. But the cows of the past are still there, the same ones that would bite the grass of the track and someone would throw them out of there when the aeroplane was arriving. The trees are also the same: groves of cryptomeria, dense perfumed incenses, some beeches-of-the-earth, a few acacias. The birds hover above and underneath us: a white tailed kite (which is our mythological hawk), the blackbird, the white wagtail, the finch. I think they travel in the air, sometimes belly up, between the cloudy balls that roll and pass by the sky of Azores.

Seen from the viewpoints of the road that takes us to the Lagoa do Fogo, São Miguel is a crooked island, a body deformed in an arc, as if everything in her converged towards the centre of the oceanic. So, every man is in her a shaft, every woman is her

conch, every cloud is an aerial presence (I believe ethereal) and wise like a witch. Now the volcanos are these hills that sometimes gauge themselves against the low firmament; they are large mortal remains of the earth (dressed with a clover, moss and ryegrass) that align themselves in the sky in range; they are incomings of the blue water, green or the colour of the rain; and being profound shipwrecked galleons, these big valleys of São Miguel do not come on the boarding books, not even in the relationship of the previous shipwrecked, not even in any other memory of the world. São Miguel is an island of two existences. About the first one, only the fish and the cetaceans can speak, given that they saw her grow through the work of fire, raising raw material from the deep until the only element that then had over the waters: air. From the second existence of the island, the birds know the corresponding detail: they passed through time-space; they were the first ones that came to live in her. They brought time with them: where before only the silence and the sonata of the sea existed, they cultivated time and memory; where night and day still did not exist, they said that on the other side of the world there had always been night and day, to be or not to be, the verb of death and of life...

The Lagoa do Fogo suddenly appears in the heights of the mountains, from where it is possible to see the surrounding waters and the sea from one point to another of the island: by an open gore between the twisted hills of the mountain, a stretch of the south coastline observes us. The coast undulates high and low, acute in the capes and round in her inbounds, but always covered in green, even when it appears steep. Descending from there towards the south, it is spotted straight away the islet of the Vila Franca do Campo, the tips of Galera and Água de Pau, the plainness of the Lagoa and Rosário, and once again Ponta Delgada: the coast punctuated by boulders, and these passed over to the investees of the Atlantic Ocean.

São Miguel is the island of the most beautiful lagoons. The one of Fogo, lies at the bottom of a downed crater between the big edges of the mountain chain, like a peninsula populated with cryptomeria between the hardly accessible margins, sands coming from the enveloping hills and ravines covered with endemic flora: herbaceous specie and shrubs rooted in the margins and in expansion up to the pastures. There is not a greater beauty than this seemingly still water that in every moment changes colour depending on the force of the wind and the clouds, at the passage of the mists that go and look for the lost mysteries of the sea. The water is blue, green or leaden, depending on the cloud and the

inclination of the solar light that leans over it. The wind merges, spreads out, collects and then takes the extra colourings of the water far away, as if a peacock's tail distended over it and closed before the sight of the astonished visitor. Every sign of individuality recedes in us. The man's hands forget the gesture and the word. We develop an unexpected desire of wanting to believe in the waters divinity. It awakes in us a belief already dead or still terrified: a doubt full of pity, its happy and sad concussion.

The lagoons of the Furnas and the Sete Cidades will possibly be even more beautiful than the one of Fogo. They were built with the unified hands of the Gods and men. The Gods created them, the men modified them. From there, results a combined scenery created by the splendid divine with the art of the human beings. The one of Furnas, on the south side of the island, is an interior sea, excavated between the Pico do Ferro and a width of mountains that even so possess, in the immense valley of the Furnas, the streams that glide between the yam, dwellings or summer houses at the edge of the water, boilers that sprout out of the ground and boils like acid – between humid ground, parks and exotic gardens, forests of cryptomeria and rare araucarias, thermal fountains, boats and weeding for fishing.

At the northeast, the Sete Cidades, at the peak of the Cumieira, is a perfect and legendary 8, formed by two lagoons, one being Blue and the other Green. Both inscribe themselves in the middle of a valley surrounded by an immense verdant wall, covered with dense flora, of the secondary colouring: phosphorescent colour of the tree ferns and of the moss; the blue, the white and the pinkness of the hydrangeas; the pale green of the bulrush and of the incense; the yellowness of millions of light-up candles during the day (which are the *coniteira* plants that bloom during the month of July). The landscape is imposed to us through that immense greenery, through the moved silence that involves and watches it, and also through everything that glides over her: the disfigured clouds due to the wind that passes by, the blueness of the sky that scatters in the waters of the lagoons.

Once at the viewpoint of the Vista do Rei, the first reaction is to turn our eyes away, to focus ourselves once again on what is being transmitted to us. It is not possible to believe in the first moment in which it is seen. One's eyes have to get used to bewilderment of that wonder, to see it a second time, a third time, and only then comprehend that one is in the presence of the most extraordinary beautiful vision in all the world of the islands. Immense and luminous ecstasies of beauty and of calmness, the two water fields are joint

together by an earthly thread in the margins in which lives a town used to the exclamations of admiration and used to being visited by incredulous people who finally believe in the miracle. This town lives outside the hours of time. The footsteps, the watches and the cameras of the visitors bring it there. But it was never needed in paradise, while being only earthly, like this one of the Sete Cidades. Raúl Brandão wrote: “An ah of astonishment, a new feeling, a vague feeling of surprise...For the first time in my life I don’t know how to describe what I see and what I feel. I suspect that the Sete Cidades is also the soul of a view. The big landscapes that die have to end up somewhere...It is due to this reason that I feel something strange about this. It belongs to the spiritual life. It is a ghostly view.”

Not far from any place, other lagoons and calderas hide in the view of São Miguel: boiled and sulphurous waters in Caldeira da Ribeira Grande, tempered in the Caldeira Velha (where they drop in a waterfall, good for a warm bath in the outdoors, in midwinter) and sweet, others. Sweet are the waters of the lagoons of Santiago (close to the one of Sete Cidades), of Carvão, of Canário and Rasa (next to Pico de Carvão halfway between São Vicente and Sete Cidades). More beautiful than them, the ones of Congro and Nenúfares (already in the south slope of the Lagoa de Fogo, when one makes its way down to Vila Franca do Campo, or returning to Ponta Delgada). Being this the island of all itineraries towards the fascination of those who visit it (by ground or by sea, by the interior mountainous or by the littoral), it is by a basic rule that in her one passes through the calderas and the lagoons. Without them, São Miguel would never be a different island from all the islands in the world, neither would its sweet silence be the sweet silence of time and of earth, nor would the singing of the birds and of the angels involve in themselves the same song of life that every life deserves.

The original text “São Miguel. Uma doce melancolia” by João de Melo can be found in

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