

THE DARK SIDE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN — EXPRESSIONS OF FEAR FROM THE INQUISITION TO THE PRESENT

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Inside the stones of its most famous buildings, Évora keeps mysteries and secrets which constitute the most hidden side of its cultural identity. A World Heritage site, this town seems to preserve, in its medieval walls, a precious knowledge of the most universal and ancient human emotion: fear. Trying to transcend many of its past and future fears, some of its historical monuments in Gothic style were erected against the fear of death, the most terrible of all fears, which the famous inscription, in the Bones Chapel of the Church of São Francisco, insistently reminds us, through the most disturbing words: “Nós ossos que aqui estamos pelos vossos esperamos”.

If the first inquisitors worked in central Europe (Germany, northern Italy, eastern France), later the centres of the Inquisition were established in the Mediterranean regions, especially southern France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Consequently, the roots of fear in Évora are common to other towns, where the Inquisition developed a culture of fear, through which we can penetrate into the dark side of the Mediterranean, where people were subjected to the same terrifying methods of persecution and torture. This common geographical and historical context was not ignored by one of the most famous masters of American gothic fiction, Edgar Allan Poe. Through the pages of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, readers get precise images of the fearful instruments of terror that were able to produce the legend that has made the first grand inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, a symbol of ultimate cruelty, bigotry, intolerance, and religious fanaticism, which unfortunately are still the source of our present fears in a time when religious beliefs can be used again as a motif of war and destruction. As Krishnamurti once suggested, only a fundamental realization of the root of all fear can free our minds.

Keywords: Fear, Inquisition, Mediterranean

Nas pedras dos seus monumentos mais famosos, Évora guarda mistérios e segredos que constituem o lado mais oculto da sua identidade cultural. Tendo sido considerada local de Património Universal, esta cidade parece preservar, no interior das suas muralhas medievais, um conhecimento precioso acerca da emoção mais universal e antiga comum a toda a humanidade: o medo.

Tentando transcender muitos dos seus medos passados e futuros, alguns dos seus monumentos históricos de estilo Gótico foram edificados contra o medo da morte, o mais terrível de todos os medos, dos quais a famosa inscrição da Capela dos Ossos na Igreja de S. Francisco insistentemente nos faz lembrar, através das mais inquietantes palavras: “Nós ossos que aqui estamos pelos vossos esperamos”.

Se os primeiros inquisidores trabalhavam na Europa Central (Alemanha, norte de Itália, França oriental), mais tarde os centros da Inquisição foram estabelecidos nas regiões mediterrânicas, especialmente no sul da França, Itália, Portugal e Espanha. Consequentemente, as raízes do medo em Évora são comuns a outras cidades, onde a Inquisição desenvolveu uma cultura do medo, através da qual nós podemos penetrar no lado mais negro do Mediterrâneo, onde muitas pessoas foram sujeitas aos mesmos terríveis métodos de perseguição e tortura. Este contexto geográfico e históri-

co comum não foi ignorado por um dos maiores mestres da ficção gótica Norte-Americana, Edgar Allan Poe. Através das páginas de *The Pit and the Pendulum*, os leitores obtêm imagens precisas dos temíveis instrumentos de terror que foram capazes de produzir a lenda que fez do primeiro grande inquisidor, Tomas de Torquemada, um símbolo de extrema crueldade, intolerância e fanatismo religioso, que infelizmente são ainda fontes dos nossos medos presentes, numa época em que as crenças religiosas podem ser de novo usadas como motivo de guerra e destruição. Parafraseando Krishnamurti, pode-se dizer que somente uma consciência profunda da raiz de todo o medo pode libertar as nossas mentes, pelo que será este o objetivo central deste ensaio.

Palavras-chave: Medo, Inquisição, Mediterrâneo

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If the first inquisitors worked in central Europe (Germany, northern Italy, eastern France), later the centres of the Inquisition were established in the Mediterranean regions, especially southern France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Consequently, the roots of fear in Évora are common to other towns, where the Inquisition developed a culture of fear, through which we could penetrate into the dark side of the Mediterranean, where people were subjected to the same terrifying methods of persecution and torture. This common geographical and historical context was not ignored by one of the most famous masters of American gothic fiction, Edgar Allan Poe. Through the pages of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, readers get precise images of the fearful instruments of terror that were able to produce the legend that has made the first grand inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, a symbol of ultimate cruelty, bigotry, intolerance, and religious fanaticism, which unfortunately are still the source of our present fears in a time when religious beliefs can be used again as a motif of war and destruction.

Lit up with a brilliant Mediterranean sunshine that illuminates the beautiful fields of flowers and plants that the Alentejo is famed for, the city of Évora also possesses an architectural grandeur that refers to a brilliant past which makes difficult to imagine the fear, the superstition, the crimes, and above all the anxiety of the condemned to the inquisitorial suplices, that constitute a very important part of that same glorified past. Tourists walking through Praça do Giraldo are very far from imagining the very unpleasant happenings called the “*auto-de-fé*” ceremonies that were held by the Jesuit Inquisition as impressive spectacles to place fear into the spectators. Initially a tribunal would open at a location and an edict of grace would be published calling upon those who were conscious of heresy to confess; after a period of grace, the tribunal officers could make accusations.

Those accused of heresy were sentenced at an auto-da-fê, Act of Faith. Clergyman would sit at the proceedings and would deliver the punishments. These included confinement to dungeons, physical abuse and torture. Those who reconciled with the church were still punished and many had their property confiscated, as well as were banished from public life. Those who never confessed were burned at the stake without strangulation; those who did confess were strangled first. During the 16th and 17th centuries, attendance at an “auto-da-fê” was as high as the attendance at bullfights.

The Portuguese Inquisition was established in Portugal in 1536 by the King of Portugal, Dom João III, as a Portuguese analogue of the more famous Spanish Inquisition. However, many place the actual beginning of the Portuguese Inquisition during the year of 1497, when many Jews were expelled from Portugal and others were forced to convert to Catholicism. In Portugal, the first Grand Inquisitor was Cardinal Henry, who would later become king. There were courts of Inquisition in Lisbon, Coimbra and Évora. According to Adolfo Borges Coelho, in his very famous work, *Inquisition of Évora*, the fearless Pedro Álvares de Paredes was the first inquisitor after the birth of the Évora Inquisition, on 5th September 1541. On the 13th January 1789, Dom João V visited incognito the prisons of the Inquisition of Évora. He entered by a secret door and attended a wizard’s interrogation. Afterwards, he entered in the dispatch room, looked from the windows at the archbishop’s palace and passed into the ‘secret’ room, with a candle light. On the 6th February, in his return from the Spanish frontier, the king visited again the jails and, in the torture room, one of the guards was subjected to simulated tortures with different kinds of objects. Many of these objects could be seen in an exhibition of Torture Instruments from the Middle Ages to the Industrial Era, presented in Évora in 1994, and where eighty-five instruments used for capital punishment, public humiliation and torture were exhibited. About three fourths of these instruments were originals, dating back to the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, while the rest were accurate reconstructions made in the last hundred and fifty years. This collection was considered unique at that moment, because nothing like it had been offered to the public since 1908-09, when an exhibition entitled *The Holy Inquisition: Its Essence, Methods and Effects*, was held in Berlin. The presence and the variety of these instruments were totally frightening: head crushers, skull-splinters, wrist and leg-irons, chain scourges, saws, hanging cages, the *guillotine*, spiked necklaces, self-mortification belts, the oral, rectal and vaginal pear, the chastity belt, breast rippers, branks and scold’s bridles, etc. Watching these instruments from all shapes and sizes, caused an unforgettable experience that revealed the sadistic pleasure felt by the inquisitors when they were inflicting those punishments. Dissenters, apostates, heretics, Jews, witches, warlocks, alchemists, homosexuals, innocent women and anyone else, out of ecclesiastic favour, was persecuted and tortured by the implacable and ferocious inquirers, who defended these shock therapies with strong fanaticism. Their obsessions by the inquisitorial proceedings were objectified in these torture instruments, which sent the human soul to a deep “blackness of darkness”, brilliantly described by Edgar Allan Poe in “The Pit and the Pendulum”:

And the death just avoided, was of that very character which I had regarded as fabulous and frivolous in the tales respecting the Inquisition. To the victims of its tyranny, there was the choice of death with its direst physical agonies, or death with its most hideous moral horrors. I had been reserved for the later. By long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me. (Poe 1984, 496)

The anticipation of fear, that these instruments provoked in the narrator's mind, is the very source of terror in this story, that presents very impressive and detailed descriptions of two of the most terrible processes of torture, the pit and the pendulum, being the pit compared to hell and defined as "the Ultima Thule" of the inquisitorial punishments.

The terror of the Inquisition lay rather in its power to destroy any human life for the mere pleasure of a group of madman, empowered to do so with total efficiency. In a work entitled *The Inquisition*, Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh expose the unacknowledged shadow aspect of religion, describing the evil that an institution is capable of engendering, especially if it wants to spread the messianic belief that it can surpass all laws of men, for being chosen as an agent of God's will. The authors explore the pathology of this religious radicalism and its perverse effects that, in spite of coming from a different religion and culture, can nowadays find many parallelisms and correspondences in Islamic radical actions of terrorism, which also intend to justify their destructive acts through religious fanaticism. Intimidation, sadism and fear were used as tools of power through violent and cruel methods to ensure conformity of belief, so creating a precedent for certain totalitarian regimes in the 20th century. Being badly influenced by what was considered the highest religious authority, people were brain-washed by a mixture of unquestioning belief and fear. The terror, aroused by dictators and their secret police in our times, is not so different from that created from the 13th to the 19th century, by the agents of the Inquisition. As it is commented in the above mentioned book:

The Inquisition rapidly developed a methodology and control that was impressively effective – so much so that one can see in it the precursor of Stalin's secret police, of the Nazi SS and Gestapo... Here was a prototype for the kind of computerised records kept by modern police forces. (Baigent 1999, 49)

It seems that from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, history had recorded nothing comparable until the Holocaust of 1939-45. The Inquisition no longer exists, but in fact *Inquisition* will be forever, because unfortunately each time has its own inquisition. Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* expressed this timelessness aspect of totalitarian persecutions through a story about an anti-utopian future, when firemen burn books and the people are sedated with television. In one of the most compelling scenes of the correspondent film, directed by François Truffaut, there is a moment, at the end, when, during an early snow, fugitives from that totalitarian regime are committing books to memory before burning them. In Portugal, the activity of the courts was extended to book censorship, divination, witchcraft and bigamy under Dom João III. Book censorship proved to

have a strong influence in Portuguese cultural evolution, keeping the country uninformed and culturally backward. Originally oriented for a religious action, the Inquisition had an influence in almost every aspect of Portuguese society: politically, culturally and socially. The fear, it created, was later reawoken in Salazar's dictatorship. According to José Gil, in his very influential book *Portugal, Hoje - O Medo de Existir* (2004), Portuguese fear was interiorized and came from this dictatorship period. He even stated that "Portugal left salazarism *with fear*, that is, *left with fear of leaving*" (2004, 123). This contemporary Portuguese philosopher defends that there is a psychic whiteness, proper of terror, in our daily life, because nothing seems to happen, nor is it strongly inscribed in Portuguese society, for the simple reason that people are afraid of fear, of the small terror of exclusion, of being excluded and turned into an object of conflict. José Gil also observed that fear can be erased by fear, because all the ancient fears, that the revolution of the 25th of April didn't exorcise, disappear when in them is grafted the fear of the exclusion, which is totally inconceivable, in a free democratic society, built against the old authoritarian regimen (124). As a consequence, it seems there is only the norm of common sense, which gives origin to a normalized space of self-contentment, where fear remains hidden. As José Gil concludes, in his work, fear or terror goes on undermining our unconscious, warning and protecting us from the exterior, preventing us from creating other forms of existing and thinking (126). This leads to the conclusion that every fear, including the fear of death, should be confronted, because it's the only way to be conscious that fear can become a dangerous threat to our freedom.

This purpose of confrontation was also expressed in an exhibition, presented in Évora in 2006, entitled *Fear*, which was constituted by small terra-cotta sculptures made by Margarida Ribeiro. These works possessed a high level of dramatic intensity, that was able to represent the most unrepresentable human emotion through allegorical forms full of symbolism and expressive power, that could expose our most painful, perverse and frightful feelings. Fear, Lust, Nausea and Autolysis were personified to make us penetrate into the most obscure aspects of the human soul, in order to remove the mask of appearance that always prevents us from looking at the most disturbing and dark side of human personality. This exhibition showed that it's possible to give shape to suffering, anguish and every other feeling that torments us, so that they can be clearly seen and perceived as something very real, that always has the power to affect all of our existence. That's the reason why these representations turned feelings into characters giving them a supernatural dimension, which was able to frighten the viewer by its close connection with a hidden reality that we are always afraid to acknowledge.

Nowadays we are surrounded by terrifying events such as September 11, 2001, the war against terrorism and the war in Iraq. Contemporary fear is deeply characterised by strong despair, anguish and uncertainty. In this respect, its essence is not very different from the oldest fears from the past. To make connections between times of fear, such as the Catholic Church's persecution of heretics, the Holocaust and the times we now live, may prove itself useful. The universal fear of victims, sacrificed to religious and ideological bigotry, surpasses time and space turning it into a common feeling for many people

in different ages and cultures. The hatred and enmity between different religious groups, the fear and repression of women, the habit of demonising others are, unfortunately, still very usual nowadays. The facts are incontrovertible, the effect on European civilisation is immeasurable.

At a time when so much that was hidden is emerging into the light, it offers a vital contribution to our understanding of how events in the past may still influence and condition the present, how perverted habits of behaviour may be perpetuated. History taught us that, in the Inquisition time, the Church attracted men who derived a perverted pleasure from the exercise of omnipotent control over others and who obeyed orders without question to its service. We should have learnt this lesson well to conclude that the pathology of sadism and cruelty, established in the past, will be repeated and amplified in future centuries, unless it is challenged and exposed in the present. Today, our great achievements in science, medicine, standards of living, respect for human rights, are threatened by our reluctance to explore the roots of the drive for omnipotence and control that lies in the shadow aspect of our human nature. As Krishnamurti once suggested, only a fundamental realization of the root of all fear can free our minds.

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