

The French influence on Eça de Queiroz' views of late-19th century Portugal:

The novel *A Cidade e as Serras* (*The City and the Mountains*)

by

Ms Ninna Taylor

Eça de Queiroz was brought up to hold all things French in high esteem: French food, French literature, French politics. He was, as were the people of his class in Portugal at the time, educated “French”. So, it was not surprising that he should choose to write a novel inspired by Paris, albeit late in his life. But although the first part of the novel¹ is set in Paris, it is not about that city. Rather, it illustrates Eça's social preoccupations, and his feelings about the need to rehabilitate his own country. The book also tells us much about who he really was, as well as being a highly entertaining read.

As a young man with limited financial resources, Eça began his career writing short articles for newspapers, mainly Brazilian ones, or for papers printed in Portuguese in Paris and then taken by the Messageries Maritimes² boats, first to Lisbon and then on to Brazil (and sometimes even down to the Portuguese colonies via Dakar). Curiously, he wrote about life in Paris (which he had yet to experience). His observations were generally favourable but he added here and there a sentence or two about the harsh life of the poor in France, again from imagination. His readers loved his stories (even when only based on his imagination). The irony was, of course, that most would never know Paris, other than the street names or mythical haunts of good or bad repute, except through the tales he told them.

Eça de Queiroz had been breastfed on Proudhon³ a French libertarian, socialist and journalist whose doctrines became the basis for later radical and anarchist theories. So Eça was a man interested from his early days in the fate and hardships of the poor. Nowhere is this truer than in his last book *A Cidade e as Serras* (translated as *202, Champs Elysées*, in French), in which he, through the book's hero, Jacinto, removes himself from the harmful influence of Paris, with its decadence and egotism, and returns to his beloved mountains of northern Portugal. But here we are jumping ahead somewhat ...

Paris in the late 19th and early 20th century was the place to go on the Grand Tour if you were a wealthy young cad. It was the “most famous bordello” of Europe, a pleasure ground where an honest woman stepped out only in company of a father or a brother; a place of theatrical productions of the highest quality or wit; a place of political exile for many; a place of intense intellectual and cultural intercourse between artists of all denominations and creeds. Four Portuguese Parisian residents of the time stand out: Antero de Quental (a socialist), Antonio Nobre (at the Sorbonne having failed university in Coimbra), Amadeo de Souza Cardoso (the famous painter, there to learn the tricks of his trade), and Mario de Sa Carneiro (living the bohemian life).

But every Portuguese at some point in time, whether living in France or residing in Portugal, becomes disillusioned with France. Eça de Queiroz was no exception. He felt the same disenchantment as the others would come to also feel but for rather more complex reasons. As we shall see, his bias was largely due to his own Portuguese cultural upbringing. As a family man by the time he moved to France in 1888, he hated the futility and bubbly illusions distilled by the French capital and its *demi-mondaines*. As an

¹ *A Cidade e as Serras*. Published in English as *The City and the Mountains*, with a translation by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus European Classics, 2018

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messageries_Maritimes

³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, born January 15, 1809 in Besançon, France—died January 19, 1865, Paris

articulate, militant, writer, he hated the cowardice of his fellow intellectuals, who largely ignored his social preoccupations.

Nevertheless, despite having adhered to a number of interesting cultural movements in his homeland before leaving Portugal (romanticism, satanism, realism, and naturalism, having been very much influenced by the great Zola and Flaubert), Eça de Queiroz comes of age in Paris. He feeds on all he has known, seen, heard, read, and learnt. France is going through an amazingly hazardous and difficult time and is still suffering from the aftermath of the Commune, a radical socialist and revolutionary government that ruled Paris from 18 March to 28 May 1871. *After a revolution there follows repression; after repression there follows again a revolution*, he wrote. Lisbon, its monarchy, its Court, its population of educated people all read with horror and mistrust his short communiqués on what was happening in France.

A trait so typical of his works is reinforced in Paris: his great irony. His published letters observe life in Paris, describe for his readers the triumph of science and technology (the *Electricity Fairy*⁴ is showcased at that time), talk about the wonderful *Exposition Universelle* (the Eiffel Tower was built in 1889), and witness various movements such as *symbolism*, *decadentism*, *boulangism*, *spiritism*, and *kardecism* rise and then fall within months of each other. He takes everything he sees and hears with a pinch of salt and shows how ridiculous and blind most people can be.

He spends a lot of time talking to his Portuguese friends and visitors and gradually, in his own mind, the definition of his mission as a man and as an author shapes itself and he starts “to rehabilitate his own country”, a country that he had criticised, along with his fellow-countrymen, when younger. He now hopes for a new surge of energy there to improve the fate of the underprivileged, as new technology brings innovation in business, investments and industrial developments to Portugal.

After having witnessed England from the inside, France from the inside (and not liking what he saw) and Portugal from the outside (especially the Portuguese aristocracy and bourgeoisie in London and Paris), he decided that he needed to step back to get the larger picture. He wrote *Sao Cristovão* (Saint Christopher) between 1894-1897, having lost all faith in monarchies, republics and the clergy, though still believing in the Christian message of Christ. *Portugal*, wrote Eça, *is a parasite that was only ever able to survive because it fed off of so many foreign elements throughout its history*.

Eça de Queiroz loved to write. He loved to share his very ironical and often drôle vision of what he observed or read in newspapers or reviews. For example, *The Mandarin*⁵ (*O Mandarin*) is another example of his ability to create a subject with imagination (he had never been to China), detachment and humour. He decided, with friends, to launch a magazine, *A Revista de Portugal*, inspired by the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, which is a much-read and admired literary, political and cultural publication still in circulation today. Eça de Queiroz's decision was backed by sound logic. Every capital of any importance had its *Illustrated News*, *Fortnightly Review* or *Contemporary Review* or *Illustrirte Zeitung* or *Le Monde Illustré*, with photographs often replacing hand-drawn illustrations and making use of modern technology and automated printing presses. But Eça was a writer rather than a businessman and the magazine barely outlived him; it finally folded in Brazil in 1892.

Why did he get himself involved in publishing in the first place? Eça felt a strong urge *to enlighten the masses* in the Portuguese-speaking world. Unfortunately, illiteracy ran high; the political powers feared dangerous propaganda being spread by newspapers and magazines; and, last but not least, people

⁴ See <https://www.liquidplasmacrystals.com/blogs/be-sure-to-know/electric-fairy-the-exposition-universelle-of-1900-golden-age-or-belle-epoque-hidden-history>

⁵ Translated by Margaret Jull Costa and published by Dedalus in 1993

generally wanted entertainment, not serious-food-for-thought, in exchange for their hard-earned pennies. What has changed today?

In *The City and the Mountains*, Jacinto – the last of a long line of Jacintos - is taken to live in Paris by his father who has uprooted his family to follow D. Miguel into exile. There, in France, Jacinto grows up, very much alone, turns into a fashionable dandy and tells his friend Zé Fernandes - who has come from Portugal to live with him in Paris - that “Man can only be happy in a Big Town” And that that big town can only be Paris.

The two men wallow away their days and nights consuming all the joys made available to the idle men of riches of their time. Pages and pages serve to describe this Babylon in the most realistic and often amusing manner, confirming the fact that Eça is a splendid portraitist of Man and his environment. Alas, “The City (i.e. modern technology) is but an illusion,” says Jacinto one day to his friend and Zé Fernandes wakes up to the fact that Jacinto is wasting away, spending his days criticising everything and everybody in Paris, not eating, not sleeping, just lolling about in his beautiful town-house, at 202 Champs Elysées, feeling totally depressed.

Zé encourages Jacinto to go back to his estate that he has never visited in Portugal and, despite numerous very funny misadventures in the train along the way, Jacinto does indeed find a new lease of life and even decides to become a philanthropist because, as he says to his estate foreman there, - “where there is work, there is always a proletariat suffering and living in dire conditions”. “But what you are suggesting to do for your labourers is no less than a revolution!”, replies the foreman. To his wife, Jacinto writes, upon visiting her newly inherited estate: “The houses in the village are not fit for even cattle to live. I am utterly appalled.”

The peasants are totally bewildered by their master's plans. “My friend, my Prince, is super-civilised”, Zé tries to explain to anybody who will listen, but nobody understands what he is talking about. Jacinto is a total foreigner to these parts, a rich, idle landowner with strange ways, innumerable quirks and almost comical whims. For the other idle rich families in the region, he is either viewed with much suspicion or is considered by the more optimistic ones as a man who brings hope to the landowners because they fancy that he might be hiding the absolutist D. Miguel on his estate. But Eça de Queiroz implies that Jacinto is simply a good-hearted man.

While all this is going on in Portugal, Zé Fernandez has returned to 202 Champs Elysées and he tells the reader that “nothing has changed”. *Vanitas vanitatum*. One night, coming home from a late-night Cabaret show, somebody in the street yells at him: “Porco de Mouro” - Bloody Moorish Arab! Nothing has changed. So Zé goes back to his mountain estate in Portugal, “to the only life that has any meaning”, he is prone to say, and living next to his friend Jacinto who is now a happy man with a wife, children and

Eça de Queiroz died before he could give a proper ending to his fairy-tale story. The book was edited and given an end by his friend and collaborator Ramalhão Ortigão and published one year after his death in Paris.

Eça de Queiroz had married late, but well and, when in Lisbon, moved in Royal circles without ever becoming a “courtier”. He voiced the worries of the upper classes, mocked their habits, declared himself to the end to be an “anarchist” hoping for change by peaceful means and referred often to the Jacqueries in France, the peasant rebellions of 1358. So, he continued to be an attentive and articulate witness to

injustice and human hardship whilst writing his *Parisian Chronicles*⁶ and the *Legends of Saints*⁷. In *A Cidade e as Serras*, Paris, the symbol of a triumphant, techno-centric, capitalistic civilisation, *kind to so few other than the very rich*, cannot ultimately compete with nature in the hills and mountains where his hero goes to live in harmony with his fellow-men.

Eça de Queiroz, the “reluctant francophile”, horrified almost beyond words by the Dreyfus Affair⁸, had finally migrated out of his shell in his later years in Paris, a shell that he felt had limited his true nature for too long – a shell that some say is still to be shed by his beloved country, Portugal. Having re-read recently, in French, his last book, I believe that Eça de Queiroz, the man and the author, is far more complex than we are led to believe. Besides being a highly entertaining read, the novel tells us much about who he really was. Does he betray his innermost thoughts when he says to a friend: “what do we want from Realism: we want to take a photograph, [...] draw a caricature of the old bourgeois world, sentimental, devout, Catholic, exploitative, aristocratic, and hold it up to the scorn of the modern democratic world to prepare its ruin.”

In *The City and the Mountains* Eça, with his very distinctive irony and sense of humour and satire, condemns northern, industrialised, Art Nouveau-loving Europe that lives for “profit and pleasure” by exploiting the masses. The worlds of Zola and Proust (and worse to come with the two world wars) are in the making and Eça knew it. That is why giving the *202 Champs-Élysées* title to the book in French was most misleading. The novel is not an apologia of fun-loving Paris or of modern Anglo-Saxon inventions prompted by the Industrial Revolution but the unfinished testimony of a man who spent a lifetime - like his two *alter egos*, Jacinto and Zé Fernandes - trying to give true meaning to his own life through his writings.

⁶ *Cartas de Paris*, published by Livros do Brasil in 2006. Not available in English

⁷ Saint Christopher, Saint Onuphrius and Saint Giles of Santarém. Published as *Últimas Páginas* in 1912. Saint Christopher, which makes reference to the Jacqueries, was published in English by Tagus Press with a translation by Gregory Rabassa and Earl E. Fitz in 2015

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dreyfus_affair