The Moral Atlantic

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ANESSAY

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Essay. Edition attributed to Oficina do Maralto, Recife and Lisbon, 1986. Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha is a literary persona created for this book. The house is fiction. There was no historical edition in 1986. The text knows The Line of the Horizon, of 1974, and does not know the later volumes.

I

The gunwale of 1974

Twelve years ago I published an essay on the line of the horizon. I said then, and I still say, that this line does not meet the sky. It is the limit of what the eyes can reach, an agreement between the curve of the water and the height of the one who looks. Infinity, from the beach at Olinda, ends at a coconut palm and a trawler. The sentence was just. The book stopped there. Stopping was, in part, honesty: I was not going to invent what I had not measured. It was also comfort. The comfort of a man of forty-three who had learned to distrust the adjective and had not yet gone down to the use that was made of the same water.

The gunwale I drew then was true as a limit of my view and false as a limit of the sea. I wrote that there were stories beyond the sidewalk and that it was not for me to narrate them from hearsay. The distinction saves the essayist from fantasy. It does not save him from omission, if the omission lasts a lifetime and disguises itself as method. Twelve years is time enough to see the difference. Method is to come back with an instrument. Omission is to call gunwale the fear of dirtying the page.

I do not renounce that book. I want to reread it with the position noted. Some pages were said from a hill, where the limit looks nobler than it is. The hill of Olinda is not a mountain, but a slope is enough for the sentence to climb. It climbed. I came down at the end of the afternoon and, at home, improved the bucket until it meant something. The reader of that volume can see the scar, if he wishes. What he cannot see, because I did not write it, is what the line was used to carry. A line of the horizon is also, on another scale, a route. And there were routes that were not made of fishhooks.

My father sold fishhooks and line at a counter. My mother called “the open,” without poetry, what lay past the reef. I do not come from captains or from masters of a plantation. That origin does not make me innocent, and it does not give me the tone of a man explaining to others a pain that never sat at his table.

It forbids me the tone. It does not forbid me the chapter. For years I confused the two prohibitions, and the confusion seemed to me a scruple. It was a polite way of staying on the sidewalk.

I write now in Recife, at fifty-five, in a room whose floor does not rock. The chair is still good. The goodness of the chair is not a property of the ocean. I have said this. I repeat it because the subject has changed weight and the chair has not. It is easy to be exact about the height of the eyes. It is harder to be exact about a crime that used the same geometry: wind, current, distance, port. The geometry did not choose. Men chose the use.

This book does not correct the earlier one with a sentence of regret. Regret, alone, is another hill: a person climbs, sees the lack, and comes down announcing that he saw. I want the detail that does not let me come out clean. If on any page the sentence is too clean, the reader has the right to distrust it. I distrust it myself. At fifty-five I still like a sentence that closes. The liking is the same as in 1974. What has changed, I hope, is the willingness to cross it out when it covers the hold.

What I covered, in 1974, was not a mystery. It was a system with paper. I had already read enough to know that the omission had a name, and I called the lack a gunwale so as not to give it that name. Gunwale is a clean word. It sounds like the prudence of someone who sails. In that essay it worked as a curtain. The curtain let the coconut palm be seen and hid the road. I saw the curtain and liked the composition. Liking the composition is a bad sign when the subject is people carried as cargo. The composition does not suffer. The people suffered. The sentence, if it stays on the side of the composition, has chosen.

Some say a first book has the right to be smaller. It has the right not to be complete. It does not have the right to present that smaller size as if it were a definitive moral discovery. I presented it so. I wrote that to invent what I had not measured would be comfort, and that was true. I did not write that to keep silent about what can already be read in the archive is also comfort, of another kind. The comfort of the closed archive looks like rigor. It has the same face as the talent for not dirtying the paper. My father, at the counter, would not have

confused dirt with the goods. For years I confused the fear of dirt with the honesty of measure.

That is why I begin with 1974, not in order to accuse myself with music. An accusation with music is another clean ending. I begin in order to say from what height those pages were spoken, now that I can say it without waiting for a reader in the future. The height was that of a man on the slope, with a good idea about looking and no idea about use. The good idea remains. The absent idea is what this volume exists to contradict. To contradict is not to erase. The old book stays. This one does not correct it by scraping the old line until it vanishes. It leaves the line and makes another.

The line of 1974 that remains is this: I did not inherit the sea. I inherited the stubbornness of looking at it until it answered me with precision, not with comfort. The sentence was from long before the book, and the book obeyed it only as far as the view obeyed. Precision, I said, and I measured kilometers by eye. In that volume I did not measure the precision of commerce. Commerce also has precision. It has a price, a capacity, a day of departure. To call precision only what left me clean was to narrow the word until it fit inside my virtue. The virtue came out small. The word asks for more.

There is a way of rereading the old book that I refuse: to treat it as a sin of youth and myself as a man who woke up. I did not wake up. I went on teaching, I crossed the same bridges, and the omission lasted while it was comfortable. Twelve years are not a lightning-bolt of consciousness. They are a span in which I could have written this and wrote other, smaller things: classes, notes, a life. The span does not condemn me by itself. It shows that the hold was not hidden in an impossible archive. It was postponed. To postpone is a form of authorship. The book one does not write also draws a sea.

II

The hold

The same ocean that the epic treated as a road was, for more than three centuries, the greatest corridor of deportation in modern history. Brazil was the principal destination of that traffic. Millions of men, women, and children crossed the water not as travelers but as cargo. I do not choose a single figure in order to seem more precise than the documents allow. The criteria of counting vary. The order of magnitude is already the moral fact: millions of lives, not an exceptional tragedy one tells in order to weep and go on.

Salvador, Recife, Rio de Janeiro, and other ports are not only fortress, tile, and sun. They are the entrances of a continued crime. There was a cargo book. There was forced baptism. There was a name exchanged. There was a death that did not deserve a line, and line, here, is not the horizon's: it is the line of the paper that refused the name. I teach near one of those ports. I can spend the day speaking of the curvature of the Earth and not say what came into harbor. I have done it. The student leaves with a pretty sentence about the limit of the gaze and without the question of what the gaze, on purpose, did not wish to include.

I do not write from the hold. I write from a street in Olinda, from a modest chair, from a language I learned in schools and which this same history helped to impose and to transform. The distance is not an excuse for silence, nor a license for a novel. Whoever was not in the hold and writes as if he had been commits a second violence: he uses another's body as his own experience. Whoever stood outside and keeps silent, so as not to commit the first, leaves the museum in the place of the ocean. The two faults are not equal. Naming them together serves so that I do not choose the one that favors me.

The hold is also maritime. The shackle is also technique, in the terrible sense of technique applied to transport. Whoever studies sails and does not study chains has studied a museum, not an ocean. The museum can be beautiful. Beauty, in that case, is part of the problem, if it serves to close the visit before

the stair that goes down. I have closed visits like that, with students, before a model of a ship. The model does not smell. It has no fever. It has no count of how many can lie down. The model is a line of the horizon made of wood: exact in what it shows, and what it shows was chosen to fit in a room.

There is a sentence that occurred to me early and that I crossed out several times, because it was too good. It said the sea is not to blame. It is true and it does not serve. The sea does not deliberate. Those who deliberated were men with writing, insurance, a port, and a buyer. To transfer the deliberation to the water is a way of absolving the hand. The water carried because it was set to carry. The trade wind, which the manuals still celebrate as an ally of the discoveries, was also an ally of the traffic. Nature did not sign the contract. It offered the wind. The contract is human, and that is why it belongs to a moral, not to a landscape.

I will not describe the interior of the ship with a detail I did not see and which a borrowed detail would make rounder than it was. There are testimonies. There are drawings made for commerce, not for pity. The commercial drawing has a dirty frankness: it counts space as one counts a barrel. I would rather cite that frankness than invent a cry. The cry, in my prose, would come out well. To come out well is the old danger. The reader would feel that he had understood, and the feeling of having understood is, often, the way of not returning to the document. The document does not ask me to write better than it does. It asks me not to trade it for a moving page.

In class, a student asked whether it was necessary to speak of this in a course on the line and the chart. The question was honest. I answered that a chart without the hold is a chart for a pleasure trip. He stayed silent, which may be thought or may be the shame of having asked. I did not exploit the shame. Another's shame is an easy instrument, and the easy looks to me more and more like the hill. What I wanted was not a silent student. It was a student who, before a fort, would not say only what a view. I do not yet know whether I managed that. I know that his question obliged me not to leave this chapter for a book I would never write.

There was another question, worse, from a colleague, not from a student. He said that to bring the traffic into a class about the sea was politicking, and that the sea ought to be left in peace. Peace, in his mouth, meant the museum. I answered badly, because I answered loud. Loudness does not prove the page. The next day I wrote what I should have said low: peace is not the name of a subject from which the crime has been removed. It is the name the crime acquires when it has already been absorbed by the view. The fort stays pretty. Peace is the fort without the question. I do not need to shout this. I need not to give in when they call me someone who spoils the landscape.

To spoil the landscape is, for a certain education, the greatest sin. I was educated in that, in part, though I was also educated to distrust the noble sentence. The two educations fight. One gave me Olinda, Coimbra, the taste for a line well made. The other, slower, gave me the archive. The archive is not a homeland. It is an obligation to read. Whoever treats it as a homeland begins to speak in the name of the dead, and I do not have that mandate. Whoever avoids it in order to protect the well-made line protects his own taste. Between the false mandate and the protected taste, I am left without a comfortable house. Good. A comfortable house, in this chapter, would be an error of furniture.

I do not describe the smell of the ship. I was not there, and a borrowed smell is an easy proof of presence. A false presence moves more than a declared absence, because the emotion confirms the author. I prefer the declared absence and the paper. On the paper there is a number of pieces, a port of departure, a mark that someone counted in order to sell. That is enough. If it is not enough for the reader who wants a scene, the reader wants another genre. The genre that offers the scene without the document is often called sensibility. I once wanted to be sensible in that sense. I was younger, and youth is not an eternal excuse. At fifty-five the excuse lapses.

The idea that the subject is too sad for the room also lapses. Sadness is not the criterion. The criterion is whether the fact organizes the coast I mean to teach. It does. Without it, the coast is a postcard. With it, the coast still has reef, fish, a boy, and a bridge, and it comes to have a history of cargo. The students can bear both things better than the teacher who protects them from the second. The

protection, often, protects the teacher. He does not want to see the face of the class when the pretty sentence ends. I have not wanted to. The face is not an argument. The argument is the port.

That is why I do not open the chapter with a cry or with an apology to the sensitive reader. The sensitive reader who can bear the sea only when it does not hurt has already chosen the museum. He is not my principal addressee, though he is the easiest to move and the easiest to lose. The addressee who matters to me is the one who agrees to stay on the page after the model of the ship loses its grace. If he stays, I do not owe him a scene of horror well written. I owe him the continuity: what the road carried, where, with what paper. Horror without paper becomes a genre. Paper without horror becomes cold bookkeeping, and the coldness also lies, because it hides that the piece counted was a person. Between the genre and the coldness, the sentence has to tremble without displaying itself. To tremble on purpose is theater. I watch the tremor.

III

The road

The sugar of Pernambuco, the gold that came down to the coast, the tobacco, the jerked beef, the city that laughs on the slope, depended on a system that used the Atlantic as a road with an organized direction. In one direction, people, on a voyage without voluntary return. In the other, wealth under another name. The sea was not scenery behind the plantation. It was a piece of the engineering. Without the liquid road, the plantation is a cruel and local farm. With it, the cruelty has a buyer on the other side and comes back as a good the house calls its own.

I have lived my whole life near that road and spent decades without giving it the name of road. I called it coast, reef, port, view. The names are not false. They are incomplete in a way that favors whoever looks from the veranda. The veranda is not a free metaphor. In Olinda, the high city looks at the sea with a safety the low city cannot copy. They put churches up above and wharves below, and then thought the distribution was a charm of the relief. The relief is real. The use of the relief is history. One does not understand a shore until one asks who was left with the breeze and who was left with the landing.

Recife taught me the syntax of water with a clarity that does not make it easy. Bridges, mangroves, quays, the tide that changes the smell of the center. The reef that gave the place its name breaks the wave before it arrives with all its force. That is geography and it is protection. It is also easy to forget that the same water, gentle in the model, brought what the city counted as wealth. I cross bridges to teach. Below, the river does what a river does. I will not ask the river for a confession. The confession belongs to the account books, and the account books are not under the bridge. They are in archives that smell of paper, not of mangrove. The smell of paper is less eloquent. It is harder to turn into prose, and for that reason it is better for this chapter.

There is a temptation to make the list and think the list is already the moral. Sugar, gold, tobacco, people. The list organizes. It also anesthetizes, if each

word takes the place of a name that was not recovered. I do not have those names. To say that I do not have them does not authorize me to fabricate them in order to give the paragraph warmth. Fabricated warmth is kin to the cry that comes out well. The list remains as a map, with a blank where the information fails me. In the book of 1974 I asked that the blank not be sold as a smooth sea. Here the blank is people without a name within my reach. It is not an invitation to imagination. It is a lack.

The buyer, on the other side, also had a moral, or what he called one. He had a sermon, a law, a moment when the law changed on paper before it changed in the hold. I will not narrate that change as if I had studied it enough to close the date with elegance. I know enough not to treat the crime as a block without an inner history, and I do not know enough to pretend that the block dissolved on the day a legal sentence became pretty. A pretty legal sentence is a genre I distrust as much as I distrust the opening of horizons. Both promise a breadth the quay does not confirm the following week.

In Lisbon, as a young man, I looked at the Tagus and thought of departure. It is the thought of someone who studies navigations and has not yet put on the same map the return of goods and the going, without return, of people. Lisbon is not innocent of that map. No city that fitted out, held, or received the road is innocent. I do not write this in order to distribute an equal guilt, which is another way of not seeing the difference between those who went on deck and those who went in the hold. I write it to prevent my student's tenderness, before a European quay, from counting as an absolution. The tenderness may stay. The absolution may not.

The wind does not apologize, and I will not apologize in its name. What I ask of myself is that each time I write ally, discovery, route, I ask ally of what. The question is simple and it slows the sentence. The sentence likes speed. At sea, speed without the question is precisely the technique of transport: arrive, unload, leave. This essay arrives slowly on purpose. If the slowness becomes a style, the pose of a grave man, it will have failed in another way. Gravity can also be an ornament. I watch it as I watched, at forty-three, the blue adjective.

Sugar had a path I can follow without a romance, because the path left house, port, and family name still visible. I will not cite one family in order to pretend I have pointed out the single culprit. The single culprit is a figure of the theater. The system had many names and one direction. The direction was this: the sweetness here, or the gold, or the tobacco, depended on a crossing that was not sweet. When I eat what the city calls traditional, I do not make a speech at the table. Nor do I pretend that the tradition arrived alone, in an empty boat, by the kindness of the soil. Soil does not cross the ocean. Someone made it cross, and someone was crossed.

There is an economy of the sentence that imitates this road without meaning to. I write people in one paragraph and wealth in the next, and the reader feels he has paid the first with the second, as if the page balanced. The page does not balance. It sets things side by side. The balance would be my saying that, in the end, the culture produced was worth the price. It was not. Nothing I love in Recife or in Olinda is worth that price, and to love it is not to pay it. They are distinct operations, again. To love the city and not charge the city with its port is to like the sweet without reading the label. The label, here, is historical. It is written in cargo.

Lisbon comes back to me not as a student's longing, though the longing exists and it is useless to deny it. It comes back because part of the road was also fitted out from there, and because I learned to like a quay before I learned to ask what the quay dispatched. The order of the learning is not innocent. First the beauty, then, if time remains, the hold. That order is the order of almost all the teaching I received. To invert it in the room, now, does not repair what I learned late. It keeps another student from inheriting the same order as if it were the nature of the course. The nature of the course is a decision of the one who makes the syllabus. I make the syllabus. Therefore the omission, when it occurs, has my signature.

A signature is not a dramatic confession. It is the name at the end of the course syllabus. If the syllabus says chart, wind, and horizon, and is silent about what the wind transported, the name at the end signed the silence. I have signed syllabi like that. I do not tear them up in public in order to seem converted. I

change what I am still going to give. Public conversion is quick and yields a memorable class, the kind students tell about and that does not change the following term. The following term is the moral. If in it the hold goes back to being an appendix, the memorable class was a bonfire. I have distrusted the bonfire since I distrusted the exceptional. What gives a bearing is repetition without an audience.

Pernambuco is not an example among others that I chose because it was near. It is the ground. The sugar from here does not ask me for a study trip in order to exist in the sentence. It asks me not to treat it as a kitchen sweetness while the port that carried it off remains in the adjective. I walk on this ground. I know the names of the bridges better than the names of many people the bridges helped to forget. The imbalance of the names is the most honest biographical datum in this book. I do not correct it by inventing an intimacy with those I cannot name. I correct it by not letting the bridges, which I know how to say, occupy the page alone.

IV
The quay

In Rio, the Cais do Valongo received, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, an immense part of those people, before it was filled in and covered by a city that preferred to walk on top. I do not need a vocabulary invented later in order to say what the papers of that time already said, when someone took the trouble to read them. There was a market. There was a price. There was a child counted. The later covering of the quay is an image almost too didactic, and still true. A city can pave what it does not want to step on by its right name.

Too didactic is a defect I know. The image closes by itself, and the reader thanks the closing. To thank an image is like saying what a view. I use Valongo because the landfill is a fact, not because it offers me a ready metaphor of consciousness. If the metaphor comes as a gift, let it come after the fact, and let it not replace it. The fact is people landed and a floor laid on top. The metaphor is my craft trying to keep the last word. The last word, in this case, does not belong to me.

Recife and Salvador do not need the image of Rio in order to exist in the same system. Each port had its way of receiving, selling, baptizing, losing the name, and letting the city go on above what it had received. I will not make the three equal in order to produce a round chapter. Roundness belongs to the model. In Recife, what matters to me is the nearness: I can walk to a water that took part in this and be home in time for supper. Nearness ought to make forgetting harder. Often it makes it easier, because the everyday has no caption. The fish arrives, the bridge opens or does not, class begins. Without a caption, the crime becomes geography. Geography seems to have no author.

There was an author. There was a notary, a captain, a buyer, a priest, a master, a clerk who wrote the number and went home, as I go home after writing this number without having lived it. The likeness of going home does not make us the same. It makes visible that administrative evil fits in an ordinary afternoon. That is the part the grandiose sentence loses. The grandiose sentence

wants a monster. The archive, often, shows a man who had supper. I do not romanticize the supper, nor turn it into a universal complicity in which we are all that man and therefore no one is. The leap from the supper to the everyone is laziness. The supper stays as a warning against the exceptional: not every crime needed a storm in order to happen. It needed a route, paper, and someone who found the route normal.

Normal is the word this book wants to take apart without replacing it by an indignation that lasts only the paragraph. Short indignation is sister to cheap emotion. Emotion is cheap when it does not alter the next sentence. I have written indignant paragraphs and, on the line below, gone back to the coconut palm as if the palm washed me. The palm does not wash. It is there, on the beach, and the beach was also a landing edge, not only a childhood. Childhood can be true. It is not an alibi. My mother, saying the open, did not know she was giving me a word I would use, decades later, in order not to say another. I do not put that bill on her. The bill belongs to the son who made of the word a fence.

If there is, in the papers, a name I can read without inventing the life around it, I ought to cite it and stop. To stop at a name is better than to continue it with a plausible fate. The plausible is the polite lie of the novel, and this volume is not a novel. It is an essay. The essay has the right to say I do not know, and that right is also a duty when the I do not know protects someone from becoming a character of mine. A character is a form of property. I would already have too much property if I turned the hold into a chapter of authority. Authority over this I do not have. I have reading, and the reading falls short.

Short is not a pose of modesty. It is a measure. I have read what a teacher in Recife can read between classes, without an army of archivists and without the pretension of closing the subject. The subject does not close in an essay. It closes, badly, in people who want the definitive book. The definitive is cousin to infinity: a word that dispenses with the coconut palm. My coconut palm, in this chapter, is the document I saw and the document I did not see. Both fit in the same honesty, so long as I do not use the second to silence the first. I have seen people too learned to speak, and the erudition became a locked shop. A

lock can also be a hill.

I walked, one Sunday, along an edge where the old name of the landing is not on the plaque. The plaque says something else, useful to the stroll. I do not demand that every plaque be a court. I demand of myself that I not treat the plaque as if it had been born from the ground. Someone chose what would fit on the metal. The choice seems small, municipal, almost without a moral. It is municipal and it has a moral. What does not fit on the plaque remains in the ground, covered or not, known by those who know and ignored by those who were taught to read only the metal. I was taught to read the metal first. The beach at Olinda, the church, the fort. The metal shines. The shine is not a lie. It is a selection.

If I find the name and the age on a list, and the list says child, I stop at what the list says. I do not invent the toy, the mother, the way of calling. The impulse to invent comes from a pity that wants to see. To see what is not written is the beginning of the novel, and the novel, here, steals again. Enough has been stolen already. My page does not need to complete the theft with a tender scene. The tender scene would be so that my reader might be left with his heart arranged. An arranged heart is rest. This chapter is not a room for rest. It is a table on which the list stays open and my imagination stays with its hands folded, not working.

The open list also tires the one who reads, and the tiredness can be just. I do not write in order to tire. I write in order not to offer relief in paragraph three, which is where the educated reader expects the compensation. If the compensation comes, he closes the book thinking he has visited the subject. A visit is little. I myself visited the subject for years, cited it in one sentence, and went back to the horizon. The single sentence is a visit. The book is the decision not to return so soon to the small measure, though the small measure remains true. True and insufficient. Both words have to fit, or else I turn 1974 into a total error or this volume into a total truth. Neither total serves me.

There were mornings when the list seemed to me repetition and I wanted one case, a single one, so the page could breathe. The case would come from a

proceeding, an advertisement, a captain's letter. When I have it, a short citation fits, and then the stop. When I do not have it at hand, I do not replace it with a typical case. The typical is an average dressed as a person. The average has no mother. I have already said I do not invent the mother. I repeat it because the impulse returns exactly when the page is dry. Dryness frightens the essayist, who fears being taken for cold. Cold would be not to have read. Dry is not to add a tear to what the paper already says. My tear is not a document. It is noise.

V

Two sentences

There is a symmetrical temptation: to declare that, in the face of this crime, nothing more can be said about the shore, the craft of those who fish, the line of the horizon. I disagree. Total silence is also an abstraction. The descendants of those who were landed built, on this same coast, languages, kitchens, prayers, boats, musics, ways of reading time and of treating the dead. To reduce the sea, for that life, only to the wound of origin is to look from outside and to bear the other only as a wound. The sea is also a saint's road, a living, an everyday danger, a house. I do not say this from inside that house. I say it from the side of someone who learned to see it and has no right to explain it as if it were course material.

What I ask is that the two truths remain on the same page without one serving as an alibi for the other. Beauty does not compensate the crime. The crime does not confiscate what was made despite it and against it. Whoever needs to resolve the contradiction too quickly is looking for rest. I look for rest at the end of the afternoon, when the water turns gold, a boy runs, and someone laughs. The impulse is human. I have given in to it many times. In this book I want to give in less. I can write that the afternoon is beautiful and, in the next sentence, remember what that port shipped and landed. If the two sentences cannot bear each other, the problem is not one of style. It is moral.

To give in less is not to never give in. Only the day before yesterday I crossed out an ending in which the light of the quay redeemed, for an instant, the page. To redeem is the verb I should have crossed out of the language together with to open, and I did not, because it arrives disguised as maturity. The maturity that redeems is cousin to the humility that absolves the author. Both offer me a clean way out. The clean way out is what the book of 1974 already wanted in its last move, when I called the descent a return to measure. There was a return. There was also the sentence washing the afternoon. Here the temptation is to wash the port. The port is not dirty only with mud. It is implicated. What is

implicated is not washed with golden light.

Nor do I accept the reverse, which would be to forbid the afternoon. To forbid beauty in order to seem serious is another pose. The boy who runs on the quay is not an offense to the archive. He is a child. If I use him as proof that life went on and therefore the crime stayed far, I use him badly. If I erase him so the page will have no joy, I use him badly in another way. He runs. The archive exists. The two facts do not ask for my reconciliation. They ask that I not sell one for the other. That is little for a chapter and it is enough for me not to lie about my competence. I do not reconcile. I set them side by side and I watch the hand that wants to join them.

The watching fails when I am in a hurry to end the essay with a wisdom. Wisdom, at fifty-five, is a reputation the room begins to expect. They expect the grey-haired man to close. To close is almost always to climb. I would rather end a chapter in the middle of a count that did not close, as my father did when a customer interrupted: he did not invent the total so the conversation would be pretty. He said what he had already counted and what was missing. Missing, in this subject, is almost everything that would be name, voice, restitution. What is not missing is the system. The system I can already write without pretending that I have written the restitution.

I do not call this book a restitution. An essay returns no one to the quay. Whoever expects that of literature asks of the sentence a power it uses, precisely, to dodge the small work. The small work is not only my craft as a writer. It is the craft of whoever reads paper, of whoever teaches without skipping the hold, of whoever does not call sensibility the choice of the postcard. I do a small part of that, in the room, and even that part I fail when the class is pretty. A pretty class is cousin to the golden afternoon. Both deserve the next sentence, which does not confirm them.

I set down a small example, from the room, so the rule will not stay in the air. A student described the sunset at the port with talent. The sentence was right as a sentence. I asked for another, not in order to humiliate him. I asked what that port did besides reflecting the light. He did not know. The ignorance, in him,

was of the syllabus, not of character. The syllabus had given him the sunset for years. I said so, so the lack would not become a personal guilt, and I also said that from then on the lack would become a choice, if he went on with only the sun. His choice does not yet exist. Mine does. In 1974 I chose the sun of the line. This book is the next sentence I should have asked of myself.

The next sentence cannot be only no. A moral made only of no turns to stone, and the stone does not teach the craft of those who fish, nor the prayer, nor the boat that goes out at dawn without being a metaphor of the traffic. I will not write that craft here as if it were the subject. I will only not confiscate it. To confiscate would be to say: until the hold has been spoken by everyone, let the other seas be silent. That everyone never arrives, and the silence becomes the property of the one who preaches. I do not want the sermon. I want the double page. On one line, the crime. On the other, what is not an alibi. If my hand joins the lines in an elegant but, I have crossed out badly, and the but remains.

But is the most dangerous conjunction I know. It looks like balance. Often it is beauty coming in by the back door after I have said that it did not compensate. I write millions, but the afternoon. I write cargo, but the music. The music stays. The but is what lies, if it suggests payment. There was no payment. There was survival and invention, which is another greatness, and greatness is not change. Change is what the sentence wants when it is tired of holding the two things without a discount. I tire too. Tiredness does not authorize the discount. It authorizes, at most, stopping the page and going on the next day, without pretending that sleep settled the account.

The next day the account is still open, and it is good that the book show this, or else the chapter becomes a man who conquered his tiredness. I did not conquer it. I went back to the table with the same wish for a but. Today's but would be this: but the coast knew how to pray. It did. The prayer does not pay the cargo. I can write the prayer in a subordinate clause, small, without a but. Grammar also has a moral. The adversative conjunction is where I hide the discount. If I remove the but and leave the two clauses as neighbors, the reader makes the link if he wishes, and the link will be his, not a bridge I built for rest. A bridge of mine, in this subject, I do not want to sign.

The room, when I manage it, practices that neighborhood without a speech about it. I read a passage in which the port is beautiful. I read another in which the port counts. I do not say which of the two wins. If I say it, I have given the but out loud. The students grow uneasy at the lack of a winner. The unease is better than my conclusion. The conclusion would spare them the work, and the work is what I can offer without pretending restitution. Some will prefer the beautiful passage. Some, the other. What I do not accept is that they leave thinking the two passages were the same kind of sentence. They were not. One describes the light. The other describes the use. To confuse them is the illiteracy of those who have studied.

VI

What a view

When I pass a fort and hear someone say what a view, I think of what the view cost those who are not in the remark. The thought does not make me better. It prevents a cheap enthusiasm. Cheap enthusiasm, in the matter of the sea, is the most common form of an unconsciousness that is not ignorance. It is the unconsciousness of someone who has studied enough to choose the postcard and call the choice sensibility. I have studies. Therefore the warning is for me before it is for the tourist. The tourist says the sentence and goes away. I can say it on paper and keep it as if it were an idea.

The line of the horizon, which was my subject in 1974, is not revoked. It remains a modest measure, a few kilometers, not a life. What this book adds is the question about the use of the distance. The same distance that limits the eye was traveled by ships with human cargo. To measure without asking the use is an exactness of the hill. To ask the use without measuring is oratory. I want both operations, and I have known, since the earlier book, that they are not the same gesture. They were not then. They are not now. The pilot and the hold do not explain each other. To set them side by side without fusing them is the most my page can bear without lying.

I will not go from here to the lighthouse. I know little of the craft of those who spend the night in the light, and a visit does not authorize the moral of the tower. Nor will I turn this volume into a theory of all seas. The Atlantic I speak of is this one, the one of the road, of the ports I can reach from home or from reading. There are other crimes at sea, other routes, other techniques. To cite them so the chapter will seem complete would be the haste of a curriculum that I refused at forty-three and that at fifty-five has more prestige, because age lends gravity to excess. Excess remains excess. Prestige does not correct it.

I go back to the counter, not in order to close with a tender scene. My father, if he were still counting fishhooks while I spoke, would ask: then how many. I would still have no single number. I would say millions, and I would say that I

will not choose the figure that leaves the sentence rounder. He might think that a lack of craft. Craft, for him, was to arrive at the total. In the archive the total also exists, and the totals quarrel with one another according to what is counted. To hide the quarrel in order to deliver a clean number is like washing the afternoon. I leave the quarrel. The reader who needs a single number will have to go to the paper and choose, knowing that he chose.

There is a last sentence I wished I could write and that I write only in order to cross out its spirit. It said that, once the hold is named, a maritime consciousness at last begins. It does not begin. Not at last. I had a consciousness before, incomplete, and I still have an incomplete one, now with one omission less and with others I will not discover only by having written this title. The title, The Moral Atlantic, promises more than the essay fulfills. Titles promise. The fulfillment is the page that does not flee into the adjective. If I fulfill that on half the pages, it will have been more than in 1974, and less than the word moral suggests. The suggestion stays as a charge, not as a medal.

Tomorrow there is class. Someone will speak of the beauty of the coast. I will let the beauty have one sentence and I will ask for the next. If I ask in a tone of victory, I will have climbed the hill in the middle of the hold, which is a base thing to do: to use the crime as a height. The tone, I watch. The wish to be the teacher who does not omit, that I watch too, because it is already a small inner fame. Inner fame returns no one. It returns only the author to himself, satisfied. I do not want to leave satisfied. I want to leave able to repeat, in the room, without music, what fitted here: millions, not a number for ornament; ports, not views; two sentences together; and the blank where the name did not arrive.

I do not arrive at a proposal. A proposal, at the end of an essay like this, is usually the way the author recovers cleanliness: after the hold, a plan. The plan returns him to command. I did not command, and I will not simulate a program of reparation on the last page, as if the program fitted in a paragraph and the paragraph were action. Action is another workshop. Mine is not to lie in class and not to call a view what had a price. Whoever expects a solution from this volume will have read the title as the promise of a court. The title promised a moral. Moral, here, is not a sentence. It is the obligation not to separate the sea

from the use that was made of it.

If I die without writing another book, this one will still be incomplete, and the incompleteness does not serve me as praise. It serves as a description. Names are missing. What I have not read is missing. What a life in the classroom does not reach is missing. What is not missing, I hope, is the awareness that 1974 stopped early and that the stop had a comfort. To name the comfort is what I could do at fifty-five without costuming myself as a judge. The judge I would be, on the page, would use the hold in order to stand high. I have already said that is base. I repeat it at the end because the end is where I most want to stand high. The end asks for a figurehead. I give it a counter, a list, and a question about tone.

The question stays for the morning, not for posterity. Posterity is a hill with more time. In the morning, the room has people who can say what a view and can also say the port. I do not control what they will say. I control whether my first sentence hands them only the gold of the water. If it hands them only that, The Moral Atlantic will have been a lying title, valid at the printer's and false in the classroom. The printer does not absolve me. The classroom is the place where the essay either becomes a tool or becomes one more postcard, now with the word moral printed on it, which would be the worst of views: the view that already thinks itself critical and for that reason does not look.

There is a postcard like that, and I have seen it on the cover of serious things: the blue sea, the word consciousness or the word moral, and no route. The cover absolves the buyer before the first page. I do not control the cover this volume will have if it ever leaves the paper on which I write it. I control not writing the inside as if it were that cover. The inside has Recife, the archive, my omission of twelve years, the child counted without my inventing a life. If that is too little for the title, let the title be ashamed, not the page. Titles are less ashamed than they ought to be. They are made for the view.

I am left, then, with what I can take into the classroom without an orchestra. The horizon measures the eye, not hope. The Atlantic I treat of was a road. The road had a hold. The hold is not a metaphor of my suffering as a reader. The

beauty of the afternoon does not pay. The prayer and the boat are not change. I stopped where the name did not arrive, and the stop is not a mystery. It is the true gunwale, this time, not the one of 1974. In that one, I could have read and I postponed. In this one, I read and I do not pretend that I have read everything. The difference is small in grammar and large in the moral. Small because it fits in a sentence. Large because it decides whether the blank of the map is laziness or a limit. I have had both. Only one of them deserves to remain without a punishment of rhetoric.

COLLECTION NOTE

Amadeu Lacerda Pessanha is a fictional literary persona created with Grok, and The Moral Atlantic is a work produced from that persona.

Margem 37 — For stories in search of a margin.