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FROM PIAZZA NAVONA TO DJEMAA EL-FNA, AND BACK AGAIN

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People arrive in Rome from all over the world just to see and admire Piazza Navona. It is extremely beautiful and shows just how man can produce artificial landscapes, symbols and architecture comparable to the wonders of nature. If you go through Piazza Navona at night – when it is deserted and quiet – its charm is unmistakable; it is amazing even without human beings.

People arrive in Marrakesh from all over the world to see and admire Piazza Djemaa el-Fna – the crowded piazza – the huge piazza situated in the Medina which is the background to one of the most powerful spectacles in the world. But the piazza is never without people. It is an area almost by mistake, with no limits, outlined by ugly architecture and huge roadways. On one side the great Medina opens out. To see it in the morning, without people, would make you wonder why they don't turn it into a parking lot, and in actual fact, not so long ago, the council authorities put forward a proposal to transform it into a parking lot. It took the government to decide that its charm had to continue and so this magnificent, medieval set remained in tact.

The piazza is indeed the people that occupy it. Starting from the early afternoon, until well into the night it is alive with jugglers, storytellers, snake charmers, magicians, acrobats, market stalls, magic potion vendors, Koran readers, fire-eaters, wheeler-dealers, beggars, thieves and bag snatchers. Towards nightfall, the market stall lamps powered by generators light up this living stage that thousands of people pass through.

Piazza Navona is its architecture, the harmony of its forms, the power of its symbols, the grandiosity of the ingenious, just as Piazza Djemaa el-Fna is its people, its ability to create stories, to be renewed – every day – simply by living together. Piazza Navona is the West, its history and its beauty. It tells the story of the splendour of a civilisation that appears at sunset, of the wonders of a past that doesn't know how to renew itself. Piazza Navona is only to be admired, contemplated, its story listened to. Piazza Djemaa el-Fna is the other world that is advancing, an interbreeding of races, dialects and cultures. The former is the manifestation of the power of order and harmony whilst the second is that of the power of chaos, of the interbred, of do-it-yourself, of contamination, of superimposing thousands of individual stories that intertwine and mix, giving life to new histories and new stories. Piazza Navona is the place of silence and contemplation, just as Piazza Djemaa el-Fna is that of the din of voices, lights, roaring engines, generators, fumes and smells

This is how Canetti expresses his amazement and enchantment – wonderful feelings – that welcome him to Marrakech during his stay in 1954 *“In the piazza I found the show of density, of the warmth of life that I feel inside. While I was there, I was that piazza. I still believe myself to be that piazza”*

And this is just what the city seems to be at one and the same time, both within and outside itself. *“I believe”* – Canetti continues – *“that with a simple, unmodified description of what I saw, without invention or exaggeration, I might construct a new city within myself...It isn't a question of something direct, that I now intend to put down on paper, but only of a new foundation: another space, not exploited, where I might stay, a new breath, an unnamed law”.*

The effect of what Canetti witnessed at Marrakech continues to influence, give new points of view and destabilise the old way of seeing by the West. Now he knows that *“In London, after Marrakech, I am sitting in a room with ten women seated around various tables, each one of them unveiled...Slightly irritating”*

While I read these intense autobiographical pages by Elias Canetti, I myself wonder whether the plurality of the worlds of the city, its polyphony, sounds, colours, dialects, cultures, ethnic groups, personal stories and memories are not, in fact, the same plurality which characterises our thousands of identities that belong to us, every single one, and through which we express ourselves: I was that piazza, says Canetti.

The mechanisms of history are always reproduced within people.

Every city resembles every other, even if it is different, just as its unique human beings do. And each

city, when it is *alive* and not archaeology, belongs to us as we belong to it. Just as in an *alive* conversation it is impossible to perceive the surroundings because they are generated moment by moment by interactions among participants, and at the same time the *alive city* continuously produces itself, renews itself, appears the same and at the same time different – just like Medina – just like the spectacle of waves that crash on the shore.

But conversations can also be closed and premeditated, aimed at the intentional controlling of people and outcomes. In this case the conversational surroundings are clear and predictable, and exclude personal contribution, creativity, improvisation, personal experience or, in a word, *change*. Thus, often, the Urban Plan depresses and kills off differences, it constructs a defined, isotropic uniform space that makes people feel uncomfortable, distances them, rejects them: how many times have we taken part in the show of a recently designed piazza, deserted of inhabitants that prefer to “camp” in a place which is definitely less appealing and seemingly less welcoming?

If I should attempt to show the differences between European cities and those of Mediterranean Africa and Asia in a single strike, I would say that the question is actually this: in the latter two the surrounds are not noticed until the *conversation* is finished – Medina and Mellah – : each individual is invited by the city to make his contribution, to express his identity, to declare himself: *I am*, and, moment by moment, each one participates in the great event of being together without denying his/her own authenticity, according to how things evolve between participants. There is a strong sense of reciprocity, and without reciprocity, without the unsuppressible need for reciprocity, each person bends and regresses to his own single individuality thus becoming victim of his own destructive drives.

On the other hand, European archaeology, even in its geometric power and beauty, manipulates the conversation with its shapes and reduces the participants to the role of obtuse, mechanical spectators that may only contemplate how much is around them. Each of them is called upon to carry out a “role”, since each one of them knows what “one really needs to say”, and what must be kept quiet, or else one already knows what the other expects to hear, and even knows that someone else has already “decided how things stand and how they must go”. These cities evoke a comatose state, so much so that as a cure and a therapy many cry out for the return to a process of *participation* that not only isn't there, but which risks being transformed into an umpteenth Western tribal rite designed to exorcise its slow agony. The language of these dying cities is that of *the consumers of goods*, of *managers* that expropriate the inhabitants of their linguistic tools, of the *competitors* that constantly propose the image of *homo economicus*, of the *business mediocracy* which is expressed within the linguistic forms imposed by the hyperbolic banality of *Money-makers*, of the *Plan* that comprises all the human drives in the sterile metaphor of the *city-machine*, in the name of the ever deadly myths of efficiency and good government.

The alive cities of Asia and Mediterranean Africa possess the language of the living connection of conversation and create the “*talking city*”, a city that sings (the chant of the muezzin at fixed times of the day and night), that speaks through its own body; a city that *isn't contemplated*, but *contemplates*, that *isn't lived in*, but *lives*, that *isn't called*, but *calls*, just like the desert. There's more life in the desert than in so many European cities. In the desert you can even hear your own breath, the deafening blow of a camel hoof in the sand, the sound of the wind, the noises of the night. Cassano is right when he says that only a Westerner could think that the desert was destined to that motorised idiocy of the Paris-Dakar.

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