

## ***Darkening Stars – A Novel of The Great War***

**by José Leon Machado**

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*Darkening Stars* is a novel by the Portuguese author José Leon Machado and whose subtitle is *A Novel of the Great War*. Indeed, originally written and published in 2008 (in Portuguese language) suggests in its title a narrative of both lightening and darkening related meanings, which ends up by characterizing the complexity of single lives and collectivities of a particular period of time. Portugal's historic period of the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century constitutes the very center upon which the main narrative gains its strength and from which develops its other symbolic features. The novel's main character, Luís Vasques is therefore the protagonist of a more familiar and particular narrative which then competes and keeps company with the other narrative coinciding with the war and the collective and republican investment in an international battle, on which stage the referred protagonist also performs.

The war is therefore vividly expressed, providing the realistic elements of danger and the very pains under the Allied soldiers suffered. Furthermore, the war theme is so prominent and of such effect that it penetrates deeply in the narrative of a more particular and familiar nature affecting deeply the main character and consequently the lives of those surrounding him. This aspect gains more importance as it expresses how the collective history and experiences of a country affect the particular spheres of the individuals, also defining their nature and character. Such narrative construction and structure thus provide a vividly rhythm, suggesting an intense and penetrating tone very much similar to that of the real life as depicted in the story. Therefore, both narratives, namely the private sphere and the war sphere are both distinct faces of the very same reality that characterizes human lives, being these characteristics from the book no different. In detail, the very episodes as depicted prove how close these characters are to a common human identity, including that of the contemporary readers. This aspect appears to serve well the interests of the former who may find a metaphorical identification with the dangers of war as experienced by Luis Vasques, Rato and their

comrades, the emotional strains and ups and downs of the main characters or even the difficult economic times and the poverty menacing signs, which may well mirror today's circumstances. All these episodes are dynamically depicted through constant dialogues and their fluent and easy language which helps the readers in detecting common features in these characters, also operating as a rich source for accessing their inner minds. Such exercise of inner analysis, which may be well done by the reader who attentively follows the dialogues, automatically leads him or her to a broader understanding of human nature in its purest form, whether it is made of darker moments or lighter ones. Such are the cases of the various unromantic sexual intercourses exposed in the narrative and the more romantic and sweet passages that involve the characters of Luís Vasques and Aninhas. Indeed, while the very first are truly and openly exposed, with its shocking details, grotesque remarks and shameless narrative related approach, the second are sometimes elusively and respectfully referred to. Such duality concerning love affairs and romantic experiences may appear as the natural and inevitable result of a man's path which is first tremendously troubled by insecurities and then animated by the will for an alternative experience in life, ultimately leading him to his own way out, some kind of a redeeming alternative. Furthermore, the character of Luís Vasques is shown as belonging to a generation too much deluded and deceived from destiny, as the following passage seems to recognize:

“Coutinho was stuck. Reducing Portugal's participation in the war to a mere play of interests seemed too petty to him. Where was the ideal? Were we going to war without having a cause to illuminate our soul? Although I kept quiet, I thought our participation was completely dispensable, both for us and for the Allies. (Machado 2012: 88-89).

External factors, materialized through the war and the many physical confrontations can only be surpassed by the inevitable or ultimate hope in an alternative experience. For Luís Vasques that redeeming way out will come out of the form of a four cent (*quatro centavos*) Portuguese coin presenting the profile of a very attractive young woman, who happens to be very similar to his future wife. Hence, while allured by such metaphorical representation of beauty and safety, so much distinct from the war experience he is about to live, Luís Vasques must delay his own private destiny, in fact he is kept from attaining his apparently *deepest wants* (Bauer 2003: 74), as symbolically

represented in that simple four cent coin due to this *evildoer* (Bauer 2003: 74)<sup>1</sup> under the name of the Republic which has motivated the Portuguese involvement in the great war. This aspect contains in its form the very idea of how far we are humans capable of controlling our own destinies when these are object of a broader manipulation and unattainable management.

It is said that “Characters have always longed for escape, freedom, an ideal existence, control of their lives.” (Bauer 2003: 74). Although this may be somehow true for the main character of the story, the novel seems to confirm the very modernist understanding that “*real life* was actually beyond understanding. “Real Life” was chaotic, planless and unguided” (Bauer 2003: 65). This apparent message, as built from within the narrative seems to deeply influence the characters’ lives in the story, illuminating therefore the very title of the book, *Darkening Stars*, and likewise depicting the reality of modern day readers.

Such strategic devices and exercises concerning a possible deep inner confrontation between modern day readers and the contents as presented by the novel is also completed by the formal vehicle of the particular easy, concise and direct phrasing that characterizes the generally formal style as operated and materialized in the story. These formal elements allow a communicative potential which is also attained and further emphasized by the circular structure of the narrative, mirroring therefore the similar circular pattern of everyone’s lives. Hence, the more particular stories comprising the lives of the main characters and their families are indeed constantly and rigidly paired with the ones displaying the lives of those who were at war. Furthermore, the referred structure of the narrative, being that circular and of a rapid tone, where dialogues play a fundamental role in such progressive building, offers modern readers an interesting resemblance to modern technological devices from where distinct sources are object of a simultaneous observation and use, together with the fact that distinct contents under attention or observation may be easily interrupted and postponed (Moore 2010). Again, mirroring the real lives outside the fictional boundaries, this novel does show worlds too much complex to be object of a simple and homogeneous tale. On the contrary, both narratives intercept each other and reveal to the reader the very interruptive elements that characterize life itself, regardless of cultures, epochs and time periods.

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<sup>1</sup> The expressions “deepest wants” and “evildoer” were inspired by the work of Susan Wise Bauer who analyses in her work the Logic-Stage Reading of the novels, among other relevant aspects (Bauer 2003).

The verisimilitude of the novel is also present through the very means of cultural references whose direct allusions may work as strategies of belief. Therefore, such are the cases of elements that were known and identified as traditional objects of that time, namely the *Minerva* cars, the Charlie Chaplin films and many others, which appear quite often in the narrative. Such insistence also contributes to the very process of creating the credibility effect on the readers. Additionally, together with these material related elements and more abstract references, there are places, physical surroundings, activities (labour and pastoral ones), food, regional related expressions and human tempers which fundamentally offer the readers an extraordinary portrait of the time, epoch and culture. Again, such portrait is furthermore animated through constant dialogues among the characters and whose contents, due to their honesty and lively tone, may confer the present day readers a source of progressive identification.

The warfare confrontation amongst nations and the way they are lived and described by the characters may also represent the inner conflicts and desperation of that young generation alone, as well as that of a particular culture and country whose identity was still about to be discovered, given the traumatic interruption of the Monarchic power and the prompt presentation of the Republican Government which is object of much depreciative comments from the characters in the novel. Such historic details may well work as devices for providing realistic effects and thus allure the reader's attention to the contents and facts under the narrator's attention. Again, the narrator presents historic characters that frequently and nebulously evoke the memories of a particular time period. Such is the case of Salazar, an historical presence and who is far from providing a mere abstract contribution to the story. On the contrary, the character of Salazar interacts with the main character, Luís Vasques, and invests in him ideas of a political nature. Hence, Salazar is object of a more human insight, suggesting the readers an alternative view on Portugal's most controversial Head of the State. Meanwhile, Salazar is not the only politically related element in the narrative. Constant references to the republican government are such a present reality in the narrative that it may be even afforded with the status of a character itself. Indeed, according to the narrator and the main character's point of view, it is because of the new regime that these young men are sent to war in a foreign country and it is this republican regime which is to be blamed for the several injuries and disgraces as lived, experimented and commented by these soldiers that appear in the narrative. Frequently, the reader

perceives indirect dialogue as established by the soldiers and this republican ghost which is therefore object of much criticism, verbal accusations and overall scorn.

Moreover, morals are a topic much approached, both directly and indirectly. Therefore, morals are presented at some point as a very complex and enigmatic area as it does not produce its expected results upon the destiny of those human lives as presented. Regarding the characters, defining the morals of such a character as Luís is not very simple nor even simplistic. In fact, assuming the narrator's voice in the story, Luís expresses views which occasionally will not coincide with the answers as provided when facing or confronting the very different fictional realities, which may result from the intense, extreme and ambiguously lived experiences as presented in the narrative. Additionally, the novel strongly presents the readers characters whose attitudes and actions unveil many different and possibly legitimate interpretations of life, which may well lead to some depreciative reactions concerning morals. Indeed, such an ambiguity or ambiguous characterization of morals and ethics together with the universality of their respective call, when put into such fictional practice, seem to represent the very Postmodern conviction that "truth about real life" (Susan Bauer 2003: 66) is an impossibility. Again, the novel finds its place within such view as Postmodernism claims that "there are many ways to portray real life and no single authority can pick which one is right. (Susan Bauer 2003: 66).

The investment in the first-person point of view as presented in this novel and throughout the entire narrative does allow the readers "to hear a character's most private thoughts – but in exchange, you can only see what happens within the character's line of sight, and you can only know those facts that the character is himself aware of." (Bauer 2003:75). Thus, such narrative aspect may therefore provide interesting elements for analyzing and knowing more intimately the main character, however, it may also well turn out limited because of its natural and consequent lack of multiple and legitimate viewpoints (Bauer 2003: 75).

Consequently, the female characters are at some degree limitedly portrayed, which may result from the very personal viewpoint of the referred narrator. Indeed, the women are depicted in a very depreciative, degrading and carnal way and their existence is frequently reduced to the sexual satisfaction of male characters. This is true for almost the entire female universe from the novel except for the central female character, Ana Maria. This very portrait is established according to such patterns that it somehow reminds those of a romantic perspective where very commonly the women

were close to the image of whether an angel or devil. Again, no truly alternative characterization of the female gender is presented in the novel.

In addition to this apparently limited portrait of the female gender, Portugal's portrait is put under censure and is indeed object of a very open criticism. Although it is frequently associated with its typical rural features, as represented by the harvest activities and others, which sometimes are close to an idyllic and bucolic atmosphere, its peoples are, however, old fashioned, too religiously superstitious and completely unacquainted with technical, scientific, military and cultural modernity. Portuguese population is, therefore, still profoundly uninterested with culture related aspects and illiteracy is presented as a deep generalized social problem:

“I was surrounded by the illiteracy, ignorance, and savagery of our troops. I thought of blaming the Republic and those who ran it, but they were not solely at fault. They were guilty of betraying their own ideals and doing nothing to free the people from ignorance and misery. They had seized power for their own advantage, while keeping the nation mired in its centuries-old apathy and traditionalism. But they could not be blamed for centuries of physical and moral slavery, the glorification of ignorance abetted by the Inquisition.” (Machado 2012: 86).

This very portrait, being too openly critical, concerning Portugal's culture and approach to life, is even more degrading when object of an inevitable comparison with the French people and culture which is, on the other hand, constantly praised. Indeed, unable to explore more positive aspects concerning the Portuguese culture and people, the novel consequently presents the author's view which ultimately reveals a great disapproval and a constant condemnation on the very particularities of the country's culture, possibly revealing a simultaneous uneasiness with the former, indicating to modern readers what is still there to be changed, as it is frequently suggested by the very steady and unchanging structures of the country whose identity is yet to be rediscovered and redefined, as it seems to happen with the characters themselves.

Indeed, concepts such as identity and character are the key aspects that may help the characterization of the main character of the story. Luís Vasques is a young University student who happens to be afraid of sleeping alone, after experiencing the very traumatic effects of the war and its many horrors as progressively testified and attentively captured in the story. His solution is at some point sleeping with his house maid proving again the male comforting status with which female characters are compared.

Regarding other characters from the novel, seldom are those whose characteristics do not reveal some sort of symbolic representations or vices immensely associated to their country. Accordingly, representing rural Portugal and its very own closeness to the simplicity life of the bucolic countryside which also resists modernity at all levels, a topic much present in the novel and reflected by the narrator's comments, Rato, Luis's close friend and war comrade, is also Luis's contrast and counterpart. Thus, while Rato embodies the common people, trapped by poverty menace and tangled with superstitious beliefs, Luis represents the traditions of a northern noble family and a class whose values resist the new political circumstances, after the violent sweep of the Portuguese Monarchy.

Hence, all these referred narrative elements and contents do symbolically represent the very decadent atmosphere as lived by the characters both externally and internally. The dual structure of the narrative corresponds in fact to the very duality one lives and experiences in life. The many adventurous frustrations as experimented by the characters in the novel fit well into present Postmodern days. Like the characters in the novel, the present day human subject also looks for his/her identity whose core has been disseminated. Now, just like Luis Vasques from the novel, the postmodern subject goes through a journey whose experiences will reveal him/her "self". Such was the journey of Luis Vasques and his generation, as well as the remaining characters of the novel.

Overall, despite the much limited characterization of some national cultural aspects and its corresponding human portrait, the novel *The Darkening Stars – A Novel of The Great War*, exhibits a very interesting representation of the human adventure within a world of much decadent and dissolving structures, values, perceptions, hopes, illusions, ideals, politics and human responses. Such picture is indeed completed through the very simple formal elements whose simplicity and easy flow correspond to the very modern ways of written communication and whose narrative with its circular structure allows the very personal management of the reading process as may be experienced by modern day readers.

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