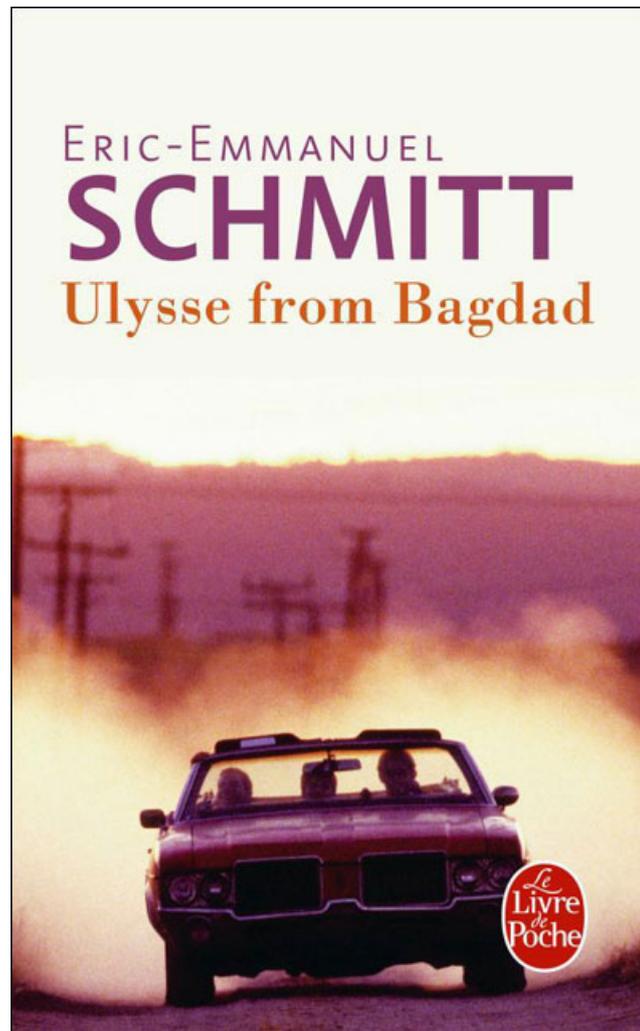




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
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ULYSSES WHO DOES NOT RETURN HOME

Ana Paula Rebelo Correia

*«Why are you helping me, Doctor Schoelcher?
Either humanism is made to the measure of the world, or it is
not. A true humanist does not recognize its borders.»*
[Conversation between Saad and the doctor who helps him
get to England (1)]



Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt's *Ulysse from Bagdad* was published in France in 2008 (2). Why write about a book that is more than a decade old now? If "to write is to act", in Emmanuel Schmitt's words, to read is to know, reflect, think, and above all, to protect the memory of the history of humanity as it repeats across centuries. For Saad, the protagonist of *Ulysse from Bagdad*, the desire to read is the desire for freedom: "...That day I gained a taste for literature, or for freedom, which is the same thing" (3).

Ulysse from Bagdad is highly topical. It is worth reading and rereading. Through the story of the young Iraqi, Saad (who, at the beginning of the book, evokes the paradox of his name: "I'm called Saad Saad, which in Arabic means "Hope Hope", but, in English, "Sad Sad"), and through the myth of Ulysses that accompanies it, we enter a labyrinth of the transhistorical conditions of human existence: war, exodus, flight, migration and clandestinity. The duality of the protagonist's name and its opposing meanings in different languages appear as omens of the ambiguous status of the refugee and the clandestine migrant, uprooted from his country, looking for a better life elsewhere. Being a migrant with no legal status gives Saad the opportunity to salvage a lost identity: "I belong to no nation. Not to the country I fled from. Not to the country I pass through. Clandestine. Simply clandestine. Welcome nowhere. Foreign everywhere" (4).

In a polyphonic narrative between fiction and reality, across fifteen chapters Saad's first person epic unfolds as a diary that is both a personal account and an essay on the human condition. In Iraq, under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, Saad's until then happy and stable life gradually changes. Like Ulysses, Saad embarks on a dangerous journey, facing countless obstacles on land and at sea. His journey confronts him with difficult decisions, often against his ethical and moral principles. But unlike the Greek hero, Saad is not protected by the gods, and nor does he begin a journey home. His journey is lonely, one of flight with no return, full of defeats and no conquests. His destiny is in his hands, guided only by the words of his deceased father, who appears at intervals to accompany and advise him.

The story is told when Saad has finally arrived in Europe, on the final stage of a violent and chaotic journey that has taken him through discrimination, invisibility and exclusion. He has lost the hope that he was filled with when he left Baghdad. Across childhood memories, the need to leave, and the terrible reality of his journey to Europe, the text unfolds as a voyage with breaks for reflection and meditation. Saad questions himself, wonders about what he lost and what he is looking for, and about his destiny, laced with illusion and disappointment. There is a pervasive and permanent confrontation between the



past and the present, between a happy childhood and the harsh reality that surrounds and oppresses it. Before describing his birth in Baghdad and his happy and hopeful childhood, Saad presents us with a painful verdict on his life. Living precariously in Soho, London, in a room of two square metres, he declares that he will be the last of his family. Having children in conditions which make him ashamed would only perpetuate a catastrophe (5).

Saad, the migrant, the clandestine, the invisible, is a university student and the son of a learned librarian and poet, a collector of books banned by the dictatorship, passionate about Greek and Roman literature and mythology. His father shared with Saad the secrets of the books in his “Pocket Babel”, the hidden library in the living room. Pampered by his sisters, mother and family, in the space of a few months young Saad watches his brothers-in-law die in a terrorist attack, his girlfriend disappear in a bombing, his father die at the hands of an American blunder, and three nephews die from disease and malnutrition. With Saddam Hussein’s regime, the war with Kuwait, and American sanctions, the repression is senselessly violent. The population is starved of essential goods. Without food, water, and medicines, and suffocated by corruption and fear, Iraq is a country where “everyone becomes everyone’s enemy”. In just a few years, Saad loses his points of reference, his friends, and the very framework of his existence. The Europe of freedom and democracy, of peaceful and well-organized cities where people live in peace and harmony, is the sole horizon on which to imagine a future and to support his mother and sisters.

Inspired by his father and the culture that he instilled in him, Saad shares a passion for the English language and English literature that unites him with Leila. For Saad, Europe is England, the land of Agatha Christie: “What could be more soothing than a world where there are only domestic crimes, exquisite, artistically staged, carried out by intelligent criminals with sophisticated venoms. For us, here, who live in a universe of brutes, in which force wins, it is a delicious, charming exoticism” (6).

From distant Iraq, where dictatorship and fear upend any possibility of thinking about the future, it is during the journey to democratic Europe - imagined by Saad as a space of free and dignified existence - that the inhumanity of inequality, injustice, and blindness and indifference towards the other is revealed to Saad. Although he is a university student, in all the countries he passes through he is just another clandestine migrant: nameless, homeless and soulless. His clandestinity makes his intellectual, scientific and cultural skills invisible, confining him only to labour in the most undervalued sectors. As he says “Sometimes I am Saad the Hope, sometimes I am Saad the Sad, but in most people’s eyes, I am nothing” (7).



Saad travels through Egypt, crosses to Malta, suffers a shipwreck off the coast of Sicily, where he then stays for a year, arrives in Naples and travels to France and finally England. On his way the young law student works as an antique dealer, a drug mule and an escort in an Egyptian bar. He is a prisoner and castaway, the slave of a thousand humiliating jobs on which his survival depends. His principles, morals and identity are shattered, crushed and annihilated by the conditions in which he must resist and survive (8).

In spite of these vicissitudes and humiliations, Saad's gaze on the world is profoundly humane. His humanity comes through in the reflections that accompany him on his journey, in his conversations with his father, in his encounters, in his ability to listen, and in his enduring humour. Saad confronts us with the human capacity for resilience and hope. In a journey full of the indifference of those whose paths cross his, Saad also meets some who make a difference. In Naples, an officer who interrogates him helps him escape through the window and tell him how to cross the border on foot. In France, Max, Odile, Dr. Schoelcher and Pauline welcome him and help him to try to reach England.

In a complex web that tangles up the best and worst of the human condition, through Saad's journey Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt delivers a concrete testimony of the migrant condition, and a critical analysis of how Europe treats its clandestine migrants and restricts their opportunities. Saad's story presents us with a plural reflection on the ephemeral character of stability (we might all one day be Saad). It exposes our blindness to others, to social injustice, and to the importance of fraternity in building a, probably utopian, society based on peace and justice.

(1) "Pourquoi m'aidez-vous, docteur Schoelcher ? Soit l'humanisme est à la mesure du monde, soit il ne l'est pas. Un véritable humaniste ne reconnaît ses frontières». Eric Emmanuel Schmitt, *Ulysse from Bagdad*. Albin Michel, édition Poche, 2012, p. 248. The translation from the French is by Archie Davies.

(2) The book made waves at the time in France and Belgium, where it was widely reviewed and analysed. It remains a compulsory text in secondary education. In Portugal, further away from the question of migration and grappling engulfed in a deep recession, there was little discussion of the book. It has been translated into several languages and there is an edition in Brazilian Portuguese (*Ulisses de Bagdá* Editora Record, 2011. Translated by Joana Angélica de Melo), but no Portuguese edition. See also Marques, Isabel Simões. *Ulysse from Bagdad d'Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt ou l'épopée d'un clandestin* in S. A. Clara, & A. J. Domingues (Eds.), *L'étranger tel qui (s) écrit* (pp. 39-48). Porto: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, 2014.

(3) "...de ce jour, j'attrapai le goût de la lecture, ou de la liberté - ce qui équivaut" (p. 23).

(4) "Je n'appartiens à aucune nation, ni au pays que j'ai fui, ni au pays que je traverse. Clandestin. Juste clandestin. Bienvenu nulle part. Étranger partout" (p. 11).



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- (5) “I’m called Saad Saad, but this name won’t be passed on. Stuck in these two square metres to which my temporary housing has been reduced, I am ashamed to reproduce, and, in doing so, to perpetuate a catastrophe”. “Je m’appelle Saad Saad mais ce patronyme, vraisemblablement je ne le transmettrai pas. Coincé dans les deux mètres carrés à quoi se réduit mon logement provisoire, j’ai honte de me reproduire, et, ce faisant, de perpétuer une catastrophe” (p. 11).
- (6) “Quoi de plus apaisant qu’un monde où il n’y a que des crimes domestiques, raffinés, artistiquement mis en scène, exécutés par des criminels intelligents usant de poisons sophistiqués. Pour nous, ici, qui vivons dans un univers de brutes où la force domine, c’est délicieux, d’un exotisme enchanteur” (p. 45).
- (7) “Parfois je suis Saad l’Espoir, parfois Saad le Triste, même si, aux yeux du plus grand nombre, je ne suis rien” (p. 11).
- (8) “Je mis ma morale entre parenthèses...”. “I put my morals in brackets.” (p. 213).

Translated by **Archie Davies**

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