

NARRATION AND CATASTROPHE: THE 1755 EARTHQUAKE¹

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Reactions to the earthquake of 1755 are many and varied, and we may follow them in either a Portuguese or European context. Although I will naturally take into account the broader context of a particularly European reaction, which informs and adds complexity to the Portuguese reaction, I shall reflect above all on the latter, which undoubtedly merits attention, not least because of the numerous accounts and differing tones (naturally mournful and frequently pathetic) in which it is described. This is perhaps a decisive starting point: the awareness that few events elicited, at the time, such extensive as well as such intense reactions. One would think, to start, that an earthquake must be a natural event. One reaches the conclusion that, at the very heart of it, an earthquake such as that which occurred in Lisbon in 1755 was much more a cultural event. What I will try to show here is how the passage from a natural to a cultural event was shaped by a huge number of reactions in the field that we broadly call literature and which, at the time, encompassed a much wider range of genres and forms of discourse.

To begin with, therefore, we must acknowledge the trans-discursive breadth of literary reactions to the earthquake: no genre, high or low, no style, no form of discourse seems to have been immune from what occurred—from philosophy to scientific discourse, from personal letters to epic poems, from lyrical poetry to drama.² This is an especially significant starting point in what concerns the literary reactions to the Lisbon earthquake: genres' boundaries are indeed frequently crossed, as though no one genre could stabilize the images and representations in question. I would like to emphasize this point right from the beginning: reactions to the 1755 earthquake are not only multiple, but they also seem to go beyond the limits of discourse to a rendering of subjective impressions. From this point of view we are dealing with the

very limits, as well as conditions, of representation. At the heart of the eighteenth century, when the sublime is slowly emerging as the awareness of something for which there will be no comparison in itself, 1755 will surely represent a major shake up in the belief that nothing may occur which may not be represented. For one of the concurrent *leitmotifs* of numerous texts on the earthquake is, as we shall see, how much speech is lacking and how much reality goes far beyond the wildest imagination.

However, the 1755 earthquake also gives rise to what many consider the first texts from which modern seismology will actually be born. If many acknowledge how much they cannot convey, others do try to be as accurate as possible in the representation of the event, in order to safeguard the possibility of memory, as well as future opportunities for understanding it. This is a major event in the history of discourse, for it will rely on a previous capacity to outdo religious or metaphysical explanations of the event itself. This had also been the case, with the sixteenth-century playwright Gil Vicente who, exceptional in his own context, wrote to the Portuguese king in the wake of a similar earthquake in 1531, alerting him to the fact that priests were taking hold of the event to frighten the people, and should be prevented from doing so. If, on the one hand, the religious polemics around 1755 are not only huge but also vital, and rage all through Europe, on the other hand, we find extremely guarded descriptions of the earthquake itself, in which all that seems relevant is carefully noted and then transmitted:

Saturday, 1st November, and the twentieth-eighth of the lunar calendar, the day dawned serene, the sun was bright with not a cloud in the sky. This serenity had already lasted during many days of the month of October, which was much warmer than might be expected in Autumn. Just after nine thirty in the morning, the barometer registered 27 inches, and seven lines, and the Réaumur thermometer measured 14 degrees above zero, there was a slight North-easterly breeze, suddenly the earth started to shake with a pulsation coming from the centre to the surface, and as the impulse increased, the earth continued to shake, swaying from the North to the South, damaging buildings. After the second minute of duration these began to fall down, or break apart, since the bigger ones could not resist

Narration and Catastrophe

the violent movements of the earth, and their continuation. According to the most consistent opinions, these lasted for six to seven minutes, and within this space of time the great earthquake allowed two brief intervals of respite. Throughout this time, people could hear loud noises underground like thunder sounding in the distance. ... The Sun went dark, doubtless because of the great quantity of vapour cast up by the earth and many people were aware of its sulphurous exhalations. Dust, coming from the falling buildings, covered the city with such a dense fog, that people could hardly breathe. ... With these movements of the earth, the sea drew back, allowing the depths of its waters, never before seen, to be seen from the shore. Then the waters rose up like high mountains, and shortly after hurled themselves upon all the coastal villages with such violence, that it seemed that the sea wanted to submerge them all extending its limits. The sea made three major eruptions, as well as lesser ones, against the land, destroying many of the buildings, and sweeping people away in its waters. What lamentable scene does my memory remember? So many sad objects I recall, that the multitude, variety and the grief make my narrative halting. (Mendonça 113/4)³

Although different in character, as we shall see, all of the texts to which the 1755 catastrophe gave rise share, to a greater or lesser extent, some common elements: the recognition of the disturbance which began as geographical and architectural then soon becomes symbolic and anthropological; the effects on the comprehension of a phenomenon which, because it goes beyond the boundaries of what is known, soon becomes a paradigm of the incomprehensible, with the consequent debates on how to make God compatible with the destruction that occurred; the confirmation of fear and terror as the major effect of the event, as Goethe has stated: “Perhaps the ‘Daemon’ of fear has never spread so rapidly and so powerfully its terror on earth” (Goethe 525). The experience of the 1755 earthquake and tidal wave, the experience of Lisbon’s destruction and the unimaginable human annihilation associated with it, gave shape to an event which is memorable in all respects, corresponding to what the concept of *cultural memory*, especially under the guise of the inscription of a traumatic event in the social and symbolic matrix, powerfully recovers.

The text that I cited above, taken from one of the many works dedicated to the earthquake, Joaquim José Moreira de Mendonça's *História Universal dos Terramotos*, involves a number of those elements, which sometimes become almost commonplace. These elements are also common to another extremely guarded and careful description of the event, that of Miguel Tibério Pedegache (1756). In both texts, perhaps two of the most detailed documental descriptions of the earthquake, two common elements are the manifestation of what we might call an *eyewitness* (cf. Campos) and the awareness that, because one has *seen too much*, speech becomes "halting" and the word is lame. Thus, there seems to be an opposing and almost paradoxical relationship between *seeing* and *saying*, because what is left over as a surfeit from the first is the reverse of what is lacking in the second. Indeed, all the descriptions of the earthquake address this difficulty in telling, which they overcome, as in the example of Moreira Mendonça and also Pedegache, either by providing an exhaustive presentation of the history and events of the earthquakes, particularly in Lisbon, or by using a pathetic and exclamatory tone which most of the poetry dedicated to the theme will adopt, from João Xavier de Matos to the Abbot of Jazente and Domingos dos Reis Quita or Francisco Pina e Melo. The latter speaks about the "sovereign indignation" ("Juízo" 4) of God, considering it the real cause of the event, as he also views it as a major occasion to ensure what rhetoric had grouped under the category of *parenesis* ("Ao Terremoto")—one of the main threads of Baroque discourse, especially relevant to the sermons, as it incorporated persuasion and moral action as its main aim. Reis Quita, on the other hand, underlines the unlimited value of the eyewitness, in the sonnets as well as in the longer composition ("silva") that he devotes to the event ("No Lamentável Terremoto"), putting himself in the midst of the scene, and therefore asserting the veracity of his report through his reliability as the one bearing testimony:

All this, o mortals, that I here put forward,
Is no information from vague people:
Nor even news from ancient History,

Narration and Catastrophe

Written to haunt the memory:
I still suppose myself in the danger
Of the lamentable episode, which I propose (251).

What interests me here, then, is this quality of testimony: the awareness that something occurred that challenged language itself—an understanding that will be at the very heart of the traumatic split between *knowing* and *comprehension* that Saul Friedländer identified in regard to the Nazi extermination of the Jews, and which he aptly designated as a way to “probe the limits of representation.” 1755 also belongs to that same kind of event, as Susan Neiman has argued, in which one is suddenly made aware that there are indeed limits to what may be represented by language, and that a definite meaning of an event may rely on its being *before* or *after* meaning. It is a threatening awareness. But it is this awareness that always appears in the background, if not the foreground, of what is said about 1755.

It is within this context that we may grasp the wider meaning of the apparent necessity, which so many texts illustrate, for someone to be responsible for narration. A catastrophe has occurred that needs the presence of a human being that may be considered as fulfilling two different roles: that of the *survivor*, and that of the *storyteller*. In fact, to be an *eyewitness* is to occupy a privileged position that ensures the legitimacy of what one is able to narrate. Therefore, to be an eyewitness becomes an important literary device, in order to be persuasive not only about the truth of what has happened, but also about the truth of what is being told.

There are several implications to this. On the one hand, it is the account of someone who was present, guaranteeing knowledge: the person telling the story was *there*, and the testimonial nature of the experience assures the reader of the narrative’s irrefutable veracity. On the other hand, this aspect is even more relevant, even necessary, when one is also aware that the event described is in every sense *extraordinary*. Its out-of-the-ordinary character might actually refer to the fictional world. The purpose of these accounts is to ensure that reality goes beyond, in a few but no less violent cases, what people understood to belong to the world of the

imagination or of myth (the different analogies between the earthquake and the sinking of Atlantis, narrated by Plato, account for this aspect, as well as the analogies with biblical cities such as Sodom, Nineveh, Babylon, to be found for instance in the works of Pina e Melo, cited above, or those by the Abbott of Jazente). Finally, being an eyewitness also draws attention to another element, in my opinion no less significant, whose roots are to be found in the Book of Job in the Bible: every destruction must succeed in saving someone who, having seen it, can describe it, because without that the future will preserve no memory (and therefore no knowledge) of the past. In other words, no catastrophe can ever be complete; otherwise, humanity itself would be in danger. *Being able to tell a story* emerges, then, as a foundation for the territory of man as an historical, cultural, political and symbolic being.

In many of the accounts we note an awareness that it is necessary to tell the story in order that future generations (including us) can live knowing it, and build their lives with that knowledge, preserved by memory: “The first day of the month will stay in the memory of everyone for centuries because of its earthquakes and fires which have ruined a large part of this City” (*Gazeta de Lisboa*, 1755, 44/45) says the *Gazeta de Lisboa*, a periodical that curiously did not interrupt its publication because of the earthquake. This newspaper became an exceptional source of information and contributed to the reduction of the *pathos* associated with all catastrophe narratives. André Belo has shown how this reduction had clear ideological and political implications, and how significant it was as an “official” reaction. But we should also note what was to be published thereafter, in the *Gazeta*, about the earthquake. In the following months, the *Gazeta* will accumulate the news of the earthquake that comes from all over—from abroad, but mostly from Portugal. News and descriptions of the earthquake and its effects proliferated (sometimes with copious details and annotations), coming from different points of the country. Castelo de Vide, Alenquer, Linhares, Gouveia, Mafra, Ericeira, Madeira and the Azores, Tibães, Guimarães—from every-

Narration and Catastrophe

where reports on the signs, symptoms and consequences reached the *Gazeta*: the red and sulphurous river water, the lakes that strangely rise and fall, the dust which made the sun grow pale, the submerged rocks which suddenly became visible, the waters of the Ocean that swell and recede or even the sudden appearance of comets crossing the night skies; and then the news that from Tangier or Marzagon to America, passing through France, England, Germany or Norway, the earthquake was apparently felt everywhere. Lists are made of buildings in ruins, destroyed or affected; minor episodes are narrated, like that of the priests who fled from the churches in which they were saying mass still wearing their vestments; the first reactions from abroad arrived, like that of the English king, who made immediately available a private sum in order to help those in need; or they note the “consternation and dismay” with which the news on the earthquake was received in Hamburg; with regard to what happened in the African fortress of Marzagon, it was recalled that “the constable of that fortress, whom the sea carried off, afterwards delivered him back alive to the fortress through a postern gate. He was given the Sacraments, but eight days later, after he had vomited sand, whelks, little shells and some congealed blood, he recovered by the mercy of God” (*Gazeta de Lisboa*, 1756, 143).

“Seeing is believing” seems, therefore, to be a position implicit in many reports, which naturally guarantees the veracity of what is being narrated, thus legitimating the narrator, and granting him the quality of *survivor* of which few could boast. There were those who survived and those who reported what happened. But few would have had the possibility to combine the two experiences, that of seeing and that of reporting: it is this convergence that transforms the one who tells, the storyteller, into an almost unique being. Needless to say, in frequent cases this is but a literary and rhetorical device, and there is no knowing whether the person in question was indeed present to what he or she so accurately narrates. This is not of course the point I discuss here: I just want to emphasize that the quality of being an eyewitness is a decisive tool within the legitimacy and the

rhetorical and political power of many of the reports on the earthquake. As an extra observation, one might also add that the fact that so many eyewitnesses may be invoked also points to the idea that this earthquake did not happen in any remote place, where knowledge certifies that there are humans, although just in an abstract way. 1755 is also about Europe. In this sense, it is also about the tragic awareness that fragility and precariousness are at the very heart of what was then considered as “civilization.”

This dimension of being present and being able to see, found in the reports, brings with it other two elements: first, the visual quality associated with all reports made of the earthquake, as well as the irresistible attraction of an abundance of detail, cases and episodes related to it. In the second place, the spectacular character that can be read in the narratives, privileging a theatrical vision of a pathetic spectacle which, in many cases, comes close to that specific form of theatrical performance known as melodrama.⁴

To begin with the first issue mentioned above, the visual dimension of the narratives linked to the earthquake naturally is one of their key aspects. In all of them, there is the attempt to bring the reader closer to the imaginary position of the spectator, sharing with him, *allowing him to see* what the words are telling.

And you mortal being, passing by, if you search
For the object of the clamour you are listening to;
Do not continue, stop, turn away your eyes,
For you will see even more than you seek.

Widen your view of the shapeless map
Of those miserable drawings; check
Greater astonishment; you'll see changed
Into sad solitude the blithe dwelling (Matos n.p.).

To “see even more than you seek” is, then, a clear sign of the excessive nature of the event, and I will come to this aspect later on. For now, it is worth noting the way the poet directly addresses the passer-by, inviting him to adopt a contemplative attitude, so that he will be able to see and then reflect on the change: a house transformed into a desert, a

Narration and Catastrophe

place where no human being can survive. Thus, this visual dimension, heir to the baroque theatrical presence, still very much felt in mid-eighteenth century, becomes the basic element of the scenes described, either through a long description of some episode, or the rapid enumeration of fleeting situations which occur one after the other and represent, by the way they succeed each other, the invasive nature of the earthquake and tidal wave:

In this horrible conflict only self love remained. Parents left their children, who did not remember those who had given them life. Husbands forgot their Wives. There were no friends ... Death looked for many, but with varying success. Some of them left their houses, in which there was no danger of collapse, and were buried by the walls of other, neighbouring houses. Others on their knees, looking up to the Heavens, were killed by stones falling from the buildings. There was a mother whose child died in her arms while she escaped; another who was struck by a stone that killed her but did not harm the child she was carrying in her arms. A Carmelite Friar was seen in a very high window from which he could not get out or in, asking for absolution from a Priest, who past, and waiting with resignation for the fire that consumed him ... Astounded at such danger, men wandered like madmen searching for the countryside without repose. One with a statue in his hands, reciting prayers, which many would continue, all praying out loud, and walking unsteadily. Others walked mute and astonished (Mendonça 116-7)

Of course, many more examples could be given because, as I have said before, this is one of the central elements considered in the catastrophe narratives. What ancient rhetoric called *placing before the eyes* (*ponere ante oculos*) represents a feature central to the construction of the catastrophe report, at a time when there was obviously no access to the numerous instruments of visualisation now available to us (one needs only to recall how the catastrophe of the tsunami in Asia, in the last days of December 2004, served as sudden and excessive material for a whole series of images, photographs, compositions, videos, films, drawings, which have invaded our daily life). It is the task of the verbal narrative to unleash the *imagination* of the event, quite beyond the direct experience that each person may have had. On the other hand, sharing the events present in all the reports, from the

Gazeta de Lisboa or the numerous private or public letters exchanged on the subject to plays, poems and epic texts dedicated to the subject, also leads to the possibility of holding an experience in common which, in another way, runs the risk of crystallizing the event into a kind of *traumatic closure*. In this context, reading concretely about the others, so many others, “seeing” them through their accounts, can function as a means of ensuring that the traumatic experience may be overcome by the way it is shared with all the others who have lived it and can still imagine it. From this point of view, writing about the catastrophe is the equivalent of making a gesture of survival, regardless of what each person manages to express with it.

However, this capacity to visualise will inevitably result in an evident pathos quite easily identifiable through the melodramatic forms that are used to appeal to the reader (transformed as we have seen into an imaginary spectator), not only to observe the event from a distance, but also, quite clearly, to take an active part, even if only through an emotive empathy, in the events and situations which are described. This quality of putting on a terrible show, presented as such to the spectator, suddenly turns the city of Lisbon into an enormous stage where all spectators become actors too, in a more or less direct and immediate way. For this reason many descriptions of the event emphasise the visual and even symbolic power of the convergence of the four main elements in the destruction of the city, as Isabel Maria Barreira de Campos⁵ points out in a detailed analysis: the earth that shakes, the sea that swallows the city, the fire which destroys what remains, the cyclone that carries the immense cloud of dust and darkens the air. Miguel Tibério Pedegache, for instance, comments on the event in the following terms: “The earth, air and water had conspired against unhappy Lisbon, and her tormented Citizens. Only the fire was missing to complete our ruin” (Pedegache 4-5). The Lisbon earthquake would also have touched the contemporary imagination since it offered a particularly vivid picture of how nature, suddenly and violently, turns against man, striking him in the place where his power over her

Narration and Catastrophe

seemed to be strongest: the city. It was not only the earth shaking, but it was also all of Nature that had suddenly mustered all its forces in order to attack man in the most terrible way. This suddenness is hence a fundamental element, as it undermines the possibility of foreseeing any safety for mankind, who is only able to build precarious dwellings. The theatrical nature of the numerous descriptions of the event and its consequences should, then, be read as an especially poignant way to discover that the world we live in can blindly and suddenly turn against its own centre: man. This is why texts such as *Teatro Lamentável, Cena Funesta: Relação Verdadeira do Terremoto do Primeiro de Novembro de 1755* do no more, in effect, than expose the pathetic dimension as constituting an inevitable element of a theatre which has now become a theatre in ruins.

One should consider, in this context, the numerous and different engravings and illustrations of earthquake scenes: it is not difficult to realise that the preferred visual mode of representation establishes evident visual links with theatrical spectacles, both because of the form used to depict the scene (the choice of perspective, framing, direction of the gaze), and the type of narrative and descriptive relationships established between the characters, and between the characters and the natural elements that take part in this terrible performance (earth, water, fire and air). The *pathos* of the picture lies in the exaggerated gestures which are drawn, in the details of twisted bodies, of excessively open mouths shouting that which cannot be heard but which are represented there, in the missed gazes which rhyme with the disordered clothes, in the uncontrolled movements: we are in the middle of a melodrama (Peter Brooks points out the analogy between melodrama and nightmare), precisely the locus from which the balance of French and European Classical theatre performance constructed its vanishing point. If such “theatre” is “deplorable” and such a “scene” is funereal, these qualities do add substance to the capacity to construct the earthquake as the staging of a spectacle whose excessive dimension also becomes a guarantee of its persuasive and redemptive effect:

Helena Carvalhão Buescu

Our houses shook like leaves on the trees, and our hearts, like our houses. Imagine, oh future generations, the fear we felt with the creaking and the rumbling of the buildings falling down, which collapsed all at once, and burned us, like a fire, to the very marrow of our bones. Here a crowd of people twisted and turned beneath the rubble, in the cruellest agony. There, heart-rending death cries echoed through stone and earth, and nobody could help the unfortunate ones who struggled alone. Further on, a poor wretch man was rending his nails and flesh to the bone to save his poor life from a sinister grave—but in vain, only to become his own gravedigger, since he was preparing, with his own hands, his tomb (Piderit 181).

This kind of *pathos* bears a direct relationship to the recent tradition canonized in *História Trágico-Marítima*, the narratives of sixteenth and seventeenth-century shipwrecks published in volume in 1736, as David Jackson has recently shown. It is not hard to understand why the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrha also keep coming to the mind of those who bear testimony of such disaster, as may be seen in many private letters written at the time (cf. Nozes).

In this context, one cannot forget that Lisbon was not just “any city,” but one of the richest and most majestic European cities, alongside Paris, London and Naples. The spectacle of its destruction is, therefore, also the capacity to *see* the contrast between what used to be so great, and what so suddenly ceased to exist. In the letter *Dalla Terra dove Lisabone fu*, the nuncio states, imitating Virgil: that place erased from the face of the earth, that missing place which only remained as a memory of what it was. One of the proposals made to the Marquês de Pombal by Manuel da Maia was precisely to ignore the old location of Lisbon, in order to build a new city further west, in a place where apparently natural defences against other possible tidal waves were stronger. We know that the Marquês de Pombal did not make that choice, but it is worth noting that the razing and abandoning historical Lisbon was an option considered and debated, very much in keeping with the general feeling of destruction shared by all. For that reason, the contrast between supreme glory and the most wretched misery is another of the elements which repeatedly echoes in the numerous descriptions of the event: as some witnesses

Narration and Catastrophe

recall, “one hour” was enough to transform more into less, to destroy that which centuries had so weightily built:

One moment, just one, yet terrible:
It opens, tears apart, reduces to pieces
The sweet homes, the glorious towers,
The holy temples, the noble Palaces.
The rude fall of the crumbling walls
Devours a thousand lives in various ways;
Just as destiny is but one, so varies the
Death which results from chance (Jazente 428).

What Abbot Jazente is describing here has a double dimension: on the one hand, he notices that “one moment, just one” marks the *difference* within the human universe—and that difference, being unpredictable, sudden and terrible, brings with it a degree of absolute uncertainty about the way men and their cities are able to assure mechanisms of continuity and survival. On the other hand, the very notion of death is changed into something random, arbitrary and is even more unpredictable: the “various ways” in which “a thousand lives” are snatched away lead to the painful understanding of how many deaths occur suddenly because of mere “chance.” *Dying by chance* has an inevitably tragic dimension which Abbot Jazente notes, because it goes to the heart of the meaninglessness of death and of life itself. This is a question whose metaphysical implications are even more relevant if one considers that it is a religious man who notes it: death by chance is always a definite risk for eternal life. In a different perspective, from where the theological tone has already disappeared, others would wonder: “Does this tumultuous collapse result solely from chance?”—the question raised by Chevalier de Cogolin (161) is indeed frightful in all its simplicity.

Other consequences have to be drawn from all this, namely those that will echo all round Europe following Voltaire’s reflections on the Lisbon earthquake, both those included in *Candide* and more immediately in his “Poème sur le Désastre de Lisbonne”: we were not living in the best of all possible worlds, as the philosopher Leibniz would have it. 1755 represents, from this point of view, the moment when the

Helena Carvalhão Buescu

possibility of considering peaceful progress as the safe place for what we nowadays call modernity spectacularly ceases to exist. For Voltaire, the Lisbon earthquake is proof that “evil exists,” as he says, and also that there is a problem concerning the way God allows and even encourages (by omission) its manifestations within man’s historical world.

In this context, the destruction of Lisbon is therefore something more profound and terrible than buildings “merely” falling down, because with them also falls any type of certainty that might have been built up. For that reason, in Abbot of Jazente’s poems as well as in other texts (for instance those of Pina e Melo), one of the recurrent images is that of the Last Judgment, a *Dies Irae* that this sudden evil had somehow announced:

*What do I listen, and feel, o God! I don’t know this sound,
Never heard before: the river Tagus grows:
The mountains shake, and it seems
That the sea thunders with new waves.*

Houses, Palaces, Temples it empties,
This terrifying sound, which dismays me:
People are amazed, the earth shudders:
The fire takes hold, and Lisbon melts.
What will it be? Who knows? ... Understanding
Is disturbed by horror; and in so much damage
It sees a final ending (Jazente 65).

The experience of the earthquake is therefore the experience of the *unheard of*: things never before heard, experiences which become obscure to human comprehension (“it seems that”...), and only the rhetorical question “Who knows it?” can address that “disturbing” of understanding. There only remains the possibility of the “final ending,” an apparent pleonasm announcing the Last Judgment, Apocalypse Day, which appears in many descriptions and reflections as announced by the earthquake. Also worth attention are the human notations implied by words such as “dismays” or “amazed,” linked to something which I described elsewhere⁶ as the perception of a sublime way to understand catastrophe: something that does not find equal greatness outside itself, something that exceeds and is in excess beyond the

Narration and Catastrophe

historical register that one can remember, something that suddenly reveals the opacity of God's designs and the blindness which one may also expect from nature. The fact that those men lose heart and are astonished before the event only proves that they recognise its extra-human dimension, unredeemable in the historical universe of "normal" events, among which several violent events are recounted, although always framed within the accepted parameters of comprehension.

Of the whole group of texts and opinions broached in this article, some common elements, which I have been referring to, stand out. Before ending, I would like to return to one of them, the *excessive* dimension of the event—because it appears to be, in my opinion, one of the elements which underlies all the reflections on the subject.

Because there are catastrophes which result from or have some degree of human participation, as some texts point out (wars, diseases, epidemics, aggressions), the catastrophe of 1755 stands out for being beyond that group of nevertheless understandable phenomena. It is precisely to this excessive dimension that witnesses and literary reactions point, when they attribute a theatrical and scenic dimension to the event, when they set out to shape descriptions and narrations where the tearing apart of the world can be seen, and may be read. To be an eyewitness, then, is to understand that *seeing too much* leads to a quest for the answer by *speaking though words are not enough*, for speech cannot match the horror. The texts we can read nowadays about the 1755 earthquake and the multiplicity of phenomena associated with it attest to this awareness of the need to configure an event so that future generations may come to know it. Contemporary Portuguese literature has also taken up the challenge. We need only think of Hélia Correia, in her novel *Lillias Fraser*, who creates the child with the golden gaze who survives a battle in Scotland and ends up witnessing the earthquake in Lisbon, or even José Saramago: surely the "natural catastrophe" (even if it does not have serious human consequences) that makes the Iberian Peninsula float out to sea in *A Jangada de Pedra*, still draws on the same image of an earth that

Helena Carvalhão Buescu

moves, with an Iberian epicentre? Or an Atlantic somehow swallowing up an Iberia whose territorial links suddenly seem so fragile? Was not the experience of that same fragility at the heart of the reactions to the earthquake?

Notes:

1. An earlier version of this essay has been published in *European Review*, 14 (3), 2006: 329-38.
2. For further discussion of this, see several essays in Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Gonçalo Cordeiro (eds.).
3. All the translations from contemporary texts are my own.
4. For further development of this topic, see Brooks.
5. See Campos, especially her chapter “Os Quatro Elementos. A ‘Vast Chain of Being.’”
6. Buescu, Helena Carvalhão “Sobreviver à Catástrofe: Sem Texto, Entre Ruínas.”

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Narration and Catastrophe

Gazeta de Lisboa, n. 45 (Quinta-feira 6 de Novembro de 1755): 360, cited by Isabel Maria Barreira de Campos. *O Grande Terramoto (1755)*. Lisboa: Parceria, 1998.

Gazeta de Lisboa, n. 18, Quinta-Feira, 6 de Maio de 1756: 143.

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