Ida e Volta: à Procura de Babbitt, by Ilse Losa – A Travel to America Looking for Babbitt and for Selfhood

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Abstract. Ilse Losa was a German-Jewish refugee who fled to Portugal in 1934 to escape Hitler’s policies. She decided to settle in Portugal, and in 1949 managed to get her first novel published, O Mundo em que Vivi. In 1960 she came to publish the travel narrative Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt (Departure and Return: Looking for Babbitt) based on the trip she undertook to the United States of America. Since the traveler narrator was facing the American otherness and, therefore, becoming aware of her European identity, these are very relevant issues addressed in the narrative. Both political and ideological questions are also debated in the text. It should be noted that Portugal, at the time, was under Salazar’s dictatorship, and that the country was living an internal social crisis. Moreover, there were already some signs of conflicts in several Portuguese colonies. These are some of the aspects I have addressed in the analysis of the text Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt by Ilse Losa, since it can be regarded as a narrative marked by a personal process of identity assertion, and also as a politically engaged text.

Keywords: travel narrative, identity, alterity, racism, Estado Novo

In the travel narrative, Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt [Departure and Return: Looking for Babbitt], published in 1960, Ilse Losa states that the starting point for travelling is selfhood:

Mas a verdade é que cada indivíduo só consegue partir de si próprio, da sua origem e situação, daquilo que viveu e sofreu e mesmo do que julga ser para os outros. Querer fugir a esta verdade seria fugir do seu eu e, consequentemente, cair numa mentira. (65)

[But the truth is that each individual can only depart from himself/herself, from his/her origin and situation, from what he/she has lived and suffered and even from what he/she thinks he/she is for the others. To intend to escape this truth would be to run away from the one’s own self and, consequently, to fall into a lie.]

These words contribute to define the main thematic areas, not only of Ilse Losa’s literary work, but also of this travel narrative. They also contribute to clearly state the self-reflexive purpose of the text. It is, therefore, relevant to
present here some information on Ilse Losa’s biography (Marques, Paisagens da Memória; Marques, As Traduções de Ilse Losa).

Ilse Losa was a German-Jewish refugee who settled in Oporto in 1934 to escape Hitler’s anti-Semitic policies. While millions of refugees carried on their trip to the United States of America or to other South American countries, Ilse Losa decided to settle in Portugal, she got married to the architect Arménio Losa, had two children, and dedicated herself to learning Portuguese. In the late 40s, Ilse Losa started writing in Portuguese, and became an active member of a small group of intellectuals and artists who opposed Salazar’s regime. It should be noted that Ilse Losa was also a remarkable translator and, therefore, a cultural mediator. She had privileged relationships with publishing houses in German Democratic Republic and eventually managed to have some of the literary texts that she had translated into German published there.¹

Ilse Losa herself had been a victim of racial persecutions and had witnessed the atrocities of anti-Semitism in Germany, and this made her more conscious of the mechanisms of social exclusion, and of prejudice against minorities. Being a woman writer in Portugal during the dictatorship of “Estado Novo” strengthened her commitment to fight for women’s rights. The fact that she was a mother made her believe in the importance of education as a key to a better world. She wrote numerous books for children, and carried out campaigns promoting the importance of reading. Her social, cultural, and political engagement turned her into an inconvenient writer. The regime suspected her communist affiliation, and kept her under surveillance (Marques, As Traduções de Ilse Losa).

It is, therefore, evident that a journey to the United States of America in the late 50s (in 1958) during the Cold War, and a few years before the outbreak of the Portuguese colonial war (1961–1974), was considered a suspicious enterprise. Although it was a common procedure, since married women were dependent on their husbands’ permission to travel abroad, Arménio Losa, Ilse Losa’s husband, had to make a request to the Portuguese authorities to endorse the travel of his wife in his passport, stating the private purpose of the trip. He mentions that Ilse Losa had a brother, Ernest Lieblich, living in Los Angeles and that she intended to visit her family.²

Ilse Losa’s American tour was later on the pretext for an interview which was published in Jornal de Notícias, “Ilse Losa regressou da sua viagem à América e contou-nos as suas primeiras impressões” [Ilse Losa has returned from America, and has told us her first impressions] (“Ilse Losa Regressou da sua Viagem” 28).³ The interview reveals not only the huge interest that the United States of America raised in Portugal, but also some of the items of Ilse Losa’s political agenda, since it is undeniable that Ilse Losa’s had the purpose of (indirectly) criticizing the Portuguese regime, through the comments on some of the problems affecting American society, namely, racism, gaps in cultural life, and education.

Ilse Losa’s American tour was later on reported in the travel narrative Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt published in 1960, the topics of the previously mentioned interview being the main topoi of the literary work. In spite of the inevitable fictive
I would like to emphasize that *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* had a considerable political impact at the time. Although the literary reception of the narrative was generally very positive, emphasizing the narrator’s objectivity, the critical views, and the slight irony (Marques, *Paisagens da Memória*), Domingos Monteiro, one of the reviewers of the Calouste Gulbenkian itinerant libraries, discouraged its reading, since Ilse Losa was a foreign author, and consequently (according to the reviewer) with a lack of linguistic accuracy. He also stated that, in his point of view, the opinions therein expressed were uninteresting and subjective (Monteiro, “Detalhe de Recensão”). This document, in particular, may give us some hints on the reactions of conservative intellectuals towards Ilse Losa’s narrative.

Another document that, even indirectly, may cast some light on the reception context of *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* is the report drawn up by the PIDE agents at the public presentation of Ilse Losa’s book *O Rosto Humano* (never published under this title) on 19.11.1960. This event took place several months after the launching of *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* and was organized by the Associação de Jornalistas e Homens de Letras do Porto. Ilse Losa read a passage of the novel *O Rosto Humano* referring to an episode of the narrative that took place at the Embassy of the United States. The reading was followed by a debate, but the presentation’s focus shifted onto some issues related to American society, namely racial discrimination, labor conditions, and education-related topics. Since these were sensitive issues in Portugal, Ilse Losa avoided answering some of the questions raised by the audience. The debate was reported in detail by the intelligence agents in charge of monitoring the event (Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo 96–98).

This was one of the defining moments in the History of the Associação de Jornalistas e Homens de Letras do Porto. Although it may not have been the immediate reason for the sanctions against the Association, it is a fact that it was in the aftermath of the presentation of the book that the leading members of the Association were dismissed and the latter was banned from hosting events of this nature. The fact that Ilse Losa never published a work under the title *O Rosto Humano*, although the author claimed it to be a marketing decision of the publisher, may also have to do with the reactions raised by the reading session. For reasons still to explain, this book came to be published only two years later, in 1962, with the title *Sob Céus Estranhos*. The political consequences of this public presentation of the novel may have refrained her from coming out with the same title. Being aware of Ilse Losa’s political engagement, and of her communist affiliation, we cannot ignore these issues in the analysis of this travel narrative based on the writer’s American tour.

Considering all these aspects we can clearly conclude that *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* not only mixes descriptions of people and places with thoughts and feelings of the traveler narrator, but also makes use of the travelling experience to convey political messages. Besides being a hetero-reflexive and self-reflexive travel report (Nünning 26–27), this narrative also conveys an unquestionable
inconvenient (at the time), ideological dimension. We should, therefore, bear in mind this kind of three-fold approach in the literary analysis of this work. *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* can be regarded not only as a sort of autobiographical travel writing, but also as an ideologically engaged narrative.

In spite of this, the purpose of the tour, which is stated in the title – Looking for Babbitt⁵ –, becomes a metaphor for the search of an entire social, cultural, and political system. The title comprises in itself the very guidelines for the interpretation of the text, i.e., a sort of disillusioning expectations in what concerns the depiction of the American society (to a certain extent determined by the communist worldview of the traveler narrator). Nevertheless, this search for Babbitt is seldom mentioned throughout the narrative, which becomes a psychological tour within the author’s inner self. Based on the fact that travel writing very often provides a means of exploring questions of identity and selfhood (Thompson 96), we can clearly state that in the case of *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* the narrator undertakes a much deeper and exciting journey of self-discovery, beyond the geographical journey. It enables her to be aware of a European dimension of her identity, which encompasses other identity layers.⁶

The following passage, which refers to a dialogue between the traveler narrator and Mr. Hupp – a successful manager and one of her American hosts – provides an insightful perspective of this identity-structuring process associated with travelling:

> – (...) vocês [americanos] aqui falam sempre em europeus como se a Europa fosse toda ela um país com uma cultura só. Na realidade, somos distanciados uns dos outros, em grau de cultura, nos costumes e na língua. (...)  

> – Mas qualquer um de vós [europeus], quando aqui vem, sublinha orgulhosamente pertencer à Europa.

Sim, ele tinha razão. É vulgar as pessoas, quando fora do seu continente, se designarem subitamente como europeus, esbatendo assim todas as diferenças, divergências e distinções que, no seu país, até tinham exaltado (...), sei, por experiência própria, que um indivíduo de um país europeu que vai viver para outro país europeu é nele tão estrangeiro como se tivesse emigrado para outro continente. (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 34–35)

[– you [Americans] always talk about Europeans as if Europe were altogether one single country with a single culture. In reality, we are apart from each other, in degree of culture, customs and language (…)  

> – But any of you [Europeans], when you come in here, proudly emphasize belonging to Europe.

Yes, he was right. It is common for people who are away from Europe to suddenly identify themselves as Europeans, thus blurring all the dissimilarities, differences and distinctions that in their country they had even exalted (...). I know from experience that any European that is going to live in another European country is as foreign as if he/she had emigrated to another continent.]
This kind of reflections on the cultural identity of the narrator emphasizes the importance of an inner dimension of the text, i.e., the process of identity maturing of the traveler narrator. It should be noted that the contact with the American culture made her aware of a more global dimension of her identity – being European besides being Jewish, German, and Portuguese. We can therefore conclude that there is an interweaving of outer and inner worlds, the latter being the main compass directing the attention of the traveler narrator along the American tour.

The topoi of this American narrative – the status of women, racial prejudice, education –, which can be understood as components of the traveler narrator’s identity, as stated previously, are also ideological issues and items of her political agenda.

Racial discrimination is one of the key topics of this travel narrative. This is a matter addressed in the narration of episodes witnessed by the traveler, who comes across, or is introduced to, some Afro-American citizens. This was the case of Wathea, a very sophisticated and reputed Afro-American teacher and pianist, (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 146–148), and of Hall Johnson, a celebrated Harlem musician and composer, who shows the traveler round in that neighborhood (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 225–232). It should be stressed that the incursion in the Harlem’s cultural scene marvels the European tourist. The positive perception of the Harlem cultural atmosphere leads her to draw comparisons between the situation of the Afro-Americans in the United States of America and the African people in the Portuguese colonies. This can be noted in the passage below:

> Depois falámos [Hall Johnson e eu] sobre o problema dos negros e eu disse que o problema dos negros na América era grave, mas, em todo o caso, talvez menos grave do que o dos negros nas colónias africanas. Aqui sempre se registam progressos constantes.

> Sim, os progressos existem – disse ele. – Mas os brancos falam deles como se representassem qualquer coisa de milagroso. E, no entanto, trata-se de progressos bem lentos, comparados ao progresso técnico da nossa terra ou ao progresso social em muitas partes do mundo. (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 230–231)

Ilsse Losa’s trip to the United States of America (1958), and especially the launching of the narrative (1960), took place shortly before the outbreak of the war in the former Portuguese colonies (1961–1974). For this reason, references to racial
conflicts should not be interpreted in an innocuous way. The cited excerpt constitutes an example of those passages, that necessarily had an impact on the Portuguese society of the 60s. We may conclude that, besides approaching the delicate issues related to the identity of the traveler narrator, this narrative also debates one of the most polemic questions of the regime: racial discrimination against African citizens.

The condition of women in the American society represents another extremely relevant topic in *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt*. In spite of being aware of the difficulties of dealing with pre-existing stereotypes conveyed by the cinema and by the media (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 9), the traveler narrator reveals a constant engagement in checking those stereotypes and an enormous capacity of analyzing a multifaceted and often contradictory reality.

Instead of futile women and unskilled housewives, which were, at the time, some of the most widespread depictions of American women, mainly produced by the entertainment industry, the traveler narrator comes across some women who prove to be good housewives, with cooking skills and panache in the home arrangement. Some of them are single or divorced, have a profession, can drive, and are financially autonomous. Moreover, without neglecting their professional careers, American women are engaged in a wide range of activities (from sports and cultural activities to charity events), which implies a very strict management of their daily routines.

The traveler narrator, as a European guest, has therefore a sincere admiration for all these women who welcome and host her in their homes. On the one hand, the traveler narrator of *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* endeavours to question the negative image of American women. On the other hand, she tries to enhance some of those features, which are not consonant with the ideals propagated by “Estado Novo”, since the regime promoted social policies that aimed at confining women to their households making them totally dependent on their husbands (Baptista 353–360).

The various female characters the traveler narrator gets to know are, therefore, representative of several aspects which are associated with the struggle for women’s rights, namely, the right to vote, to have a profession, to fight against the social stigma associated with divorced women and single mothers.

The reader gets to know Marga, who is a nurse. Marga had decided to live far from her work place because, in the area where she worked, she did not have the right to vote, and, therefore, she was not able to actively participate in political life (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 14–20).

We become familiar with Mary Anne, who is a divorced lawyer (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 22) and an unconditional defender of the American nation and culture. Mary Anne’s parents were European immigrants who had settled in USA.

We are introduced to Dixie, who is a part-time writer, a fan of extreme sports. Dixie is married, but leads a life completely apart from her husband (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 111–115).
We come to admire Wathea, who is an Afro-American single mother, a highly praised music teacher, and supervisor of several schools (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 146–147).

We also meet Jean, who is a young primary school teacher sharing a modest house with several other young people (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 187–189).

To a certain extent, *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* can be regarded as a tribute to all those American women who manage to have their autonomy, and are active citizens in the American society. The narrative is, therefore, a homage to women and to their role in society regardless of their marital status, religion, or race. This homage conveys some criticism towards the social condition of women in Portugal, who are deprived of all these rights. Portuguese women were totally dependent on their husbands. They had a minor status in society and were politically nonexistent.

The amazement before all those American women does not blur the critical analysis of the traveler narrator and compels her to go beyond appearances in an attempt to uncover the reality behind this image of irreproachable efficiency, fulfillment, and harmony. The fact that the narrator expresses admiration for American women, for their versatility and independence does not hinder her from criticizing the high standards they have to meet (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 81–82). Actually, there are several passages in which the narrator tries to reflect on the Americans’ necessity to occupy their time completely. The narrator considers this tendency a sort of unconscious strategy to camouflage a tragic emptiness of their existence.

It is at a dinner party in Laguna Beach that the narrator finds what she considers to be an example of the American Babbitt – a successful business man who talks to the traveler narrator about happiness and solitude and admits that he has achieved everything in life, but lives in an immense void, even within the family and with his friends. The passage below refers to this episode:

Muita gente que viaja na América procura o “Babbitt”. Todos leram o *Babbitt*; mas nem todos encontraram o “Babbitt”. Eu encontrei-o: foi esse homem em busca da felicidade. Pois “Babbitt” não é, como muita gente julga, o tipo horrendo de comerciante sem alma, representante de uma nação enriquecida à pressa, o *robot* insaciável, mas sim o homem “atrofiado” pela ganância comercial (…), o homem sempre em busca de algo diferente, que quer ter uma atitude digna e que, no entanto, não o consegue por já não lhe ser possível. (Losa, *Ida e Volta* 140–141)

[Many people who travel in America are looking for Babbitt. Everyone has read *Babbitt*; but not everyone has found Babbitt. I found him: it was this man in search of happiness. For “Babbitt” is not, as many people think, the horrendous kind of soulless merchant, the representative of a nation enriched in haste, the insatiable *robot*, but the man “atrophied” by commercial greed (…), the man always looking for something different, who wants to have a dignified attitude and who, however, cannot do so because this is no longer possible.]

Again, and despite being confined to just a few pages, this conversation with Babbitt, makes us realize that this search for the protagonist of Sinclair Lewis is an attempt to demystify a concept, or to ratify a theory: the material
well-being of American society is not synonymous with social perfection, or individual happiness. According to the narrator, Babbitt, with his disillusioned attitude, confirms this thesis. Therefore, *Ida e Volta: À Procura de Babbitt* is not about judging individuals, but rather about analyzing the social system that creates them. Babbitt’s quest is the search for the dark side of American society beyond its golden aura. Although it is a reflection on the existential void that so often afflicts the modern man, it is also, and above all, a reflection on political models and ideological convictions.

It is this surreptitious “however” staining the golden image of American society that makes us realize that this European-Portuguese-German-Jewish, and communist-woman writer had, in fact, travelled to America, both looking for Babbitt, and for Selfhood.

Notes

1 As a matter of fact, Ilse Losa and Óscar Lopes had contacts with publishers in German Democratic Republic, *e.g.*, Verlag der Nation, Aufbau Verlag, Verlag Volk und Welt, which sometimes led them to visit that communist country. This explains the reinforcement of the regime’s vigilance over the activities of these two writers, in particular over their contacts with those publishers. Much of the correspondence between both parties was intercepted and seized by PIDE/DGS. Even so, we owe Ilse Losa and Óscar Lopes the publishing of many Portuguese authors in East Germany thanks to the editing of anthologies of poems and short narratives, *e.g.*, *Portugiesische Erzählungen* [Portuguese short narratives] (1962), *Ich kann die Liebe nicht vertagen* [I cannot postpone love] (1969), *Erkundungen. 30 Portugiesische Erzähler* [Incursions. 30 Portuguese narrative writers] (1973).

2 These documents are available in the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, which hosts the files of the secret services of the regime, PVDE, and PIDE-DGS.

3 A newspaper clipping of the interview can be found in a PIDE-DGS file Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, 28.

4 The assertion, even in the prologue to the narrative, of a first person who is the protagonist of the American tour, results in a kind of affirmation of an autobiographical pact that identifies a coincidence between author, narrator, and character (Lejeune 26). However, the temporal, emotive, and informative distance between the narrator self and the narrated self emphasizes the distance between the planes of the narration and of the happening. It is, therefore, a process of abstraction and narrative mediation, in this measure, close to other types of writing.

5 *Babbitt* is the title of a novel by Sinclair Lewis (1885-1951) published in 1922. The term was later adopted to illustrate the presumption, the dubious values, and the dissatisfaction with life of the American middle class (Gebsattel 1314–1315).

6 Gustav Siebenmann in the article “Sprache als Faktor der kulturellen Identität: Der Fall Kataloniens” [Language as Factor of Cultural Identity: The Case of Catalonia] reflects on the process of the forming of the individual’s cultural identity. According to this author, cultural identity is multidimensional, since each individual belongs to different types of communities (the so-called groups of belonging) of very different dimensions, ranging from the household, to a region of a country, or to the nation to which the individual belongs. Each of these dimensions does not exclude, but rather integrates the smaller dimensions, helping to establish individual identity in a more global or broader level (Siebenmann 231–237). The theoretical model developed by Gustav Siebenmann was the basis of analysis of Ilse Losa’s novels (*Marques, Paisagens da Memória* 21–44).

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