

Acts of Literature: Notes on *The Return of the Caravels*

Facts and Fictions of Ant. Lobo Antunes

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Abstract: The last two decades or so have witnessed a profound theoretical reaction against cultural and aesthetic claims of "literariness." Despite its political appeal, however, such a critical attitude too often forgets the capacity of all canonical cultures to challenge and critique themselves internally. This paper reads the work of António Lobo Antunes, in particular his *The Return of the Caravels*, as an exemplary instance of such internal critique, reworking *The Lusiads* to yoke imperial fantasies of the Age of Discovery to harsher memories of the Portuguese occupation of Angola. Yet, no simple work of counter-imperial demystification, Lobo Antunes's novel does not simply dismiss or destroy the rich epic texture of *The Lusiads*. Instead, it strives to "recycle" the tropes and allusions of the earlier work into a new ethical fabric for our times. In so doing, it also provides an occasion to re-think the value of "literariness" itself: its elasticity, capacity for metamorphoses and status as a record of all that is not only worst but also best in a culture, imperial or anti-imperial, European or otherwise.

A few years ago, in the midst of a colloquium on postcolonial theory at the University of Lisbon, my friend Maria Alzira Seixo—interrupting the proceedings with characteristic and sudden urgency—said to me: "But Leela, what about literature?" Her query, indeed let me call it her challenge, referred, of course, to the increasing marginalisation of "literature" in Literature Stud

ies. But it spoke also to the profound theoretical reaction, over the last two decades or so, against cultural and aesthetic claims of “literariness.” As we might recall, following in the footsteps of Edward Said, postcolonialism, especially, has launched a discursive war against the Western literary canon on the grounds that its pleasures are hopelessly vitiated with imperial structures of attitude and reference. Thus, where once (in the halcyon days of the nineteenth-century novel) the business of reading was haunted by the guilt of unearned leisure, postmodern reading is newly susceptible to the guilt of imperialist collaboration, a sort of armchair colonialism that criticism must combat with ideological determination.

The following paper is a response to this critical climate and so to Maria Alzira Seixo’s question. Its twofold aim is, first, to call for a ceasefire between criticism and literature, and second, given the specificities of my own theoretical persuasion, to demonstrate some ways in which an anti-colonial imperative can fruitfully combine with a defence of literature. I will, however, fulfil my second aim only by proxy, speaking not for myself but of António Lobo Antunes’s *The Return of the Caravels*, a novel that offers an exemplary instance of an anti-colonial, pro-literary practice and that demonstrates, *contra* postcolonialism, the capacity of canonical literary cultures to correct and to challenge themselves internally. All literary production, as Harold Bloom has argued, comprises a recurring struggle between the beginning poet or *ephebe* and their powerful forbears. The pages of *The Return of the Caravels*, I submit, are fraught with the labour of this struggle, predicating the very act of literature on a contiguous refusal, in this case, of the imperial past.

The simple anticolonialism of *Return* is irrefutable even at first glance. Available to reading as a dystopian sequel to Camões’s *The Lusíads*, the novel begins where the epic ends, amplifying the untold story of da Gama’s return to Portugal following his adventure of “discovery”: “The sea ever calm, the wind blowing ever gently, they continued on their way until at length the land of their birth, the land they had never ceased to long for, came once more in sight” (Camões 246). Seizing upon the unspoken conclusion of *The Lusíads*, *Return* renders the occluded scene of imperial homecoming into a linguistic orgy of demystification, a journey to the underworld reminiscent in its mood and metaphoricity of Aime Cesaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955).

Cesaire’s manifesto diagnoses colonialism as the pernicious harbinger of civilisational death. A civilisation that partakes of colonial adventure, he writes, “is a dying civilisation”; and with every act of colonialism “civilisa-

tion acquires another dead weight [...] a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread” (9, 13). It is such images of death and disease that are made to cleave as authorial opprobrium to the disembarking colonials of Antunes’s novel. The man “Luis,” tethered on arrival to the putrefying corpse of his father, will find himself incarcerated in a sanatorium for colonial returnees, witness, with his compatriots, to the death of Lisbon: “[...] accompanying the false guilt of some funeral waiting for the night of cemetery cedars where the deceased evaporated [...] smothered by artificial flowers that smelled like the gauze cherries on hats and which he confused with the naphthalene smell of death” (Antunes 200-201). Elsewhere, coloniser Manuel de Sousa de Sepulveda will seek his fetish in a stuffed bull’s head infested with “ladybugs that had nested in the nostrils and [...] moths that were devouring the tight skin of the jaw” (100). The office of the redoubtable Diogo Cão will, in similar vein, conceal a “coffin shop [...] teeming with the funereal outpourings of gladiolus sprays and the odour of the little wax hands of sick people’s pledges” (168-69). And throughout the novel, sex and death, forgetting their therapeutic opposition, will combine as collaborators giving the lie to life itself in the guise of “funereal” prostitutes, “offering truck drivers the dead pleasures of sex” (112, 102).

So we might say: speaking in the harsh diagnostic idiom of a Cesaire or a Fanon, Lobo Antunes categorically refuses any productive (or life-giving) symbiosis between colonialism and civilisation. “I suddenly understood,” as da Gama says in the novel, “the extreme emptiness of command, no matter how many monuments are built at the anchorages of caravels conquering the world” (159). But—and here is the question that most concerns us—how is this conscientious anticolonial verdict linked to Antunes’s defence of literature? Or what—as Maria Alzira demanded—about literature? To engage with this question let us, for a moment, place *The Return of the Caravels* within that complex tradition of poetic *apologia* germane to modern European literary history. For, I wish to argue, it is here that we might obtain the critical building blocks of our argument.

Referring in the first instance to English literary history, we can discern in a genealogy that descends from Renaissance literary theory through Romanticism to *fin de siècle* aestheticism/Decadence an accretive defence of the imagination conducted in the name of literature, art, poesy. Markedly in its early modern origins, and then more subtly, this tradition of poetic *apologia* is simultaneously and inextricably posed as a critique of history.

Allow me to explain. As is well known, emerging under the aegis of Renaissance humanism, the defence of poetry convention took shape as a belated rejoinder to the early and medieval Christian bias against "untruth." And in an intellectual milieu where Church Councils of 1529, 1565 and 1624 continued to proscribe, in the name of truth, the use of fictitious tales in sermons; and where an eager exhumation of antiquity disclosed, among others, Plato's famous denunciation of poets as liars in *The Republic*, poetry/fiction found itself in severe disciplinary competition with history.

In the ensuing discursive battle, with history laying claim to the privileges of veracity, and literature labouring to delineate apt grounds for its own legitimacy, a crucial separation of domains occurred, distinguishing fact from fiction, empiricism from imagination, etc. Within this schema—perilously abbreviated here—history came gradually to stand for the domain of "similitude" (or familiar and knowable things), and literature/poesy for the domain of "alterity" (or unfamiliar and unknowable things). Thus Mazzoni, much like Tasso, allows poets priority in telling of "all those things of which the people for whose benefit the poem is written has no firm and sure knowledge." But poets, he adds, must give way to historians on all those occasions, "when the events have happened in the present time and in the country of the people" being described (qtd. in Weinberg 63). Thus, history becomes *eo ipso* the factual narrative of nationalism, and poetry a speaking on behalf of that which is foreign, different, unknown.

This separation of domains becomes sharply visibly in Elizabethan England where, as one critic observes, "History was written and read as a spur to patriotism, as the ground of Protestantism, as a text-book of private and public virtue and national prosperity" (Shepherd 39). By contrast and albeit "negatively," disqualified as it was from the order of the same, literariness obtained a potential freedom from the imperatives of nationalism and—if it chose—a congruent utopian empathy with foreign places and peoples. Such is the freedom possessively claimed by Sir Philip Sidney in his *An Apology for Poetry* (1595) and, some centuries later, by Percy Bysshe Shelley's in *A Defence of Poetry* (1840), which claims for poets the unique capacity for "going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, *not our own*" (33; my emphasis). These principles, we might add, António Lobo Antunes understands with a rare acuity, continually giving his readers the sense that he can only write fiction legitimately, if at all, *contra* nationalism,

contra similitude.

While I do not wish to reduce Antunes's work to a rigid or schematic re-enactment of the Poetry versus History tradition in European letters, *The Return of the Caravels* is visibly animated by a nagging dissension between literariness and historicism: official chroniclers police national borders suddenly under threat from a crowd of immigrating Portuguese and Spanish poets; the monarchal Dom Sebastião "robs" the decadent aesthete Oscar Wilde; the carnivalesque excess of "the labyrinthine market" contrasts sharply with the utilitarian "cement building" of officialdom, and so on (149, 3-4). These framing oppositions in the novel, I propose, obtain their complex anticolonial significance via Hegel, for the contest between history and poetry that we have been considering so far achieves a specifically colonial dimension in the German philosopher's influential *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. To elucidate: In this work, zealous as ever in the task of allocating civilisational priority, Hegel makes a crucial distinction between those cultures (good and progressive) that possess history and those (bad and retrograde) that possess only poetry. Thus India, if gifted with "splendid works of poetry," "nevertheless has no history." Only Europe, Hegel insists, with its universal social forms is able to produce the empirically grounded "prose of history" (136). An enmeshment in poetics, therefore, brings with it a civilisational distance from Europe and one (we might add again) that Antunes exploits to the maximum.

But what does it mean to be historical? To have history? It means, in the paraphrase of postmodernism and postcolonialism, to undergo the experience of colonialism: as recipients to suffer a command to supersede indigenous pasts; as agents or actors to participate, in the words of Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clement, in an "annihilating dialectical magic" intent on "the inexorable plot of racism" (24: 70-1). To elaborate further: the self-positing (and pre-eminently European) subject/agent of Hegelian history achieves radical freedom through an expressive unity with the world. But this, let us be warned, is unity imperial-style. For, desperately seeking an external embodiment that expresses him, the Hegelian subject-of-history constantly finds himself faced with an alien, foreign and intractable world that he (lacking the gift of poetry) must ruthlessly excise, cancel, and negate, grinding its rough surfaces into a mirror which reflects him always, everywhere, *ad nauseam*.

History, in these terms, heralds the triumph of narcissistic subjectivity—one marked by a chronic allergy to alterity that requires, furthermore, the negation/co-option of different worlds. So it is, as Robert Young writes, that

Hegelian world history, “not only involves what Fredric Jameson describes as the wresting of freedom from the realm of necessity but always also the creation, subjection and final appropriation of Europe’s others” (2). But what next? What, if any, are the existential rewards of colonial historicism? Having excised, negated, appropriated Europe’s others, the Hegelian subject-of-history, as we know from *The Phenomenology of Mind*, arrives—dare we say “returns”—to a shared community based on reciprocal recognition. Such recognition, however, can only be achieved among counterparts in a milieu where, to borrow some words from Charles Taylor, my interlocutor sees “in me another, but one that is not foreign, which is at one with himself” (153). To put this simply, and somewhat opportunistically, history, *à la* Hegel, offers its (colonial) votaries and adventurers the consolation of a homecoming to a familiar community whose members, as Hegel puts it, “recognise themselves as [...] recognising each other” (231).

It is, arguably, this Hegelian reward of reciprocal recognition that Camões’s voyagers anticipate upon their homeward return “to the land of their birth” at the end of *The Lusíads*. Yet it is precisely the consolation of recognition that Antunes withholds from the colonial populations that flock into Lisbon in *The Return of the Caravels*. Through such withholding he gains illustrious admission to that long tradition of European poetic *apologia*: imposing alterity in the place of similitude, estranging the dubious gains of history within the competing space of literature. His belated colonial *arrivants* bearing the weight of a colonial enterprise extending dubiously from the age of discoveries through to the bloody rebellion in 1970’s Angola, find themselves adrift in a world that they do not recognise and in which they are unrecognisable. After fifty-three years in a cubicle in Bissau, the man with the deranged wife finds in Lisbon a baroque stage-set, a science-fiction fantasy that allows no access to the quotidian, wherein a hall of distorting mirrors brutally severs his image from memories of a pre-colonial childhood in Portugal (Antunes 42).

Manoel de Sousa de Sepulveda suffers a parallel alienation, returning home to the inhospitality of a grumbling brother struggling to inhabit a city in which he is himself utterly foreign and deterritorialised: “Take a good look at somebody who doesn’t know what socialism is all about, an illiterate [...]. He’s just arrived from Africa, poor fellow, he hasn’t been here for a hundred years, he’s been exploiting our little black comrades, he thinks the place belongs to him [...].” (63-64). And Vasco da Gama, no less, travelling back from the mess of history, contemplates “how almost everything had changed in Lisbon since

he’d embarked for Angola to live in the midst of the violent solitude of blacks” (93). The city, in turn, treats him like an unwelcome interloper: “They’d grown so old that the people of the city, who didn’t recognise them, were flabbergasted at the pair of masked old men [...]. The children [...] surrounded them in an uproar of amused curiosity [...]. The women, selling vegetables, startled, froze in the middle of their vending shouts. The colours of the traffic got all mixed up as they passed [...].” (94).

If the agents of history fail in every way to achieve recognition in *The Return of the Caravels*, historicism is itself continually disrupted in the novel through the revolutionary action of literature. The “homogenous empty time” (252, 255) that Walter Benjamin once described as the key symptom of historical consciousness is ferociously diversified through the temporal anarchism of Antunes’s anachronistic simultaneity: caravels jostle with oil tankers on the Tagus, the Infante Dom João’s hunting mastiffs dine voraciously in the company of planters from Carmona, Diogo Cão claims simultaneously to have “commanded the Prince’s ships all along the coast of Africa” and “worked in Angola as an inspector for the Water Company” (47). So too, the “empire of the self-same” (Cixous and Clement 78)—of tedious similitude—that Cixous detects in Hegelian historicism yields under figurative pressure to Antunes’s oxymoronic imagination as he yokes differences together into a disruptive catalogue of monstrosities: “we put our baggage on the ground beyond the agapanthus that mechanical sprinklers were aspersing [...] near the labourers who were working on the drains [...] leading to the soccer stadium [...] as the Cape Verdeans’ tractors crossed paths with the carts carrying the tombs of princesses and piles of arabesques for altars” (2). And finally, the unified and self-positing subject of European (imperial) history, characterised by Mary Louise Pratt as the “seeing-man” who is, at all times and in all places “master-of-all-I-survey” (201-27), is replaced in the narrative by a chronically split and fragmented subject, neither fully observed nor observing, never securely in possession of his own tentative pronoun.

But, a small problem: if indeed, as I have been suggesting, the “magic” of Antunes’s novel relies on his replay of the disciplinary and ideological opposition between literature and history, then how does he deal with the problem of the poet Luís, that could-be versifier for empire (that may-be author of *The Lusíads*), symbolically tethered to history through the burdensome corpse of his father which, as he complains plaintively, he simply “can’t get rid of” (129)? The solution, we might remember, is both ingenious and startlingly lyrical in the midst of this excoriating novel. An experimental healer induces

Luis to sell him the cadaver for use as fertiliser for his medicinal plants thereby transforming the past into compost for an improved future and transcending, albeit briefly, the death that is colonialism.

So, to come to a conclusion: in his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley makes a crucial distinction between disciplines that adhere to the Real and those that conform to the Imagination. In his words, "the cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave" (52). After Hegel, we might claim, as postcolonialism does, that the masters of the colonial encounter are in fact indistinguishable from the slaves they seek to vanquish. Or, as Cesaire puts it, "colonisation works to *decivilise* the colonizer, to *brutalise* him in the true sense of the word [...]" (13). This, it seems to me, is the "moral" if any, of *The Return of the Caravels*. But more so, and true to the hyperbolic imagination of its poetic predecessors, this novel firmly aligns literature on the side of the angels, reminding history that literature, Maria, is alive and kicking.

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