

The Dethronement of Historical and Mythical Figures in Portuguese Novels in the Eighties and Nineties

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Introduction

Portuguese literature in the period after the Carnation Revolution in 1974 is a field of particular interest. Compared to the fiction of other Western countries, history gets a specific and important role for Portuguese writers in the post-modern period, due to what I would define as a *double focus on history*. This double focus is determined on the one hand by the fact that post-modern trends reach Portugal from other countries, and, on the other hand by the radical political and social changes that force the Portuguese into rethinking history.

The discourse of history in post-modern fiction is, generally, a theme of special attention. Claiming this I refer to post-modernist thinkers such as Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon 88) and Hans Bertens (Bertens 97), and not to the widespread opinion that postmodernism is neither political, nor conscious about history (cp the idea of the end of history). Theorists as Hans Bertens argue that a “late” post-modernism, taking over from the 80’s, has very much in common with post-colonial literature and post-structuralism. This understanding of post-modernism realizes that “if representations do not represent the world, they must represent something else and in so doing they will inevitably be political...” and “...it matters more than ever who has authored, or who controls, any given representation” (6). Regarding history, the basic understanding is that a plurality of voices/ controllers of representation appears and starts to relate other versions and other truths of history.

This understanding is supported by Hutcheon's theories on historiographic meta-fiction (88). She argues that postmodernist writers undertake the task to problematize the existing historiography, and to re-interpret and re-write history. She also argues that there is no such thing as one truth; "there are only truths in plural" (65).

The revolution of 1974 and the resulting de-colonization was the end of a 500-year-old empire, of 15 years of colonial war, and of a dictatorship that lasted from 1932 to 1974. The whole idea of the greatness of the empire had for centuries provided a basis for a conception of a so-called national identity, and the end of the empire led to a national crisis of identity. As a consequence, national myths and heroes needed to be re-thought and re-formulated. The traditional discourse of history couldn't bear any longer.

The combination of the political changes in the Portuguese society and the reception of post-modern trends lead to the *double focus on history* mentioned above.

Hypothesis: The deconstruction of the mythical discourse in Portuguese fiction

The on-going discussion of the mythical figures of Portuguese history and their significance for the national identity took its start, according to my analysis, shortly before the revolution, but for the period immediately after the revolution there seems to be a literary vacuum. A few novels are published, as for example Lobo Antunes' *Memória de Elefante* (Antunes 79) and *Os Cus de Judas* (Antunes 79)

Throughout the eighties Portuguese mythology, national history and national identity become the centres of attention for many Portuguese writers, especially for the novelists. We are almost dealing with an explosion in the number of novels that incorporates these themes. The fundamental issue is to dethrone the central heroes of Portuguese history and mythology. These

heroes are re-interpreted, turned upside down and inserted in new, degrading, ironic contexts. I will demonstrate that a special characteristic for this decade is that the degradation concentrates on making the heroes carnal, mortal human beings, by focusing on what Bakhtin calls the grotesque body (65).

In the nineties history and Portuguese historiography continue to be in the focus for a number of Portuguese novelists, but according to my hypothesis, we can observe a transformation of the way in which they represent and contextualize the national heroes. Their treatment of the national heroes is less sarcastic and less ironic than the treatment in the novels of the eighties. This paper will demonstrate that the representation of the national mythological heroes in Portuguese novels changes from the eighties to the nineties. The eighties was a decade of a radical ‘iconoclasm’. The ironic representation of the heroes inverted their status as ideal, mythical heroes and turned them into ‘grotesque bodies’. In the nineties these heroes were interwoven in a context of re-written history and reflections at a meta-fictional level, focusing on showing other versions of historical truth.

The beginning

The polemic on the mythical figures of Portuguese history is first and foremost an issue for novelists, but nevertheless the first step in the process of degradation was taken in poetry. In 1967 Manuel Alegre published *Abaixo el-rei Sebastião* in *O Canto e As Armas*, a poem that dethrones the most central hero of the Portuguese history, Dom Sebastião.

The poem is, on the one hand, a request to the Portuguese people of letting Dom Sebastião die in their conscience. *Matai dentro de vós el-rei Sebastião*. But on the other hand Manuel Alegre addresses explicitly his readers to be Portuguese poets and writers: “É preciso quebrar *na ideia e na canção* / A guitarra fantástica e doente / Que alguém trouxe de Alcácar Quibir” (Alegre 51). He prompts to kill the whole idea

of Dom Sebastião being the incarnation of Dom Afonso, the propagator of the Christian faith. He also requests to annihilate the Portuguese ideology, permeated as it is with the idea of the imperial greatness that has determined the national collective self-conscience. This request was later on was taken serious by many Portuguese writers.

The eighties

The main figure representing the process of the dethronement in the eighties was, without any doubts, Dom Sebastião. José Saramago re-interprets several historical figures, as for instance in *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis* (Saramago 84), where the reader among other figures meets Dom Sebastião, incorporated in a meta-fictive discourse: “...Lá está D. Sebastião no seu niche da fronteira, rapazito mascarado para um carnaval que há-de vir, se não noutra sítio o puseram, mas aqui, então teremos de reexaminar a importância e os caminhos do sebastianismo, com nevoeiro ou sem ele, é patente que o Desejado virá de comboio, sujeito a atrasos” (74-75). By emphasising “reexaminar a importância e os caminhos do sebastianismo” he puts a central question in postmodernism, that is, to rewrite the discourses of history. *Os caminhos do sebastianismo* refer to the historical development of the Portuguese discourse on history regarding the sebastianism, and *a importância do sebastianismo* refers to the importance of sebastianism in the contemporary society.

In Augustina’s *O Mosteiro* (Bessa-Luís 80) the reader meets Belché who is writing Dom Sebastião’s biography. Augustina includes in this way both fiction and historiography, and takes part in the discussion of the fiction and the historiography being both verisimilar, using Hutcheon’s term. (Hutcheon 88) Both literature and historiography are possible truths, since truths only exist in a plural form. The approach of the main protagonist of the novel, Belché, is close to a post-modern approach, in the way that his interest is directed towards

the *interpretation* of the history (historiography), more than towards History itself: “Mais do que a História, Belche amava os seus sussurros e a maneira de os interpretar” (Bessa-Luis 125). The period of Dom Sebastião is weaved together with the period in which the novel takes place, and the two stories only exist by virtue of one another. This is among other things shown in the similarities between the protagonists of the novel and the persons of the biography, for instance between Primo José Bento and Dom Sebastião, and between Josefina and Dona Joana, Dom Sebastião’s mother. This linking between the two periods illustrates on the one hand that the author inevitably refers to her cultural luggage as well as to her contemporary horizon, while writing historical fiction. On the other hand the inter-textual relation between past and present shows to what extent the sebastianism is important in the contemporary time of the novel.

Generally speaking, Augustina questions some of Dom Sebastião’s qualities that have been attributed to him in the historiography, but she does so approaching the theme like the writers of the nineties. She is not ironic nor degrading the national heroes to the same extent as other writers from the eighties.

In the beginning of the nineties, Dom Sebastião is finally given the deathblow by Almeida Faria in the novel *O Conquistador* (90), a novel that, according to my analysis marks the end of the eighties approach to historical and mythical figures. The author focuses specially on one of the main qualities of Dom Sebastião, namely his lack of interest in women.

According to Bahktin, the world order is denied by inverting the universal truths. In the traditional and widespread image of Dom Sebastião, he represents the sublime, the high, the ideal, in the shape of a hero who fights for the interest of his country. In Faria’s version, he has become a representative of the low, the profane, shown by focusing on his physical, carnal

traits and needs. By showing the similarities and differences between the two characters the degradation is made evident. On the one hand, there are clearly physical similarities between the two, but, on the other hand, Faria's Sebastião is created with qualities that are diametrically opposite to the qualities of the mythical Dom Sebastião. The traditional historiography claims that he was afraid of women and that he had no interest in carnal lust. Faria creates a person who dedicates his life to satisfying his own and women's carnal needs. The incarnation of Dom Sebastião has returned with one purpose, not to save Portugal, but to satisfy women: "Insistia Alcides que, sendo eu a reencarnação há séculos aguardada, devia dedicar-me em exclusiva àquilo em que o Outro estrondosamente falhara ao manifestar pelo belo sexo uma aversão extraordinária" (Faria 74). The reader follows Sebastião in his adventures of conquering women in the first part of the novel, and in the later part in being used for prostitution by several persons.

The incorporation of words with a special sublime meaning in a traditional historiographic context also has a degrading effect on the national hero interpreted in a revisionist context. The title of the novel, *The Conqueror*, which traditionally has been associated with the Portuguese discovery and with the expansion of the empire, is given a seductive meaning. Something similar is the case with the inverted meanings of "O Desejado", "Honra Lusitana" and "a patrioca tarefa", all traditionally related to the expansion of the Christian faith, and in this new context they are concepts degraded to a low, carnal sphere: "Calhou bem, e daí por diante todas as turistas fizeram parte dos meus feitos fictícios, sempre na patriótica tarefa de defender a boa fama da honra lusitana" (Faria 40).

Historical and mythical figures from the discoveries

Other Portuguese figures that undergo a process of dethronement during the eighties are historical and mythical figures from the period of the discoveries. One of the most central novels dealing with this is *As Naus* (Antunes 88) by António Lobo Antunes, a novel that has transplanted many Portuguese historical heroes to the period immediately after the revolution in 1974. The historical figures have, in this new context, just returned to Portugal from the previous Portuguese colonies, and the borderlines between the two eras (the period of discoveries, in which the Portuguese gain, and the post-revolution period, in which the Portuguese lose) disappears in the same way as we could observe it in *O Mosteiro* by Agustina Bessa-Luís.

Lobo Antunes uses the heroes of the past to show the absurd conditions in contemporary Portugal, that is, the conditions of the Portuguese returned from the former colonies, and he demonstrates as well his critical attitude towards the existing traditional national discourse of history by introducing historical figures in the post-colonial context. He rethinks history in post-modernist terms by thinking, on the one hand, critically, and, on the other, contextually.

The dethronement of the Portuguese national heroes is carried out by means of re-creating the mythical figures with qualities contrary to those they have in the traditional discourse of history. The traditional images of the national heroes are negated by means of inserting them in a ridiculous, absurd and insignificant existence, where basic human needs predominate. This is the case of for instance the character Luís who points directly at Camões. Luís appears as a foolish person, sitting in the harbour guarding his father's dead body.

One of the most common ways of dethronement in *As Naus* is focusing on what Bakhtin designates the grotesque body. The combination of the grotesque body and sublime, spiritual elements is very common in *As Naus*. One example is

that the protagonist of one of the major works of world literature, Don Quixote, is related to human stools: “Urinei a pensar no relojero surdo-mudo, ... , a pensar em Dom Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra que nos gritava por vezes episódios esquisitos de Dulcineias e moinhos e acrescentava excitadíssimo,...” (Antunes 24).

Illness and death are as well important elements in the theory of the grotesque body. The creation of figures suffering of syphilis, herpes, malaria and scurvy contributes to the dethronement of many characters. Death appears in comic and ironic images several times combined with a terminology that as a contrast refers to the sublime. This is the case of for instance. “glorioso defunto Manoel Maria Barbosa Du Bocage, ...” (50) as well as “senhoria defunto” (52). The act of growing old and the death are both part of the low sphere, but at the same time these elements mean innovation and change, which could lead us to interpret the presence of the death in the novel as an expression of the desire that these figures die in the Portuguese memory, giving space to innovation and change in the Portuguese mentality.

The nineties

In the nineties, a national discourse of history continues to be in focus for rather many Portuguese writers, but – as mentioned – it’s possible to observe a change in the way the historical and mythical figures are represented. The essential degradation took place in the eighties, and in the nineties it was time to rethink, rewrite and reinterpret history, with less obvious sarcasm and parody. New light is thrown on History, and other truths are told. Reflecting and commenting on the existing historiography as well as being self-reflective are two main characteristics of this decade.

This is valid in the case of Mário Cláudio who relates the discovery of the sea route to India in his work *A Peregrinação a*

Barnabé das Índias (98). He focuses his truth on an ignored side of the discourse of history: the presence of the Jews on the trip to India. The reader experiences the trip through the eyes of the Jew Barnabé, falsely converted into Christianity.

The apparently religious approach is not meant as a promotion of the Judaism, but rather as a way to put into perspective the Portuguese idea of being a Chosen People, and with the intention of questioning the Portuguese self-perception. Barnabé's comparison between the Portuguese and some central Jewish characters leaves the Portuguese in an ordinary and ironic light.

The novel refers in an intertextual way to a certain discourse of history, to a complex of myths that has been determining the Portuguese national identity for a long time, but the novel refers as well to a long literary tradition going back to Camões. The presence of the mostrengo is a clear reference to Camões, but the version of *Os Lusíadas* "Eu, levantando as mãos ao santo coro / Dos Anjos, que tão longe nos guio, / *A Deus pedi que removesse os duros / Casos, que Adamastor contou futuros*" (141) on how the Portuguese managed to pass the mostrengo because God heard Vasco da Gama's pray, is here negated. Instead Barnabé's Jewish pray seem to be the motive that calms the mostrengo: "... se deitou o infeliz a recitar, 'hodou ladonaye ki tob, ki léolam hasdo, yodou ladonái hasdo véniflétav liduné adam'. E de novo mergulhou, e de novo regressou à tona, e havia aquele imenso arruído proporcionado entretanto lugar ao silêncio dos vastos templos vazios. Serenava o Atlântico como se sobre ele tivesse baixado a mão do Criador, impondo a ordem onde a desordem reinara..." (Cláudio 172).

The novel deconstructs a myth, while creating another. Little by little a myth is constructed centred on Barnabé. In the end he appears as a Messiah-a-like figure: "E acreditavam os mareantes, transposta a reticência primeira que envolve o portador da diversidade, que fora o rapaz abençoado com os dons subsequentes à infusão do Divino Espírito. [...] E ao

enfaquearem-se numa rixa dois grumetes borrachos, apartou-os Barnabé como quem desvia os juncos do caminho que leva, descreveu uma cruz sobre o golpe das navalhas, e logo estancou a hemorragia, e as feridas cicatrizaram, e não se cansavam os homens de render graças a Deus pelo guia com que os contemplara” (250).

The interesting point is that it is a recognizable process in relation to the Portuguese complex of myths. The following example shows how Baranabé is prophesied to expand geographically, as well as we know the Portuguese was prophesied to do it: “..., e não serás tu quem permanece, mas O que me enviou, e perante o Seu trono descansarás da jornada, e às Índias verdadeiras aportaste, pois que sempre se alojaram elas nos ocultos de ti, *e de tamanho riqueza te revestes que nenhum reino te ultrapassará, ...*” (200-201). The presence of another myth minimizes the importance of Portuguese complex of myths.

Obviously the novel also questions and re-interprets the figure of Vasco da Gama. We are dealing with an image differing from the traditional one, but the extremely sarcastic tone, we could observe for instance in *As Naus*, has disappeared. What does appear is a character with human characteristics, far from the image of the courageous hero.

In the course of the novel, Vasco da Gama's personality is revealed. He represents apparently a strong and eloquent figure in the beginning of the voyage, but the reader already has an image of the old bitter da Gama as well as of the child Vasco who was afraid of jellyfishes. And little by little he appears as a person with human feelings, primarily fear, but also desire, physical as well as material. The fear appears, on the one hand, in inner dialogues and dreams. The reader is confronted with a vulnerable and horrified young man, afraid of failure and of being caught as a coward. He dreams about being ridiculized by the men on the boat: “e é Vossa Senhoria tão cobarde como a

galinha na hora de lhe aplicarem ao pescoço o facalhão” (Cláudio 131). On the other hand, the omnipresent narrator changes the image of a hero into an image of an apprehensive person, who cannot bear his responsibility: “E ajustando o óculo, varria o pobre do comandante a linha do infinito, e intimava o vigia a que se mantivesse alerta, e refugiava-se entre os livros e as cartas, e como um menino chorava, esgadelhando-se de susto, esborratando de ranho a escrita das folhas do roteiro da viagem” (38). In the end Vasco’s fear is expressed through Barnabé’s thoughts. He is able to see how insecure Vasco is and how important his brother Paulo da Gama is for the realisation of the voyage.

The image of Vasco da Gama created in the novel is far from the traditional one, but we can as well observe an approach to the figure that differs from the representation of the figure in for instance *As Naus*. The general description of the figure is canalized from extreme degradation and sarcastic treatment of the historical figure, into a desire of telling another truths of history.

Conclusion

Concluding, one could state that it is possible to observe a change in the way of treating historical-mythical figures in Portuguese literature, from the radical iconoclasm of the eighties to the reduced sarcasm and further interest in focusing on the variety of truths of the past of the nineties.

It is of course necessary to analyse a greater number of novels in order to be able to determine a tendency, but this study is meant as a preliminary study to be extended in a more extensive research.

Concluding, one could ask: are the post-modern theories applicable to Portuguese literature after 1974? As to the literature of the eighties, Bahktin’s theory of the grotesque body is very relevant to point out how present and strong the process of degradation was in the Portuguese prose fiction of this

decade. It is as well a substantial aid in understanding that the meaning of dethronement of the heroes is done in order to change Portuguese collective mentality and to leave space for something new to happen in the Portuguese self-understanding. Concerning the theories developed in the post-modern period as in this case Hutcheon's theory on historiographic meta-fiction, I can conclude that these theories are relevant and promising for a further analysis of the specific Portuguese literary conditions and expressions. Where the prose fiction of the 80es is occupied with dethroning every historical-mythical national hero, the novels of the 90es emphasise increasingly the contextual understanding of history and the critical attitude towards the traditional discourse on history. But it is important to underline that Hutcheon's theories are written in an American-Canadian context and may therefore not be fulfilling for a study in Portuguese literature. More specific European theorists as Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema might help us to determine a particular Portuguese post-modern literature. Especially the theories on how post-modernism since the eighties approaches post-structuralism might be promising as well as theories on post-colonial literature can help us to understand the specific Portuguese case.

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