

Mia Couto or the Art of Storytelling

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Abstract. Although a great deal has by now been written about Mia Couto, the key to his exceptional success remains largely unexplained. Why should he appeal so widely, especially to those readers who know little or nothing about Mozambique? What can such readership find in a prose so replete with “Mozambicanisms” and so heavily accented by an invented language? Couto started his literary journey as a poet and he has written novels as well as a number of plays, but this article focuses on his short stories, or *contos*, for it is in the short stories that Couto achieves the greatest degree of literary originality, exhibits the most notable poetry, creates the most imaginative language, and reveals the most acute psychological insights. The article examines in its appropriate chronology the whole of Mia Couto’s corpus of short stories, with a view to assessing their literary qualities. The aim is both to explain why the author excels in a genre not so widely practised and to illustrate the manner in which language is related to theme within a very specific African context.

In 1999, the Mozambican writer Mia Couto was awarded the Prémio Vergílio Ferreira. This was a great honour for someone only 43 years old, and whose oeuvre consists largely of short stories. By then, however, Couto was not only an established writer in his own country but he was well known throughout the Portuguese-speaking world, where his books sell in large numbers. Although a great deal by now has been written about him, the key to his exceptional success remains largely unexplained. Why should Mia Couto appeal so widely, especially to those readers who know little or noth-

ing about Mozambique? What can such readership find in a prose so replete with “Mozambicanisms” and so heavily accented by an invented language?

Couto started his literary journey as a poet and he has written novels as well as a number of plays, but I want here to focus on his short stories, or *contos*, for they represent in my view the essence his work. It is in the short stories that Couto achieves the greatest degree of literary originality, exhibits the most notable poetry, creates the most imaginative language, and reveals the most acute psychological insights. It is also in the *contos* that he develops a body of writing chronicling the evolution of the country in which he lives. Finally, it is plain, as I shall explain later, that his novels are, in large measure at least, constructed according to a “short story” blueprint.

The writing of short stories has always been a most difficult art, which very few contemporary writers attempt. Among the present canon of twentieth-century writers, only a small number are the crafters of short stories. Interestingly, it has been, in the recent past, a genre more widely essayed in non-European settings—whether in North or South America—than it is in the continent in which such writing flourished in the nineteenth century. Perhaps it is today a form of literary expression particularly well suited to the new world, frontier spaces, the far reaches of empire, or even more, to the postcolonial experience. Perhaps it is a type of writing that remains closer to the orality of everyday life, and such orality is often the mark of “new” or “marginal” areas.

Whatever the reasons for Mia Couto’s inclination to compose short stories, and I shall explore them in detail in this article, it is important to discuss the personal and historical context within which he has been writing. Mia Couto was born in 1955 in the Mozambican city of Beira, where his parents had settled. His father was a journalist, a writer of poetry, who was both an opponent of the Salazar regime and someone with a great interest in the lives of Africans in the midst of whom he lived.

O meu pai era jornalista e era poeta. Ele publicou cinco ou seis títulos em Moçambique, uma poesia pouca íntima, mas também dois dos livros foram livros que tentaram ser livros de preocupação social, em relação ao conflito da situação existente em Moçambique. Mas eram livros em que a consciência política era mais antifascista, liberal, democrática, mas não questionando ainda a questão colonial.¹

His mother knows little about her own origins, since she was an orphan, but what Mia Couto mentions in the same interview is, in my view, signifi-

cant: “Ela ficou órfã, abandonada [...] até o nome dela foi reescrito, foi inventado para ela não ter uma ligação com a sua mãe—uma ‘senhora do pecado.’”

Two features of his early life are particularly important. The first is that his parents were not typical Portuguese settlers in that they did not seek merely to live a “colonial” existence, insulated from the local population. Beira was notoriously a socially and politically conservative city, where race relations were not good, and the Coutos’ ways set them aside from the bulk of the local white community. The second aspect of his childhood that is relevant, therefore, is that right from the beginning he lived and interacted with peers from different racial and social backgrounds, particularly black and *mestiço* children. Although in the formal sphere of school and home, he largely lived the life of the typical European youth, the rest of his time was spent with boys and girls from all horizons. The fact that his parents, unlike most other settlers, did not object to such a lifestyle enabled the young Mia to grow up in close proximity to Africans and to absorb their language and traditions.

Couto, consequently, is a Mozambican, not just in the sense that he was born in that territory but in the more significant way that he partook of the whole of its (at least urban) diversity when he was a child. Crucially, he also understands the African languages most commonly used in southern Mozambique. What matters for the understanding of his work, however, is what this complex, and somewhat contradictory, Beira childhood meant to him.

Eu guardo da minha infância, assim, uma coisa muito esbatida, um ponto de referência, as histórias que eram contadas, dos velhos que moravam perto, vizinhos do outro lado da rua, de um outro mundo, e eu recordo desse mundo encantado até algumas histórias, sobretudo como eles me deixaram uma marca.²

[R]ecordo-me das histórias que me eram contadas—quer em português, quer em chissena—pelos velhos e pelas pessoas que pertenciam a esse mundo, que transportavam esse outro imaginário. [...] [E]u ainda hoje volto muito a histórias que me foram contadas há muitos, muitos anos, das quais só me lembro de pedaços, de coisas que me assustavam, que me tiravam o sono como criança.³

Couto went to Lourenço Marques, the capital, for his secondary and university education and it is there that he became a supporter of FRELIMO, the anti-colonial movement, which came to power in 1975, following a ten-year armed struggle and the return of democracy in Portugal. At that time, he was

one of a number of young white Mozambicans to join the nationalists and to commit himself to the socialist politics that they advocated. He interrupted his medical studies after the 25th of April 1974 when he was asked by FRELIMO to become active in journalism. He worked successively for *Tribuna* (with Rui Knopfli), the *Agência de Informação Nacional*, the review *Tempo* and finally the newspaper *Notícias*. He resigned from this last post in 1985, partly because he was dissatisfied with the lack of professionalism in his work and partly because he no longer wanted to be a “functionary” of the state. He resumed university, this time in biology, and started working in environmental studies, chiefly in research and mostly on NGO contracts.

In 1983, he published his first book, a volume of poetry—*Raiz de Orvalho*, one of the early collection of poems in the country that moved away from the militant and political towards the personal, intimate and subjective. The book was well received, as were others, in the same literary vein, among those issued by the Association of Mozambican Writers, at the time one of the few outlets for home-grown literature.⁴ Couto and his fellow versifiers (Patraquim, Viegas, White, Baptista, Artur, Bucuane, Muteia and Saúte) followed in the footsteps of a generation of strikingly original Mozambican poets, of whom the most influential undoubtedly were José Craveirinha and Rui Knopfli. Naturally, they all wanted to make their mark in ways that differed from those

of their elders.

Couto, however, had already started writing brief prose pieces, *contos* or short stories, based on his interest in the life histories, fantasies or rumours that he uncovered as a working journalist, and influenced by memories of storytelling harking back to his childhood. His first volume, *Vozes Anoitecidas*, was published in Mozambique in 1986. In 1988, he put out a collection of the weekly *crônicas* he had written for the newspaper *Notícias* in the previous two years. Both books were immensely successful in Mozambique and were reprinted by the Portuguese publisher *Caminho*, who has now not only brought out all of his work but has published other Mozambican writers like Suleiman Cassamo, Eduardo White, Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa and Paulina Chiziane. Couto has received prizes for *Vozes Anoitecidas*, *Cronicando*, and his first novel, *Terra Sonâmbula*. His literary fame has grown steadily and it has undoubtedly helped raise the status of Mozambican writing in the Portuguese-speaking world.⁵

Mia Couto has published five novels, to which I will refer briefly, but it is

as a writer of short stories that I should like to approach his work, for I am convinced that this is the medium through which he has succeeded in creating a new (Mozambican) form of prose writing that will endure.⁶ Although *Vozes Anoitecidas* was the first book of short stories Couto published, partly (I suspect) because it is more “literary,” the roots of his writing is to be found in his journalistic work. In this respect, then, the collection of *contos* that came out in *Cronicando* is a useful starting point for the study of his very unusual writing. Three features of the *crônicas* immediately stand out, and all three are at the heart of all of his subsequent prose. They have to do with the choice of character, the way in which the story is recounted and the highly unexpected, unreal or discordant development of events.

The first is the ability to focus on highly distinctive characters, a (real or invented) person, or animal, either because of who they are, or because of the situation in which they find themselves, or, finally, because of their behaviour. All three aspects are important and may well overlap, for the point is to bring to the attention of the reader a type, or range, of characters that are often not just strange, different, but also behave in a highly unusual fashion. The key is that they may appear normal, and then reveal themselves to be odd, or they may be distinctly bizarre, unreal, right from the start and yet behave in straightforward and sensible ways. Whatever the situation, the characters are inevitably bound up in events, incidents, or actions that are simultaneously within *and* outside the common range of human experience, beyond the pale of everyday life. The hallmark of Couto’s writing, then, is the ability to present these characters, *as though* they were perfectly ordinary, *as though* what they were doing, what was happening to them, was in every respect logical. In other words, the characters chosen serve not just to illustrate the point that the tale will make, as they would in all short stories, but also, and maybe more importantly, to challenge, or interrogate, the reader’s assumptions and expectations. The great originality of characterisation, therefore, is the ability to portray seemingly normal personages involved in plausibly fantastic situations.

The second trait of Couto’s prose writing is the manner in which the story is told. The strict discipline involved in having to write newspaper *crônicas* to a set limit has influenced or, better, conditioned the author’s style from the outset. For Couto, implicitly or explicitly, a *conto* is in practice a piece that is limited to a very small number of words indeed. Whilst other short story writers have also published brief prose fiction, they have most often written at different length. What is noteworthy in Couto’s work is the virtually stan-

dard size of all his short stories. Although this may seem a relatively trivial point, I believe it is in fact crucial, for in this case writing to length is one of the main reasons why the *contos* work so well. The very brevity of the piece brings out in the writer a conciseness of expression, both in the text and in the dialogue, which sharpens inventiveness and heightens imagination.

The third attribute of the *crônicas* is the unexpected ending, or the twist at the conclusion of the tale. To some extent, this is a feature of all good short story writing and it is commonly found in authors as far apart as Somerset Maugham and Richard Carver. Nevertheless, Mia Couto has perfected the art to a degree simply unknown in contemporary Western literature, and even unusual in the so-called “magic realism” from Latin America. Indeed, it might even be said that it is the way in which the Mozambican writer wraps up his stories that is their most original aspect. What is undeniable is that Couto constructs the *contos* around the finale, aiming always to close them in a strikingly unexpected manner. This is achieved in many different ways, depending on who the characters are and what has happened to them, but the key is the element of surprise. Couto’s stories are very largely revealed for what they truly are at the very last moment—and sometimes not even then.

Let me illustrate what I mean by means of a closer look at the first *crônica* published in the Mozambican version of *Cronicando*.⁷ The piece, “A Velha e a Aranha,” is apparently about a mother waiting for her son to come back from the army. The first sentence encapsulates the way in which Couto creates a fundamental disjuncture, a juxtaposition of real and unreal, of fact and fiction, within an apparently banal setting:

Deu-se em época onde o tempo nunca chegou. Está-se escrevendo, ainda por mostrar a verdade caligrafada [...]. Uma mulher, oculta de face, entretinha suas vidas numa casinha tão pequena, tão mínima que se ouvia o roçar das paredes umas de encontro às outras. O antigamente ali se arrumava [...]. Sentada, imovente, a mulher presenciava-se sonhar. Naquela inteira solidão, ela via seu filho regressando.⁸

This opening is not only a model of brevity but it sets the tone: an ordinary person in ordinary circumstances is about to live through an extra-ordinary event.

The old woman, sensing that her son is about to return, prepares for this happy event by donning her best outfit. She then notices a cobweb under the roof. Intrigued, she waits (a long time) for its creator—it turns out to be a

small green spider—to appear. The spider requests silence, so as not to be disturbed. The two talk and agree that they are both waiting. The old woman settles in for the (long) haul. Finally, she hears the sounds of boot steps. The story, in other words, unfolds “normally.” However, this is how it ends:

Encontraram a velha em estado de retrato, ao dispor da poeira. Em todo o seu redor, envolvente, uma espessa teia. Era como um cacimbo, a memória de um fumo. Ao seu lado, sem que se vislumbresse entendimento, estava um par de botas negras, lustradas, sem gota de poeira.⁹

The force of the story lies, as I indicated above, in the way in which the three aspects of the telling intermingle. What Couto likes best, when he can, is to leave a *conto* without obvious resolution, without simple closure. For him, a short story is not a fable; it is not edifying but symbolic. And it is in this respect that his writing, though influenced by local oral culture, is not really derivative of the African tradition of orature, which is almost always didactic.

In order to demonstrate how Couto's technique is consistent over time, I now turn to the first story of his most recent collection: “O menino no sapatinho.”¹⁰ Here too the tale is of the relationship between identity, loss, time and space; here too the focus is on the relationship between mother and son. Again, the account is plausibly simple, if entirely fantastic: a child was born unusually small:

Era uma vez o menino pequenito, tão minimozito que todos seus dedos eram mindinhos. Dito assim, fino modo, ele, quando nasceu, nem foi dado à luz mas a uma simples fresta de claridade.¹¹

The mother rejoices in the fact that her son is undemanding, either in food or affection. He is so slight that even his tears float up to the ceiling. Because he is small she uses one of her husband's shoes as a cradle, but he is angry at the undignified use of his footwear and threatens forcibly to empty it. She now bemoans her child's size and, come Christmas, begs that he be returned to a normal dimension. Following the Western tradition she places the shoe, with the child, under the improvised Christmas tree. She worries all night. On Christmas morning she rushes to see what has happened:

Dentro do sapato, porém, só o vago vazio, a redonda da concavidade do nada. O

filho desaparecera? Não para os olhos da mãe. Que ele tinha sido levado por Jesus, rumo aos ceus, onde há um mundo apto para crianças [...]. De relance, ainda notou que lá o tecto já não brilhavam as lágrimas do seu menino. Mas ela desviou o olhar, que essa é a competência de mãe: o não enxurgar nunca a curva onde o escura faz extinguir o mundo.¹²

Although perhaps slightly less unexpected an ending than the first story, there is nevertheless an absence of closure, or rather a closing that does not “resolve” the riddle of the tale itself. Here too, therefore, the *conto*’s freshness lies in the juxtaposition of the improbable with the poetic. The author himself wants to express nothing more than a light whisper, the shadow of a sentiment, as it might have emerged in the heart of a sad mother.

Across the decade and a half that spans these two stories, Couto has remained true to his vision of the short story. We have seen how these tales are constructed. Let us now look more closely at the style and language in which they are written. The author is famous for his inventiveness with the Portuguese he uses. He is often compared with that other well-known creator of “African” Portuguese, the Angolan Luandino Vieira. Yet, above and beyond the fact that they both, writing over thirty years apart, have fashioned what is recognisably a different literary language from that used in Portugal, there is little in common between the two. Perhaps the only link is the homage they pay to the Brazilian writer, Guimarães Rosa, who was at once a very fine writer and a pioneer in the invention of a locally based version of Portuguese, one that integrated the language spoken in its local setting.¹³

I do not intend here to give a linguistic analysis of Couto’s writing, an enterprise that would require a much more systematic study of the current Mozambican Portuguese language than is possible in an article.¹⁴ I should like instead to make a little clearer how the author fashions his prose and give a brief assessment of its undoubted qualities. It is relevant at this stage to distinguish between the short stories and the novels, as indeed there are differences in style between the two. Nor should these differences be glossed over. Nevertheless, what, from my point of view, is most noticeable is how much the novels are written like short stories. Indeed, a study of the longer prose work would only highlight the linguistic characteristics of the *contos*.

The novels are divided into a large number of (usually) short chapters. Each chapter exhibits some or all of the features discussed above—particularly as concerns the openings—even if, naturally, their ending must allow for

some continuity. But since the short stories, as I have shown, are themselves never properly “closed,” the parallel with the novels’ chapters is quite clear. Moreover, the construction of the novels is not so much cumulative, or even linear, as it is circular—by which I mean that there is no standard plot development as such but rather a series of events, or accounts, which may or may not be resolved at the end. What matters, and in *this* way Couto’s novels are very African, is the road travelled rather than the point of arrival. This is best demonstrated in the author’s main novel, *Terra Sonâmbula*,¹⁵ undoubtedly the emblematic prose work of postcolonial Mozambique at the height of the civil war.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is equally noticeable in his two other main novels, *A Varanda do Frangipani*¹⁷ and *O Último Voo do Flamingo*,¹⁸ where the endings, again, fail to bring a sense of closure.¹⁹

Terra Sonâmbula opens thus:

Naquele lugar, a guerra tinha morto a estrada [...]. A estrada que agora se abre a nossos olhos não se entrecruza com outra nenhuma. Está mais deitada que os séculos, suportando sozinha toda a distância [...].²⁰

The first paragraph of the second chapter is even clearer, from the point of view of the link with short story writing:

Quero pôr os tempos, em sua mansa ordem, conforme esperas e sofrências. Mas a lembranças desobedecem, entre a vontade de serem nada e o gosto de me roubarem do presente. Acendo a estória, me apago a mim. No fim destes escritos, serei de novo uma sombra sem voz.²¹

And the book’s last sentences are as follows:

Me apetece deitar, me anichar na terra morna [...]. Mais adiante segue um miúdo com passo lento. Nas suas mãos estão papéis que me parecem familiares. Me aproximo e, com sobressalto, confirmo: são os meus cadernos [...]. Movidas por um vento que nascia não do ar mas do próprio chão, as folhas se espalham pela estrada. Então, as letras, uma por uma, se vão convertendo em grãos de areia e, aos poucos, todos meus escritos se vão transformando em páginas de terra.²²

What is interesting about the ending of *Terra Sonâmbula* is how similar it is to that of most of his short stories. Not only is it not “possible” from the

perspective of what has been happening to the main characters in the novel, but also it is fantastic in the sense that it transmutes the fictitious into the factual. Above all, like his *contos*, it fails to conclude. The last few lines serve only to close the circle in the sense that they suggest a continuation of that elusive dialectic between the words that produce an account of events and the soil that holds the country's cultural heritage. The novel is a chronicle of a tragedy unfolding. It serves to impart a sense of the mindless journey on which the inhabitants of this cursed land are embarked. Like the short stories, therefore, *Terra Sonâmbula* allows us to feel, rather than comprehend, what is taking place.

Of course, Couto's novels are much more explicitly about the history of independent Mozambique, and in this way touch much more directly than the short stories on the question of the country's identity and the calamity of its postcolonial condition. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are also, and, I would argue, are primarily, about constructing a literary language that can account for such a history in what might be termed culturally indigenous writing. For this reason, they are not simply an expression of the complexity of the experience of the country since independence, but they are above all an attempt to root that experience in a locally meaningful context—that is, one that is in consonance with the traditions and beliefs of the majority of its inhabitants. Thus, the novels are more overtly ambitious. They aim to create a body of culturally significant prose writing that bridges the gap between the modern, even post-modern, circumstances in which the country finds itself and the “traditional” foundations from which the ruling elites all too often want to dissociate themselves.

Here, *A Varanda do Frangipani* is quite unambiguous. Ostensibly about an enquiry into the death of the governor of an old people's home, the novel is in fact a disquisition on how the country's modernity is at the expense of its cultural roots. The frangipani tree is the link with the past and the enquiry, predictably, does not achieve its aims. Here, again, I can do no better than quote the last paragraph of the novel:

Aos poucos, vou perdendo a língua dos homens, tomado pelo sotaque do chão. Na luminosa varanda deixo meu último sonho, a árvore do frangipani. Vou ficando do som das pedras. Me deito mais antigo que a terra. Daqui em diante, vou dormir mais quieto que a morte.²³

The inmates, among whom is an old Portuguese man, decide to return to

the roots of the frangipani tree rather than suffer the madness of the “real” world. Tradition overcomes the blindness and futility of modernity. As in *Terra Sonâmbula*, the concluding sentences bring together the words with the soil, as though it is truly the earth that shelters the “reality” worth preserving.

A Varanda do Frangipani, however, also illustrates my point about the genesis of Couto’s novels, for it undoubtedly is a novel that is most obviously constructed as a succession of chapters closely following the patterns of his short story writing style. It is in this respect, therefore, quite literally a collection of connected *contos* about the characters that appear, in the tale, either as residents or outsiders. Although the novel is evidently more than the mere appending of separate accounts, what makes it so attractive is the quite unique (in terms of contemporary literature) way in which it constructs the narrative by way of self-contained and finely rounded sections. The device is the apparently straightforward report given by each character of the death of the director. In reality, each chapter is the story of one life as recounted, in fact as in fantasy, by those who reject an objective, modern, and “external” explanation of their lives.

This brings us back to the short stories. If in the novels Mia Couto is concerned to bear testimony to the history of Mozambique as it is unfolding, in the *contos* he allows himself complete freedom. As he himself says, he does not seek the stories out; they come at him: “Olha, as pessoas que convivem comigo, *constroem* as histórias que me vêm contar. Episódios que vêm no meio da rua e me vêm dar o instrumento que é o material para fazer depois um trabalho que é um trabalho de artesanato.”²⁴ This point is critical, for it explains why the short stories have such a distinct edge. It is the fact that they issue from the “real” world as it touches the author that makes them both original and arresting. It is almost as though they could not be invented. Reality is much stranger than fiction. The novels, by contrast, are, in my view, more deliberately constructed for the purpose of rendering into literature the more general narrative of the country. And, while they follow the same style as the short stories, both their ambition and their length make them far less “spontaneous,” or fresh.

Thus, one undoubted quality of the short stories is their instant quirkiness, this powerful sense that they have materialised “out-of-nowhere.” Not because they have not been chosen and crafted meticulously, since they quite clearly have been, but simply because they usually manage to confound utterly the quiet, implicit, and perhaps lazy, expectations of the reader. A sec-

ond aspect of their originality is the absolute coherence with which fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, are woven together. This is not achieved, as with other writing (for instance, in some magic realist or even postmodernist literature), in the all-too-deliberate overlay of the actual and the invented, so that the two are still recognisably distinct. Rather, it comes about through the exposition of an apparently quite “objective” reality that only incidentally happens to be an admixture of the factual and fictive.

Moreover, the importance of such a literary construct does not simply lie in the exploitation of the effects achieved by such disparity. Quite the reverse: the originality of Couto’s writing is that it is precisely this blend that makes up the “authentic” life of the stories. Whereas in contemporary “postmodern” writers like Rushdie, for example, the contrast is often played for effect, for Mia Couto there is no such (crude) undertaking: it is quite simply objectively the case that life is an unexplainable combination of fact and fantasy. He writes, pointedly, in the epigraph to *Vozes Anoitecidas*:

O que mais dói na miséria é a ignorância que ela tem de si mesma. Confrontado com a ausência de tudo, homens abstêm-se do sonho, desarmando-se do desejo de serem outros. Existe no nada essa ilusão de plenitude que faz parar a vida e anoitecer as vozes.²⁵

Hence, what makes his stories so vivid is the way in which they draw the reader into a world, as real as any, where all boundaries are put into question, when not completely erased.²⁶

Almost every story demonstrates this characteristic but, in order to clarify more fully what I mean, I shall refer to one that Couto himself has identified as triggering in him the wish to write in this way. It is the *conto* that appears in *Vozes Anoitecidas* as “As baleias de Quissico.” He says:

Depois, em 1985, comecei a ouvir umas histórias que vinham ligadas à guerra, como aquela história da baleia [...]. e pensei que havia de haver uma maneira de contar aquelas histórias, mantendo a *graça* e a *agilidade* das pessoas que mas contavam [...].²⁷ (my italics)

The *conto* refers to a man who hears about a whale, near Quissico, that disgorges bounties at night. The event, connected to the very real delivery of supplies by South African submarines to the armed opposition, RENAMO, is

transmuted into a rumour about fantastic black beasts landing on the beach, and induces in the main character a dream of easy opulence. He goes to Quissico and, having witnessed a storm, which, he believes, announces the arrival of the whale, he enters the waters to retrieve the goods. The story ends with the discovery of his clothes on the beach, evidence for some that there has indeed been a distribution of goods “out of the seas.”

Paradoxically, but bearing out my argument, “As baleias de Quissico” is not one of the most effective, or suggestive, short stories. This, I would venture, is because, like the novels, it is a trifle didactic. Such rumours may have been an inspiration to the writer, but he is at his best when the idea germinating in his mind is not capable of a straightforward “explanation.” It is as though what most inspires him is the experience of a tale that can only be revealed, rather than made “clear,” by means of the literary creation it triggers in the author’s imagination.

What is plain, however, is that it is in the local tradition of storytelling that Couto originally found inspiration. Recounting his first attempt to write the story of the “baleias de Quissico,” he says:

E, à medida que eu ia fazendo, eu me apercebi que não podia usar o português clássico, a norma portuguesa, para contar a história com toda a *carga poética* que ela tinha. Era preciso recriar uma linguagem que trouxesse aquele ambiente de magia em que a história me foi contada. E aí começa essa experiência e, interestantemente, eu fui de repente projectado para a infância, para os tais momentos de que falo, em que os tais velhos contavam as tais histórias [...].

E isso [story telling] só é possível através de, número um, a *poesia* e, número dois, uma linguagem que utilize este jogo de dança e de teatro que eles faziam. Então foi aí que eu comecei, de facto, a experimentar os limites da própria língua e a transgredir no sentido de criar um espaço de magia.²⁸ (my italics)

The key to the origins of his stylistic quest, therefore, lies in the search for a way of conveying the magical by way of “poetic” prose. There is, as he himself has said, no valid distinction in his mind between the two forms of literary expression:

A única coisa que eu posso dizer é que eu estou tentando criar [...]. beleza, mostrar um pouco o que é a possibilidade de alguém fazer uma língua sua. De criar a partir da desarrumação daquilo que é o primeiro instrumento de criação, que seria a

língua, a linguagem, e os modelos de uma narrativa. Por exemplo, abolir esta fronteira entre poesia e prosa. Porque é que a coisa tem que estar arrumada, porque é que é preciso haver esta categorização de géneros literários [...], o realismo mágico, o realismo neo-realista? Nos podemos talvez criar à margem disso [...].²⁹

While it is often the case that writers' pronouncements on their own work are not enlightening, I believe that here Mia Couto is providing us with a genuine insight into his writing—as is easily validated by a sensitive reading (rather than simply a linguistic analysis) of his short stories.

I propose to illustrate the texture of poetry in Couto's prose by discussing one short story from each of his volumes. Not because there are only a limited number of such "poetic" *contos*—though they are obviously not all equally successful in this respect—but simply because there would be too many to choose from and my point here is to show the thread that runs through his writing over time. Admittedly, this is a somewhat contrived approach but it is the only one that makes it possible to be wide-ranging without becoming tediously repetitive.³⁰

From *Vozes Anoitecidas*, I should like to offer "Afinal, Carlota Gentina não chegou de voar." The main character sits in prison, accused of having killed his wife. He tries to explain to the authorities what has happened. The point, as always with Couto, is both straightforward and fantastic. The man, convinced that his wife had become a bird, resolved that the only way to find out was to pour boiling water on her. If she screamed she would be human. But she did not utter a sound, even as she died, which confirms the husband's suspicion that she is in fact a bird. This is how the account opens:

Eu somos tristes. Não me engano, digo bem. Ou talvez: nos sou triste? Porque dentro de mim, não sou sozinho. Sou muitos. E esses todos disputam minha única vida. Vamos tendo nossas mortes. Mas parto foi só um. Aí, o problema. Por isso, quando conto a minha história me misturo, mulato não das raças, mas de existências. A minha mulher matei, dizem. Na vida real, matei uma que não existia. Era um pássaro. Soltei-lhe quando vi que ela não tinha voz, morria sem queixar. Que bicho saiu dela, mudo, através do intervalo do corpo?³¹

What is enchanting in the writing here is the juxtaposition of, on the one hand, verisimilitude of expression, as though this was the speech of a most ordinary man in the most ordinary circumstance and, on the other, the

simultaneous deployment of arresting images. Indeed, these few lines demonstrate the freshness of Couto's prose: its poetic quality is a blend of "common sense," apparently mundane statements and a pungent, unexpected, quasi-naïve, expression. In this story, the explanation given of the man's behaviour is rational: he was led to believe that his wife, like her sister, might have been a "witch." His action, though reprehensible, is at least explainable.

At the end, the man demands, without much hope, to be judged by those who share his faith in witchcraft. The story, however, would easily have become merely edifying, were it not for the writing. The concluding paragraph casts the whole episode into a mournful, yet moving, light:

Agora já é tarde. Só reparo o tempo quando já passou. Sou um cego que vê muitas portas. Abro aquela que está mais perto. Não escolho, tropeço a mão no fecho. Minha vida não é um caminho. É uma pedra fechada à espera de ser areia. Vou entrando nos grãos do chão, devagarinho. Quando me quiserem enterrar já eu serei terra. Já que não tive vantagem na vida, esse será o privilégio da minha vida.³²

From Mia Couto's second, and very successful, collection of short stories, *Cada Homem é uma Raça*, I should like to discuss another astonishing story, "O Pescador cego." This *conto*, like the previous one, touches on what is a fairly consistent thread throughout the author's work: the account of acute, and apparently gratuitous, violence in the life of humble people. Whilst the first story turned around beliefs in the occult, which remain as strong today as they were a century ago, "O Pescador cego" takes place within the context of a period of war and famine. The fisherman is desperate to bring provisions to his family. After days at sea without success, mad with hunger, and bereft of food, he uses his eyes as bait. He comes home with fish but without the means to continue his profession. The narrator introduces the story, as he is wont to do, in a discursive, but stylistically accomplished, manner:

Vivemos longe de nós, em distante fingimento. Desaparecemo-nos. Porque nos preferimos nessa escuridão interior? Talvez porque a escura junta as coisas, costura os fios do disperso. No aconchego da noite, o impossível ganha a suposição do visível. Nessa ilusão descansam os nossos fantasmas.³³

The fisherman's wife, even more desperate now than before, wants herself to go to sea in the hope of bringing fish back. Her husband cannot accept

what would be tantamount to his total social disgrace. Having already rejected his wife's affection out of humiliated pride, he finally burns the boat rather than let her use it. His life now becomes a long tortured stay on the beach, prey to the elements and to the wanderings of his mind. Until one day a woman he cannot identify comes and provides him with food and affection. Is it his wife? A changed man, he builds a new boat, and invites the unknown woman to go out to sea, to find the eyes he has lost. The story ebbs away with these somewhat wistful lines:

Desde então, todas as infalíveis manhãs, se viu o pescador cego vagando pela praia, remexendo a espuma que o mar soletra na areia. Assim, em passos líquidos, ele aparentava buscar seu completo rosto, gerações e gerações de ondas.³⁴

For the sake of continuity, but also to illustrate the change in Couto from a concern with the tragic fate of his country during the civil war to a more hopeful look into the future after peace returned, I should like to present another story about blindness—"O cego Estrelinho"—from *Estórias Absenionhadas*, the author's third collection of *contos*:

O cego Estrelinho era pessoa de nenhuma vez: sua história poderia ser contada e descontada não fosse seu guia, Gigito Efraim. A mão de Gigito conduziu o desvisitado por tempos e idades. Aquela mão era repartidamente comum, extensão de um no outro, siamensal. E assim era quase de nascença. Memória de Estrelinho tinha cinco dedos e eram os de Gigito postos, em aperto, na sua própria mão.³⁵

Gigito is a dreamer, conveying to his blind friend a wonderful world of fantasy, so that the blind man lives an enchanted life. When Gigito is drafted into the army and Estrelinho is left to his own device, his life turns upside down. He lapses into great sadness until, one day, a friendly hand, that of Gigito's sister, takes charge of him. She, however, is down to earth and her factual account of the world fails to remind Estrelinho of what her brother had invented for him. Yet, they fall in love. Gigito is killed. His sister now sinks into depression.

A moça, essa, deixou de falar, orfã de seu irmão. A partir dessa morte ela so tristonhava, definhada. E assim ficou, sem competência para reviver. Até que a ela se chegou o cego e lhe conduziu para a varanda da casa. Então, iniciou de descrever o mundo,

indo além dos vários firmamentos. Aos poucos foi despontando um sorriso: a menina se sarava da alma. Estrelinho miraginava terras e territórios. Sim, a moça se concor- dava. Tinha sido em tais paisagens que ela dormira antes de ter nascido [...].³⁶

Here, the poetry of the author's language is expressed more through the invention of words than the display of striking images. This in itself is noteworthy, for there is in Couto's writing a steady development of a new form of linguistic expression, of which one of the most notable features is the creation of an entirely fictional, but exceedingly plausible, construction of words.³⁷ There is in the above paragraphs quite a selection of such verbal imaginings, all of which manage to communicate a precise meaning and bring aesthetic pleasure. Expressions such as "desvistado," "tristonhava," or "miraginava" are not just an original way of conveying the type of Portuguese spoken in Mozambique; they are also music to the ear—in short, utterly poetic.³⁸

Couto's third collection, *Contos do Nascer da Terra*, was published on the morrow of the peace agreement and within a perspective of renewed hopefulness. Perhaps for this reason it is a volume of miniatures focused on the subjective, the intimate, and the emotional. The author seems to have responded to the country's changed circumstances by prying even deeper into ordinary humanity, as though it was that quality that was most needed at the time. As ever, the book's epigraph provides a most valuable handle on what follows. I quote it in full here, because it is relevant to most of Couto's recent work, not just to the particular book it prefaces:

Não é da luz do sol que carecemos. Milenarmente a grande estrela iluminou a terra e, afinal, nós pouco aprendemos a ver. O mundo necessita ser visto sob outra luz: a luz do luar, essa claridade que cai com respeito e delicadeza. Só o luar revela o lado feminino dos seres. Só a lua revela intimidade da nossa morada terrestre. Necessitamos não do nascer do Sol. Carecemos do nascer da Terra.³⁹

I have picked in this volume a tale that is perhaps more hermetic than the previous ones, but I believe it is quite representative of much of the author's work—and this for two reasons. Firstly, it belongs to a strange and disquieting streak in his writing, much of which goes against the grain of our Western sensibilities. The second is that it appears to be even more thematically "African" than most. "O ultimo voo do tucano" is at first a weird, but still understandable, story. A pregnant woman begins to behave oddly:

Ela estava grávida, em meio de gestação. Faltavam dois meses para ela se proceder a fonte. O que fazia nessa demora? Deitava-se de ventre para baixo e ficava ali, imóvel, quase se arriscando a coisa. Que fazia ela assim, barriga na barriga do mundo?

—*Ensino o futuro menino a ser da terra, estou-lhe a dar pés de longe.*⁴⁰

The husband is intrigued but puts it down to the foibles of a pregnant woman. Then the story takes a most fascinating turn. His wife tells him that she wants to prepare for the birth like the bird “tucano,”⁴¹ entirely walled inside her house (nest), with a small hole through which he is to deliver food. He acquiesces reluctantly and thus begins a long wait. The woman gives birth silently and refuses her husband access. Eventually, she hands him the delicate bundle inside which she claims the offspring lies. As he attempts to lift the extraordinarily insubstantial cloth, it falls to the ground:

Foi quando, de dentro dos panos, se soltou um pássaro, muito verdadeiro. Levantou voo, desajeitado, as encontrões com nada.

O homem ficou a ver as asas se longeando, voadeiras. Depois, ergueu-se e se arremessou contra a parede da casa. Tombaram paus, desabaram matopes, despertaram poeiras. Agachada num conto estava a mulher, de ventre liso. Junto dela a capulana ainda guardava sangue. Areias revolvidas mostravam que ela já escavara o chão, encerrando a cerimónia. Ele se ajoelhou e acariciou a terra.⁴²

The latest collection of short stories, *Na Berma de Nenhuma Estrada*, displays a very assured hand. All the tales are of similar length and format. All touch on the question of identity within a world with shifting boundaries and unformed future. They are written within the context of Mozambique's post-conflict, but ruthlessly unequal, development. Times change but does it really matter to the ordinary men and women who continue to struggle in their daily existence and still largely fail to make sense of what is happening to them? The violence of war is gone but the arbitrariness of the present is even now at hand. Reality continues to be odder than fantasy. Identities dissolve: who is a man, who is a child, who is human? What does it mean? I have opted this time for a common tale, found throughout the ages and across the world, about the bond between a child and her grandmother.

In “A adivinha,” the child, Mimirosa, is very fond of her ailing granny, an old woman with a lively imagination, and whose influence the parents fear.

The girl, after all, ought to concentrate on her schoolwork. The *conto*, like most of Couto's others, is at once a fairy tale and the account of an ordinary situation. It is the language that turns it into the wonderfully whimsical story it becomes. As ever, and this is his trademark, the author encapsulates the essence of the tale in the first few sentences:

Há o homem, isso é facto. Custa é haver o humano. A vida rasga, o homem passa a linha, a costurar os panos do tempo. Mimirosa, a menina, nada sabia desses acertos. Nem sabia que tudo é um jogo, passatemporário. Acreditava ser a vida simples como molhado e água, poeira e chão. E assim, em tamanho não aparado: os seres em infância, as coisas sem consequência.⁴³

The grandmother's riddle to Mimirosa is the question of which river has only one bank. The prize for guessing right is the power to arrest time. The girl is hooked but does not find the answer immediately. Granny becomes ill and bed-ridden. Mimirosa finally escapes school to see her again but finds her apparently lifeless. She deposits her precious notebook by the grandmother and announces, triumphantly, that she has solved the riddle:

—É o mar, avó. Esse cujo rio: é o mar.

Se retiravam daquele luto, todos mais Mimirosa, quando os dedos da avó tactearam o ar e, cegos, chegaram até ao caderno. Suaves, acarariciaram o azul da imagem. E o caderno começou a pingar. Primeiro gotas, depois água gorda e cheia. E o caderninho se estuou como um rio. Como se o papel não mais contivesse aquela toda imensa água.⁴⁴

Here, as in other stories, inanimate objects acquire life and soul. The poetry, the rhythm and music, of the prose makes it possible for the author to give substance and emotion to the slightest event and the most banal of items. Water is, of course, central to Couto's fiction and is found, both in short stories and novels, to provide the gateway between the world of reality and fantasy, and to free the characters from the mere contingencies of everyday existence.⁴⁵ But my point here is not primarily to "explain" Couto's images, metaphors or similes—a useful but limited type of literary analysis. It is, more exactly, to suggest how the writing achieves so much by mere evocation. The greatest quality of the prose is undoubtedly the economy of means and the simplicity of expression, both of which are, plainly, central features of poetry. In the end, therefore, it is

the tone of the short story that makes it so luminous.

Although the tenor of this tale, as that of most of those included in the collection, has shifted markedly from that of the earlier volumes, the style and language have continued to evolve coherently. Mia Couto is today a quintessential writer of short stories and these have acquired an entirely distinct identity, recognisably his but also recognisably of his time and place. Yet, how “African” is his style, and is it that which makes his writing so telling? There has been debate about the extent to which Couto’s writing has been influenced by “traditional” oral literature. I have already hinted that this is a more complex issue than at first appears. There is a view that the author’s eccentric construction and his idiosyncratic language are in fact derived from indigenous roots. Mia Couto himself has helped buttress that opinion by resorting in the epigraph of many of his books to (invented) African sayings or proverbs, as though the inspiration for the writing drew from a well-established corpus of “customary” wisdom.

However, a moment’s reflection would show that such sayings are but a convenient way of distilling the spirit of the text that follows. Far from deriving the story from the adage, it is the story that brings about its creation. I use as illustration, one of the three aphorisms offered at the beginning of *Terra Sonâmbula*:

Se dizia daquela terra que era sonâmbula. Porque enquanto os homens dormiam, a terra se movia espaços e tempos afora. Quando despertavam, os habitantes olhavam o novo rosto da paisagem e sabiam que, naquele noite, eles tinham sido visitados pela fantasia do sonho. (Crença dos habitantes de Matimati)⁴⁶

Here, as elsewhere, Couto is laying down on paper the kernel of his book, drawing our attention to what matters, at least to him. His use of a (fictional) African citation is not directly relevant to the question of whether he has been “influenced” by African literature, as should be made clear by the fact that on the same page, he offers a delightfully “traditional” aphorism from Plato: “Há três espécies de homens: os vivos, os mortos e os que andam no mar.”⁴⁷

However, there are a number of very subtle ways in which his prose writing is rooted in the culture within which he lives. Of these, I would want to highlight only three: language, character and construction. Couto is (quite rightly) famous for having created a linguistic space in which he manages both to render in literary form the tone, cadence and composition of the language

that is spoken in (at least urban) Mozambique. It is not that he reproduces the way(s) in which people actually express themselves, as Suleiman Cassamo does to a much greater extent. It is, to be more precise, that he evokes the music and theatre attached to such characteristics as are found in the Portuguese language spoken by ordinary people. His prose is acutely attuned to what I would call the “mannerisms” of that living form of expression that makes communication, but also misunderstanding, between Mozambicans possible. Mia Couto has an extraordinarily sharp ear, not just for the concrete expressions heard every day on the streets of Maputo, but also for the linguistic eccentricities of a language that is made of an unexpected blend of colonial Portuguese and the local vernacular(s). It is in this respect only, I believe, that he can be said to have followed Guimarães Rosa’s example.⁴⁸

The second feature of his writing I would highlight concerns his characters. As is obvious to those who are familiar with his books, Couto inhabits a world of wonderfully “simple” but extremely evocative creatures. None is recognisable as someone anyone might actually know but all are immediately familiar—as though we had been living alongside them without noticing them properly. The point, of course, is not that any one of us, in Mozambique or elsewhere, might in reality have met, or known, any such person. It is that these characters are notable for their humanity, a feature relevant to all of us and which makes them all so palpable. What links such characterisation to the local milieu is Couto’s unfailing eye for their demeanour. Like a painter, he captures what is essential in such minor personages and in the tableaux he offers us, for this is what they really are; they make us feel, rather than understand, how people in Mozambique might experience the life they lead but which they fail fully to grasp. That the writer should have evolved such perceptive characterisation in part because of his assimilation of African culture is unquestionably true. Yet, it would be considerably to reduce his art to argue that his prose simply follows the models of oral literature.

The one area where perhaps the author has been most strongly influenced by African literature is in the architecture of his storytelling. The environment the author inhabits is one that is predominantly oral—even if ever larger number of Mozambicans can now read and write—not just because it is African, but because he has chosen to engage characters who live in just such a milieu. His interest does not lie with the educated, literate, middle classes but with the ordinary men and women whose existence is more seldom captured by writers of fiction. Couto has acknowledged his debt to the

African storytelling tradition and it is clear that he has continued to entertain the greatest interest in the ways in which people account for their lives, in fact as in fiction. His claim that he draws for his stories on what he has heard might be seen as contrived modesty but it should merely be understood as a statement of the obvious. Inspiration is not the same as imitation. Insofar as Mia Couto is intent on “telling” stories, it is clear that the construction of his writing draws inspiration from the craft of storytelling with which he is most familiar—that of Africa.

In the end, however, it is pointless to seek to establish the degree to which the author’s work is or is not African, and, if it is, how. The question itself is redundant. Mia Couto is a Mozambican and there is no reason to presume, other than out of racism, that the colour of his skin, or his Portuguese ancestry, should make it more difficult for him to draw on the culture within which he has grown up. As he himself says: “O que eu escrevo é moçambicano, digamos inconscientemente, involuntariamente. Eu não faço nenhuma coisa para que seja. É uma maneira, simplesmente, entre mil outras.”⁴⁹ The author is demonstrably writing about the country, the people and the society he knows best—as all writers do. Whatever influence African literary traditions may have had upon him do not explain why his books are so successful. They merely help place them in the appropriate historical and cultural context.⁵⁰

What makes Mia Couto an innovative writer is that he has managed to blend a unique perception of the ordinary people of his country with an imaginative narrative style. His achievement does not lie in his linguistic contrivances or the sources of his inspiration but in a finely attuned sense of poetry dedicated to the revelation of the sheer humanity of people whose lives he has shared since he was child. His is truly an original art of storytelling.

Notes

¹ Interview with Mia Couto, in Patrick Chabal, *Vozes Moçambicanas: literatura e nacionalidade*, 274.

² *Ibid.*, 286.

³ “Encontro com Mia Couto,” in Michel Laban, *Moçambique: Encontro com Escritores*, 3.1011.

⁴ See here Patrick Chabal, “Mozambique,” in Patrick Chabal, *The Postcolonial Literature of Lusophone Africa*.

⁵ For an early study of Mia Couto, see David Brookshaw, “Mia Couto: a new voice from Mozambique.” For a more recent analysis by the same scholar, see Brookshaw’s “Mia Couto.”

⁶ It is fair to say, however, that Mia Couto rejects such a division of his writings. He says: “Da mesma maneira que me atrai estar a trabalhar na desobediência da norma, também, even-

tualmente, me atrai trabalhar na desobediência dos géneros literários,” in Laban, 1021.

⁷ Mia Couto, *Cronicando*. I choose this story because it is the first one and we might well presume that the author's choice to place it there is not irrelevant.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Mia Couto, *Na Berra de Nenhum Estrada*, 13-16.

¹¹ Ibid., 13

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Mia Couto in the interview cited above, says: “Quando li o Luandino, em 1977, 1978, isso foi importante para mim. Depois, lendo o Guimarães Rosa, senti que afinal há maneiras de fazer este trabalho de recriação da língua. O Brasil conseguiu com o brasileiro e eu pensei que é possível fazer isto em Moçambique, com um sabor moçambicano. Eu penso que faço uma coisa bastante diferente do Luandino. Ele tem outro tipo de ambiente, tem outro tipo de imagens, tem outro tipo de recriação” (289).

¹⁴ On the Mozambican Portuguese language, see Perpétua Gonçalves, *Português de Moçambique: Uma Variedade em Formação*.

¹⁵ Mia Couto, *Terra Sonâmbula*.

¹⁶ For one discussion of this important novel, see Fiona Gonçalves, “Narrative Strategies in Mia Couto’s *Terra Sonâmbula*.”

¹⁷ Mia Couto, *A Varanda do Frangipani*.

¹⁸ Mia Couto, *O Último Voo do Flamingo*.

¹⁹ I devote less attention here to the commissioned novel, *Vinte e Zinco*, because it appears to me to have suffered in some respects, and not least stylistically, from its programmatic origins. His latest novel, *Mar me Quer*, is in my view, best seen as an extended short story. It is otherwise, in construction, style and characterisation most similar to *A Varanda do Frangipani*.

²⁰ *Terra Sonâmbula*, 9.

²¹ Ibid., 15.

²² Ibid., 218.

²³ *A Varanda do Frangipani*, 152.

²⁴ *Vozes Moçambicanas*, 290 [italics in the original].

²⁵ *Vozes Anoitecidas*, 19.

²⁶ For a discussion of Mia Couto as a postmodern writer, see Phillip Rothwell, *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*; and Maria Manuela Lisboa, “Colonial Crosswords: (in)voicing the gap in Mia Couto.”

²⁷ *Vozes Moçambicanas*, 287.

²⁸ Laban, 1015-1016.

²⁹ *Vozes Moçambicanas*, 289.

³⁰ My choice is not an attempt to highlight the “best” stories, but is merely a device for comparison over time. In any event, it would be quite futile to try to rank Couto’s stories in such a fashion. For the sake of contrast, and also because it matters greatly in terms of how a *short story* is constructed, I shall cite, as I have already done, the beginning and end of each *conto*.

³¹ *Vozes Anoitecidas*, 85.

³² Ibid., 95.

³³ *Cada Homem é uma Raça*, 93.

³⁴ Ibid., 100.

³⁵ *Estórias Abensonhadas*, 29.

³⁶ Ibid., 33.

³⁷ Whether such constructions are derived from African languages or not is to my mind irrelevant to the very effective result achieved.

³⁸ On Mia Couto's linguistic innovations, see Fernanda Cavacas, *Mia Couto: Brinciação Vocabular*.

³⁹ *Contos do Nascer da Terra*, 7.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁴¹ A "tucano" is a bird.

⁴² Ibid., 64.

⁴³ *Na Berma de Nenhuma Estrada e outros contos*, 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁴⁵ On the most important theme of the "sea," both in general and in the case of Mia Couto, see Ana Mafalda Leite, "Os Temas do Mar em Algumas Narrativas Africanas de Língua Portuguesa: insularidade e viagem."

⁴⁶ *Terra Sonâmbula*, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibidem.

⁴⁸ Here, see Mary Daniel, "Mia Couto: Guimarães Rosa's newest literary heir in Africa."

⁴⁹ *Vozes Moçambicanas*, 290.

⁵⁰ On the much-debated issue of "moçambicanidade," see Gilberto Matusse, *A Construção da Imagem de Moçambicanidade em José Craveirinha, Mia Couto e Ungulani Ba Ka Khosa*.

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