

## ***Mau Tempo no Canal: Critical Assessments***

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### **Aspects of the Origin and Critical Fortune of *Mau Tempo no Canal*<sup>1</sup>**

What Vitorino Nemésio must have felt at the exact moment he finished his novel *Mau Tempo no Canal* can easily be imagined; we can more easily imagine it through the exacting, and included, brief information he recorded at that instant: *Lisbon, 7:25 am / 21 February 1944*. This detail, which appeared in the first two editions of the work (and which is restored in this new edition), naturally moved me for his having just brought that inner journey to its end, but also for his recourse at that moment to the “timekeeping ways” to which Vitorino Nemésio, an islander through and through, was always so faithful—and, even more particularly, it is in keeping, in this instance, with the maritime atmosphere of the whole novel. But what I find most striking today in this precision with time is the coincidence that its details would prefigure, thirty years later—to the very month, day, and almost hour—the very time when Vitorino Nemésio’s body would be laid to rest in Coimbra in the Cemitério de Santo António dos Olivais.

We will try, however, to evoke him as when he was still living, at that very moment described above in which he has just written the succinct signs of the time and place after his last sentence, the final syntagm of this long narrative text: *in the darkest depths of the sea...* .<sup>2</sup> He is a man forty-two years (and two months and two days ...) of age who has written and published since he was virtually a child, who has lived in a half-dozen cities (Angra, Horta, Lisbon, Coimbra, Montpellier, Brussels) and who now teaches class as

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an associate professor of Romance Philology in the Faculdade de Letras in Lisbon, in the caverns of the Academia das Ciências, after having seen many highs and lows and even suffered many hardships, which he, moreover, has needed and always will, in order to meet the responsibilities of a large family, contributing widely to countless newspapers and journals (and recently radio as well). Despite all this, he is now the author in various genres—poetry, fiction, essay, biography, criticism—of at least eighteen works that until now have astonished or bewildered more than made a contribution per se to “canonize” him—a seemingly heterogeneous whole about which a univocal, unanimous judgment has not formed, and one wonders if it ever will.

The writers of his generation whose rallying point was the journal *Presença*, as well as the writers of the immediately subsequent generation who had just begun making their names, saw him with exemplary and aggressive cohesion through the poetic *plaquettes* of the *Novo Cancioneiro* and the fiction collected in the *Novos Prosadores* [*New Writers of Fiction*], as well as the remaining writers—disperse though they may be—of the early *Seara Nova*'s intervening critical spirit, as well as the survivors from a certain “official” literature; yet, in each of these camps, Vitorino Nemésio unfailingly has a few scattered and fairly solid friendships. Yet what predominates in their approach to him is a certain irritation toward the discomfiting abundance of his verbal gifts as a creator, a certain restless mistrust (which at times assumes even more impure emotions) toward his idiosyncratic refusal to lend himself, whether in literature or politics, to facile solutions, or, at least, to make conciliatory gestures in the face of rites of ex-communication. Moreover, Vitorino Nemésio does not even have the spare time to take part in these never-ending shell games, with their promotions of some and exclusions of others, to which some virtuous intellectuals nevertheless devote themselves, intellectuals who are no doubt quite progressive, but who, just as certainly, have been smiled upon more benevolently by the goddess Fortune.

Here we have, then, in broad strokes, the man who has just inscribed, like a colophon—or, rather, like an imprimatur—the summary space-time coordinates in which he has this instant concluded his most ambitious work to date. We can readily imagine, thus, how in that inscription are mixed (though we shall never know in what doses) feelings of relief and expectation, of personal triumph and gnawing doubt, of personal liberation and general perplexity. I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's recording in her diary the moment in which she set down the last sentences of *The Waves*: “I think I

should record this for my own information.” Only hours later, as she strolled down a London street, and as she then felt reinstalled in daily existence, would she finally have a clearer sense of the jumbled feelings that ending her new novel were giving rise to in her: “And I think to myself as I walk down Southampton Row, ‘And I have given you a new book!’” This simple (how complex!) sense of having given—donated—“a new book” to one’s fellows is also expressed, though with more roundabout modesty, in Vitorino Nemésio’s act of only indicating a place, date, and time. In short: at the appointed time, the exact instant, painstakingly observed, in which everything was ready for the “donation” to be brought to fruition.

Meanwhile, although we know something about the conclusion of this great literary artifact, we know next to nothing about its origins. In 1937, when he published the novellas of *A Casa Fechada* [*The Closed House*], Vitorino Nemésio did not indicate, on the list of works “by the author,” any work of fiction in preparation—unlike what he had done the previous decade in the book *Varanda de Pilatos* [*Pilate’s Veranda*] (1927) and the volume of stories *Paço do Milhafre* [*Buzzard’s Palace*] (1924). In fact, each of these narratives was advertised as a novel, or, perhaps, two different novels, since their titles were different: *Ilha da Fortuna* [*The Isle of Fortune*], the oldest, and *O Alfarrábio e a Dama* [*The Second Hand Book and the Lady*], the most recent. Were they, in one or both cases, rough outlines or even sketches, mere kernels, or fully realized versions of what would become *Mau Tempo no Canal*? Perhaps they were, at the most, in matters only slightly different from the future novel, certain of its later thematic threads. And certainly, “realities” such as island, fortune, book, lady, would be ever-present in the spirit and texture of the work.

Yet I suppose, at all events, that we should seek out the most visible “antecedent” of *Mau Tempo no Canal* not in the problematic depths of one of these texts (nor do we even know if they exist) but in the text itself of one of the novellas in *A Casa Fechada*, the longest and the only one in the book with an Azorean setting: “Negócio de Pomba” [“Dove Business”]. With all the obvious differences between a novella nearly one hundred pages long and a novel on the order of four hundred—the former, naturally, with its straightforward plot, the latter, for its part, composed of several “webs”—and despite all their even more decisive dissimilarities stemming from the presence, in the first case, of the “unity of place” as regards a small village (though left unnamed, it is Praia da Vitória) while, in the second case, the space where the action takes place is incomparably more diversified, more evolved, even more

markedly cosmopolitan—truly, the two texts show an innate identity that is also proven in the features of an adolescent and those of the adolescent grown to adulthood, among the first rehearsals of a great “show,” and the final presentation of the very show that was rehearsed.

The protagonist in “Negócio de Pomba”—Renato Ormonde—already contains embryonically *Mau Tempo no Canal*’s João Garcia: the same indecisive behavior, the same sickly shyness, the same ever-present risk of—*par délicatesse*—never living “his” life. Like Renato’s childhood, João’s would have the depth and darkness of a cistern full of sunken slime (see *A Casa Fechada* 116); also, though suffering from a “disconsolateness” less “embittered,” his soul, like Renato’s, will be “obstructed” by a sallowness that impedes the flow of all life’s joys” (*A Casa Fechada* 116). Moreover, in both, the mysteries, if not the faults, of their respective progenitors are evenly matched: both “heroes”—or, rather, anti-heroes—from the time we meet them feel incomplete and frustrated on that score. Renato Ormonde moves, then, from Praia da Vitória to Horta (which, incidentally, is always a projection or disguise for Angra), gains a wealth of academic experience in Coimbra and military experience in Lisbon—and behold, he is suddenly metamorphosed into João Garcia. But also the play of economic (and social) interests unfolding around the Clarks, Dulmos, and the Garcias may be seen as a widening—though at first with various risky moves and partnerings of varying importance—of senhor Peixoto’s family’s “domestic” game... . The only thing that does *not* still exist in “Negócio de Pomba” (a single thing, besides, that in *Mau Tempo no Canal* would come so much into play!) is a character that broadly or narrowly prefigures Margarida. I feel that in compensation, we find her in rough form in the different but complementary elements of the main female characters in the two other novellas from *A Casa Fechada*: Zilda, from “O Tubarão” [“The Shark”], and Brites, from the text from which the book takes its title. And if we add—as we have noted in the series of these *Complete Works*, in the introduction to the new edition of the novellas—certain stylistic and narrative processes that are precursory to many that would be used in *Mau Tempo no Canal*, the close relationship between the two works can be seen that much more clearly.

Regardless, two years after the *editio princeps* of *A Casa Fechada*, a typeset text that later would be an integral part of *Mau Tempo no Canal* would reach us. I am referring to the publication of the passage “Um Ciclone nas Ilhas” [“A Cyclone in the Islands”] in issue number 7 (April 1939) of that same *Revista de Portugal*, which, edited by Vitorino Nemésio, had earlier included

early versions of the two stories that would appear in *O Mistério do Paço do Milhafre* [*The Mystery of Buzzard's Palace*] (1949): “O Espelho da Morte” [“The Mirror of Death”] (in no. 4, July 1938) and “I’m Very Well Thank You” (in no. 5, October 1938). At first sight, the passage “Um Ciclone nas Ilhas” could also be considered a stand-alone narrative were it not for the fact that it appeared with a whole line of ellipses at the end (something that had not happened with the other two): a sign, therefore, that something was left unfinished... And, actually, that passage would be, five years later, with a few variants, the then-entitled “A Serpente Cega” [“The Blind Serpent”], the actual chapter 1 of *Mau Tempo no Canal*.

I do not know if research on these variations has been carried out. But this is not the forum to do so exhaustively. In any event, it will always be worthwhile to note that these variants, few in number and importance, are nevertheless significant in that they concern—particularly in that period of his work—the extraordinary resources Vitorino Nemésio had to perfect the stylistic level and his economy and intense effects on the narrative level. Clearly these two levels are overlapping at all points; any correction or alteration that might seem required, *verbi gratia*, for reasons of euphony, later prove extremely relevant for storyline clarity, and vice-versa; any decisive change in the narrative sphere translates immediately into heightened phonics. A mere cursory review of these two versions side by side—these two different “states” of the same text—leads one quickly to the conclusion that there did not exist in Vitorino Nemésio what he so often was foolishly charged with: expression for expression’s sake, style for style’s sake, form for form’s sake. Simply by way of example, let us consider a few cases.

Note, for the moment, what happens in the second paragraph where Margarida is first referenced: it is a “description” of her eyes, a description that metonymically serves as an “introduction” to her in her entirety, and a prelude to the “narration” of her behavior. Here is the *Revista de Portugal* version: “Os olhos de Margarida tinham um lume evasivo, de esperança que toma precauções, mas era ainda mais forte a vivacidade azulada que lhes dava um brilho animal” [“Margarida’s eyes had a momentary spark of guarded hope, yet even more pronounced was their blueish liveliness that lend them an animal gleam”]. And the defining “lesson”: “Os olhos de Margarida tinham um lume evasivo, de esperança que serve a sua hora. Eram fundos e azuis, debaixo de arcadas fortes” (3) [“Margarida’s eyes, deep and blue under the bold arches of her brows, betrayed a yearning for lands faraway, a momentary spark of hope”]. Let



us highlight what is gained from one version to the next: rhythm and respiratory decompression, synthesis, suspense, and a condensed wealth of suggestiveness. First, dividing the first sentences into two separate ones on the one hand measures out and advantageously stitches together the sonorous fullness—the phonic layer—through which twofold information is conveyed and, on the other, it has the virtue of advantageously separating out what in this information—the meaning layer—refers to what is incidental (what her eyes *had* at that moment) and *permanent* (what they *were*). Second, in the passage referring to the “incidental,” the aforementioned “lume ... de esperança *que serve a sua hora*” [“a momentary spark of hope”] is incomparably less categorical and more suggestive than “lume [...] de esperança que toma precauções” (“a momentary spark of guarded hope”); in turn, the passage relating to what is “permanent,” the replacement of subjective interpretations (“vivacidade” [“vivacity”], “brilho animal” [“animal gleam”]) with mere objective, somatic facts (which are now purely from the realm of the *were*, completely uncontaminated by the *had*)—here we have what makes this second excerpt stand completely alone relative to the first, and renders completely useless the mixed part of the early version.

A second example may be taken from the fifth paragraph of the novel. Here I believe we need simply transcribe the two versions, italicizing the differences between them. The *Revista de Portugal* version (1939):

Margarida ouvia-o agora vagamente distraída, *com um movimento* de cabeça *virada devagar* às nuvens, como quem tem uma coisa que incomoda no pescoço, mas pouco. O cabelo, *levemente desfeito*, ficava com *quase* toda a luz da lâmpada *eléctrica em frente, num poste de pinho*, de maneira que a testa *ia repetindo* o vaivém da sombra ao vento.

[Margarida listened to him somewhat absentmindedly now, her eyes slowly turning to the clouds as if she had a slight kink in her neck. Her hair hung partly down, receiving almost the full light of the lamp next to her on the pinewood post, her face reflecting the play of shadows in the wind.]

The final version (1944):

Margarida ouvia-o agora vagamente distraída, de cabeça voltada às nuvens, como quem tem uma coisa que incomoda no pescoço, *um mau jeito*. O cabelo, *um*

*pouco solto*, ficava com toda a luz da lâmpada *defronte*, de maneira que a testa *reflectia* o vaivém da sombra ao vento. (3)

[Margarida listened to him somewhat absentmindedly now, her eyes on the clouds as if she had a kink in her neck. Her hair fell free, receiving the full light of the lamp, causing her face to reflect the play of shadows in the wind.]

As in the previous example (but, as we saw, with other implications) the corrections are added basically for reasons of condensation, simplification, reduction to the essence. Whence “that other” Vitorino Nemésio whose work is often accused of being “precious” or “rhetorical,” mannerist or baroque, and with an undeserved pejorative undercurrent to the terms? Perhaps merely in the imaginations of those who read the work heedlessly, or without engaging their sensibilities or reading with the whole of their critical spirit.

And two more final examples, chosen almost at random, to support my observations above. When the cyclone hits the house—shortly more than a page from the end of the chapter, where Nemésio first had written, somewhat confusedly and overburdened with needless details—“Seguiu-se um curto silêncio marcado pelo tremor do espelho mareado do tremó D. Maria II” [“A brief silence followed, punctuated by the rattling of the lusterless Dona Maria II mirror”]—particulars that only help break up or dissolve the deliberate auditory sensation the author sought to convey—note how, in the final version, that same sensation, stripped of all extraneousness, finally was expressed with wondrous concision: “Seguiu-se um breve silêncio marcado pelo tremor fugitivo de um espelho” (15) [“A brief silence followed, punctuated by the fleeting rattle of a mirror”]. And, a bit later, when Dona Catarina is caught unawares by her husband’s entrance as he pursues the daughter, the differences between the first and second versions stand in contrast; in this case they essentially involve replacing one image from the domain of one advanced technology (entirely out of place in the context of the chapter and the novel as a whole) with another that is much more appropriate, an example taken purely from the realm of crafts. To wit, the passage beginning “... o marido agarrou-a por um ombro e arredou-a quase com calma, *como se dispusse da mola de um portilhão automático*” [“... her husband grabbed her by the shoulder and pushed her aside almost calmly, as if he were pressing a button to open an automatic gate”]—finally became “... o marido agarrou-a por um ombro e arredou-a quase com calma, *como se deitasse a mão a uma cancela de molas*.” [“{Her husband} grabbed her by the shoulder

and pushed her aside almost calmly, *as if he were opening a farm gate*"]. There is no point in belaboring what was improved upon in terms of rigor, appropriateness, and in visualizing the action's "movement" itself.

Yet when the two versions are compared, what is most striking is to find that the author respected, in the intervening five years, in addition to a few dozen variants, the overall structure of the chapter, nor did he fail to keep intact the entire integrated succession of each of its "movements." As for the "motifs" that are prefigured and later developed, only one entirely new one is added to the final version: the allusion made in João Garcia's speech to the "curso de milicianos" ["military training"] that he would have to pursue on the continent. Moreover, of the secondary characters or mere background characters from then on glimpsed or mentioned, only two would appear in the book with different names: the old bluestocking Dona Corina Peters, who at first was named Cristina Street, and the protagonist's "queer" uncle, who transforms from Cândido into Ângelo... But Pretextato, Januário, Diogo Dulmo, Dona Catarina, the elder Clark, Maria das Angústias, Manuel Bana, Aunt Teresa, Uncle Saavedra, all would appear, in 1939, with their identities intact... All this leads us to believe that not only had the novel's broad outlines been conceived, but also most of its details had been thought out and structured. These individual characters and this creation itself must have been long familiar to Vitorino Nemésio. Hence the work's complexity. Not many, however, expressed this at the time, or even with the passage of time—as if there were a conspiracy of silence woven around this novel (for the very fact of its being a masterpiece?)

In the following brief anthology of critical opinions, it will be immediately clear that only two critics—João Gaspar Simões and Albano Nogueira—were deeply sensitive to the work's merits at the time of its publication. By contrast, what cannot be found in this brief anthology is, on the one hand, the great many absurdities that the book elicited from other critics (these were mercifully omitted) and, on the other, symptomatic silence (something that not only is not being *heard*, but obviously is not *seen*) issuing from certain media outlets and certain sectors of the literary community. As for the latter, suffice it to say not even the journals *Brotéria* or *Vértice*—at the time, I believe, even more dissimilar than they are today—deigned to run the smallest review of the work. And it will not be time spent unwisely to—*pour l'humour*—compile a list of novels they reviewed, praised, and raised into the heavens, for example, in the period from 1944 to 1947...



But contemporary critics suffer from the universally acknowledged limitations and contingencies: it would not be proper to demand too much from them. Yet when a case such as João Gaspar Simões' judgment of *Mau Tempo no Canal* appears, an assessment so perfectly accurate and stirring, then he should be showered with the highest praise. But one must understand too some of the errors in perspective, or, shall we say, lack of perspective, made by contemporary critics in general. They were indeed serious errors if allowed to endure beyond a reasonable time, if they tend to be repeated endlessly out of obedience to some indefinable motivations or simply out of intellectual feebleness. It should be admitted, then, that few and far between were those who understood, when *Mau Tempo no Canal* was published, that it was an undeniable masterpiece; what becomes somewhat unsettling is that individuals supposedly with critical accountability continued—and continue—to not understand it ten or twenty or thirty years later. And this happened as well; and this continues to happen.

I will cite merely three examples. The first is from a man, departed (as a critic), by the name of Franco Nogueira, who had the unfortunate pertinacity to reprint in 1954, in his *Jornal de Crítica Literária*, certain passing judgments on Nemésio's novel. Here are a few:

O quadro geral que nos é exibido e que forma o pano de fundo do romance é completo e pormenorizado: mas é um quadro parado. O ambiente social é sugestivamente posto perante os olhos do leitor; mas é uma [sic] ambiente estagnado como se a vida, tendo encontrado as figuras em movimento, suspendesse de súbito o seu curso e as imobilizasse. Como consequência ultimamos a leitura de *Mau Tempo no Canal* com a sensação de que o romance não principiou sequer. Por isso a sua leitura é extenuante e por vezes dolorosa. (116)

[The panorama spread out before us, forming the book's backdrop, is detailed: but it is a lifeless setting. The social ambience is suggestively laid before the reader's eyes; yet it is a [sic] environment that is stagnant, as if life, having come upon the figures in movement, suddenly froze, immobilizing them. As a result we finish reading *Mau Tempo no Canal* with the feeling that the novel has not even begun yet. Thus to read it is exhausting and at times painful.]

And he ends by asking if he should not “concluir pela inapetência irre-

mediável de Nemésio para a novelística” [“conclude with Nemésio’s hopeless inappetence for writing novels”]. Clearly, where he wrote “inappetence” he meant to write “ineptitude.” But we are the ones left wondering about Franco Nogueira’s “aptitude” for criticism, since he was not lacking for “appetence.”

The second example begins “collectively” but is rounded out by an individual case. In the publication *Tetracórdio*, edited by José-Augusto França and published in 1955, a poll is included about works by Portuguese authors appearing from 1901 to 1950 that were worth reading and had been worth writing. The results: of the twenty-one respondents, only seven mentioned Nemésio’s name (and all of them, moreover, cited *Mau Tempo no Canal*): Alberto de Lacerda, Armando Ventura Ferreira, Castro Soromenho, José-Augusto França, José Gomes Ferreira, Luís Francisco Rebelo, and I. Of the other fourteen, two—José Osório de Oliveira and Urbano Tavares Rodrigues—stated they were explicitly naming deceased authors, which thenceforth excused them from citing the name or works of Vitorino Nemésio; yet of the other twelve, some others offered long lists of highly relevant living authors, even including several works published after 1950: yet about Nemésio, absolute silence. On another occasion I will delve further into other curious cases, merely drawing attention here to that of Mário Dionísio, who gave, for example, among equally influential or noteworthy works, *Bairro* [Neighborhood] by Manuel Mendes, *Escada de Serviço* [Backstairs] by Afonso Ribeiro—while, highly logically, overlooking *Mau Tempo no Canal*...

Finally, the third example. This is the most pernicious one, for it tellingly is found in a book with didactic aims: António José Saraiva’s *História da Literatura Portuguesa*. Even in its latest edition, appearing very recently (1979), the name of Vitorino Nemésio still does not appear as a fiction writer. Instead, many others from Nemésio’s generation or the following one are mentioned, writers who, if I am not mistaken, never wrote anything that could compare to *Mau Tempo no Canal*. Note that, nevertheless, this is probably not a case of bad faith; as a poet, the author appears. But cited though along with a brief excerpt from the (admirable) *Versos a Uma Cabrinha que Eu Tive* [Verses to a Little Goat I Had]—which nevertheless are still the part of his poetry with which a person who only knows Nemésio’s poetry is familiar.

Strange, is it not? Lapses, or errors, or willfulness of this sort in people as different as António José Saraiva, Franco Nogueira, and Mário Dionísio... Yet in the mid 1940s, they were not so different as they seem today: they all were toeing, then, the same party line, if not “ideologically,” at least “aes-

thetically.” And a work such as the novel *Mau Tempo no Canal*—for its density, its perfection of form and its structure, the highly original combination of its multiple layers, its dynamic resistance to all pre-established schools—would highlight uncomfortably the essential inanity and untenable documentary approach taken by most of the novelistic products that came out of the “party line” mold. Only some years later, once the set of beliefs had evolved, and owing to the insightfulness of a true critic like Óscar Lopes—who in fact *reads* the works he writes about, Vitorino Nemésio’s novel would finally be “recovered” by the very camp in which he previously had been silenced or misunderstood. But we can also surmise that there were other causes, and that matters have a more simple explanation: Óscar Lopes’s sensibilities with respect to the artistic value of literary texts has always been incomparably more unerring, more refined, and more active than the other three; moreover, those who prove essentially to be either authorities in the history of culture, or experts in politics or diplomacy, or specialists in the plastic arts do not even have the obligation to be great *literary* critics.

Regardless, the pages that Óscar Lopes devoted to *Mau Tempo no Canal* can be understood as a watershed moment in the work’s critical fortunes, just as during or after that moment the critical attestations by Nuno de Sampaio, Maria Lúcia Lepecki, Maria Idalina Resina Rodrigues, and António Machado Pires would be highly significant to the work’s history. But we would have to wait for the publication—this year—of the masterful book by José Martins Garcia, *Vitorino Nemésio: A Obra e o Homem* [*Vitorino Nemésio: The Work and the Man*] to be given the deepest and most complete exegesis *Mau Tempo no Canal* has had to date. For this very reason, in the brief anthology to follow, the text by José Martins Garcia is the one most regrettably abbreviated, insofar as it would have been highly desirable to transcribe not the five paragraphs that appear, but the totality of the dense forty-seven pages he devotes in the aforementioned work to comprehensively and analytically deciphering this novel that represents not only the zenith of Vitorino Nemésio’s work in the form, but also one of the high points in the history of Portuguese fiction.

Let us go back, then, once more to 1944: Vitorino Nemésio has just written his book; he has delivered it to the publishers—the same ones that today are putting out his *Obras Completas*—and as he waited for the novel to be published he was somewhat concerned about the panorama of Portuguese cultural life of the day, and especially about certain habits within it—bad habits—of the prevailing literary criticism. In fact, in the first issue of the journal *Litoral*,

edited by his poet friend Carlos Queirós and bearing the date of June of that year, Vitorino Nemésio appends a most curious text entitled “Parar, Reparar e Admirar” [“Stop, Look, and Appreciate”], where he asks about the state of affairs “na república das letras portuguesas” [“in the republic of Portuguese letters”]—which he calls a “sociedade pseudónima de responsabilidade vagabunda” [“pseudonymous company of idling liability”] and where he famously states the following: “As reviravoltas de quadrante literário dão-se em menos de um ano, e sucedem-se por força de uma impotência criadora, que resta provar se é incurável ou se nasce, principalmente, da falta de higiene mental e crítica” [“The reversals of position in the literary scene occur in under a year; creative helplessness breeds overturning after overturning. It remains to be seen whether this lack of creativity is incurable, or if it arises mainly from a lack of mental and critical hygiene”]. Later he reflects:

A opinião literária, felizmente, não se estabelece como quem define um dogma: resulta dos múltiplos pareceres, sai viva e depurada da própria contradição ou contradita dos julgamentos; ondula, hesita, flutua. Refaz-se e cambia sempre. E este refazimento e este câmbio, longe de significarem desordem, são a própria alma e ordem das Letras; reproduzem a instabilidade do que se sente e pensa, e se é convidado a exprimir. A arte é então—como a vida—uma peripécia imprevista e renovada.

[Literary opinion, happily, is not set as dogma is defined: it arises from multiple perspectives, it emerges alive and cleansed from the very condition or refutation of its judgments; it flows, wavers, fluctuates. It is remade, forever changing. And this remaking and this change, far from meaning disorder, are the very soul and order of Literature; they reproduce the instability of what is felt and thought, and what one is summoned to express. Art—like life—is, then, a series of unexpected and renewing events.]

And I cannot resist the temptation to quote two other paragraphs from the above-cited text by Vitorino Nemésio, which are very important for their contemporaneity with the conclusion of *Mau Tempo no Canal* as well as for the burning relevance to the present-day it unfortunately appears to have:

Enfim, o problema da dignidade das Letras volta-se agora para os próprios

escritores, como principais responsáveis. Uma ou duas gerações literárias, amadurecidas nos últimos vinte anos, apresentam o triste espectáculo de uma divisão que parece irreparável, complicando as naturais divergências, filhas da luta dos credos, com o atomismo próprio de quem falta aos mais elementares deveres de entendimento: esta solidariedade mínima de quem pisa os mesmos trilhos e visa, afinal, ao mesmo alvo.

Pois não é verdade que a literatura é quase uma dignidade, como a de homem, e a arte uma espécie de carisma? Não estaremos aqui todos para escrever do mais íntimo da vida, matar esta sede de expressão e de confiança que nos faz levantar todos os dias cedo no meio do deserto e ver água onde, na maior parte dos casos, nada mais há que a triste e fátua projecção dessa íntima secura? Então, porque fechar os olhos, fugir dos outros, fingir que não?

[In short, the issue of literature's dignity now is incumbent upon the writers themselves, for they are the most answerable for it. One or two literary generations that came of age in the last twenty years present the sad spectacle of a seemingly irreparable rift, which complicates the natural divergences born of the war of credos adding the factionalism characteristic of those lacking the most basic duties of understanding: the minimal solidarity of people traveling the same road and who ultimately set their sights on the same goals.

For is it not true that literature is virtually a kind of dignity, as that of man is, and art a kind of charisma? Are we not all here to write of the most heartfelt part of life, to slake this thirst to express and to trust that what makes us rise early each day in the middle of the desert is seeing water where mostly there is nothing but the sad, illusory projection of that thirst we have down inside? Then why close our eyes and free from others, pretending otherwise?]

One might say, then, that Vitorino Nemésio foresaw, on the eve of the publication of *Mau Tempo no Canal*, that there would be no shortage of people closing their eyes and pretending otherwise, as in fact happened. But the light the work gave off was too strong; and in time, either the eyes that closed stopped mattering, or else they who at the time and later began to open theirs, gained courage.

*Lisbon, summer 1979*

*David Mourão-Ferreira*



### Critical Assessments

#### João Gaspar Simões

Though our age may let itself become caught up in the pious hymn of accessibility like no other time, when we look back on the early years of the twentieth century and attempt to take stock of what has been written since then, we must acknowledge that the most representative works from this whole era are those very works that were slow to find enthusiastic readers and that did not slip away into the anathema of obscurity. The work of Fernando Pessoa should suffice to illustrate this point. Vitorino Nemésio's novel *Mau Tempo no Canal* was immediately met with voices protesting its "difficulty." It is a difficult, obscure, complicated, tiresome work, say the common readers, and along with them, some who should not be. In fact, we concede that *Mau Tempo no Canal* is not as easy as certain social novels... That is, some will have an easier time reading the common story of an everyday fisherwoman than this sonata rich in verbal textures full of color and sonority. Everything lies in knowing if true literature is triviality and boredom, or quite to the contrary, exceptional events and transformation. Personally, I have no doubts: boredom and triviality could never be attributes of true literature.

*Mau Tempo no Canal* truly represents a miracle of balance between Vitorino Nemésio's metaphoric imagination and the psychological action necessary for literary imagination in movement to reach the point of fusion in which style becomes life, and literature, the expression of human passions and feelings.

Despite what many may think, my sense of admiration is stronger than my spirit of criticism or repudiation. Reading Vitorino Nemésio's book wrenched me out of my state of disbelief in which recently published Portuguese novels had left me. It has been many years since a novel as original and important as this one has been published in Portugal. It has been many years since I have had the opportunity to read a book in which intellectual merit and human emotion commingled so completely. Reading the last pages in the book brought the tears to my eyes that one sheds only over masterworks.

From *Diário de Lisboa*, 24 Aug 1944. Reprinted in *Crítica* III, ed. Delfos (1969): 229-236. Reproduced in *Críticas sobre Vitorino Nemésio*, ed. Bertrand (1974): 70-77.

### Albano Nogueira

After he produced, a few years or so ago, a tottering novel heavily laced with foreign influences, now Vitorino Nemésio is publishing, in this year of grace, 1944, another novel—but this one is one of the most original, strongest, and most complete in our literary history to date. It is called *Mau Tempo no Canal*—and this title, like those of the other works of fiction and poetry by the author, is more an allegory than a definition. In this case, however, the title has the merit of freeing the work from those who but glance through it, and focuses only what it really is: more than a novel of people, it is rather the novel of any given social group; more than the novel of any given social group, it is rather the novel of an Azorean island... .

Above and beyond all this, Vitorino Nemésio's novel is, more than a novel of action, a novel of suggestion. Therein lies its greatest virtue, and too, its greatest originality—in a country such as ours, in which the novel has most often oscillated between unstimulating reportage and truthless distortions. From this it obviously follows that in writing of a novel of suggestion we mean one in which the reality that hovers over animate and inanimate things is no longer that of animate and inanimate things, for it is the poetic expression of both. And this is neither accessible by direct description nor does it result from simple plot: the novelist can only express it through an indirect process of hints and subtle notes that in and of themselves mean nothing, strictly speaking, but that are like an expressive potentiality, dense and all-encompassing, whose greatest virtue as a novelistic ingredient lies in the power of what they hold but do not reveal directly. Accomplishing this in a novel is an achievement—and it may be said that Vitorino Nemésio has done so admirably.

Thus, what first strikes the reader about Nemésio's novel and takes hold of him, then engrosses him, is, for lack of a better word (of course, the term is not so bad, even consecrated), what we will call *atmospheric*. But it is not the case that the novelist shuns the trivialities of the everyday nor does he forget people and their behavior. His memory is, however, reminiscent and lively, tentacular, sly, selecting details from the past that are seemingly insignificant but that, full of novelistic potential, come uniquely alive when brought together in a mosaic to absorb the poetic savor with which the book is imbued. *Mau Tempo no Canal* is replete with this; and it should be noted that a large part of its power of enchantment derives from it and nearly everything that truly gives the work vitality and spirit.

From *Litoral* 4 (Oct.-Nov. 1944): 459-61.

### David Mourão-Ferreira

*Mau Tempo no Canal* is a novel that can only be spoken of with a feeling of infinite respect; and if we cannot find many people to speak about it, it is because there do not happen to be many people capable of such feeling. There is no work in the genre that compares to it in twentieth-century Portuguese literature, nor is there perhaps a more complex, more varied, more dense and more subtle work in the whole of our literary history. Around what Aristotle would call the *fabula*, what today we term the main plot, around this nucleus, made up of a story of disappointed love affairs—or rather: *star-crossed* loves—Vitorino Nemésio crystallized countless motifs (historical, social, and ethnographic) and developed multiple events assembled with the supreme artfulness of his creative faculties, applied culturally to several planes of the past through his astonishing erudition, and alternately imbued with lyricism, bordering on satire, verging on tragedy and even epic, constantly mediated by his poetic genius. These motifs and events, weaving and unweaving in time through a process of accumulated scenes and keen representations, a process much closer to the English novel tradition than to that of the French, little by little are threaded into an enormously vast tapestry in which we do not know what to admire more: whether the psychological richness of each character, with the savory exactitude of each detail; whether the mysterious alchemy that takes the everyday, page after page, to a charmed procession whose rigorous style sublimates it; whether, finally, the overall configuration of all this into a gripping “representation”—at once faithful and suggestive, local and universal—of Azorean society in the first quarter of the twentieth century, with its many social strata, its tropisms of decline and ascension, with its old-fashioned and progressive characters, with all their potentialities—explored in depth and at length—of an exemplary microcosm. A novel of situations and of atmosphere, of habits and of moods, a realistic and symbolic novel, *Mau Tempo no Canal* is a work that is above all defined—and as thus it eludes all definition—by the enveloping presence of an indefinable “poetic dimension” through which the rest grows, transforms and is rendered immortal.

From *Colóquio* 42 (1967). Reprinted in *Tópicos de Crítica e de História Literária*. Ed. União Gráfica (1969):159-189. Reproduced in *Críticas sobre Vitorino Nemésio*, ed. cit.: 114-136.

### Maria Lúcia Lepecki

To try to classify Vitorino Nemésio's *Mau Tempo no Canal* as a specific type of novel, to "label" it, is relatively difficult in that so many issues, of greater or lesser importance, crop up throughout the book. The analysis and even the critique of a social reality are presented therein, a reality made up, on the one hand, of what could be called the island "macrocontext" of the Azores and, on the other, of the "microcontext" made up of the two opposing economic and financial factions: the Clarks and the Garcias. Moreover, the landscape itself where the plot unfolds may be considered essential to the novel's development, given that there is a specific *islandness* that to some extent envelops and often even explains the characters and their conflicts. The descriptions of physical nature become essential—from the climate to topographical details—and so too the psychological studies. Both elements help characterize the islander who is brought into a certain physical and psychological reality. Nature and psychology lend the book a more encompassing scope in which to place the aforementioned economic and sociological issues.

The analysis and the critique of socioeconomic reality, the portrait of a mindset and a psychology, and the presentation of a physical setting are complemented by another focal point: the complex romantic problems the heroine Margarida Clark Dulmo experiences. Thus we have a novel constructed in two directions: horizontally, embracing nature and the social community; and vertically, which delves into the inner world of a character who is symbolic of a time and a situation. These two perspectives in the work are paralleled in the way the heroine herself is structured: she also lives in a vertical dimension (the lovers' discord and her emotional relationship with her family) and in the horizontal dimension (involved as she is in a collective drama, in which she has a part to play, just as the servants or the Garcias or the Clarks and Dulmos themselves have their parts). It is, nevertheless, through Margarida, and only through her, that a critical perspective is offered and a value judgment rendered on the totality of the surrounding world. Margarida is, then, what is called a complex, or "moldable" character, in light of the fact that, though she remains to a certain degree a "pawn" in a game, she also maintains a basic individuality that makes her stand out from the rest of the characters.

From *Colóquio/Letras* 4 (1971): 44-49. Reprinted in *Críticas sobre Vitorino Nemésio*, ed. cit.: 167-175.

### Óscar Lopes

[...] [I]n *Mau Tempo no Canal* we perceive a modulation of tone: the keynote no longer lies in the demand for the “pure erotic,” and is transposed into the inner self-censoring of love as it ends, into its incommensurability with an individual life. It is well to remember that the topic of the erotic self-restraint of the intellectual is important in the decades of the 1920s to the 1940s: on the one side Aquilino is punishing as degenerate the man of letter’s instinctive cowardice, but on the other, certain members of the Presença school rise up to gild over the timidity, if not the Neoplatonism, reincarnating in their heroes the prototypical figure of the shy, Bernardian Avalor. Margarida Clark Dulmo, descended from one of the oldest (and, in its day, powerful) Fayal families, is the center of the action in Nemésio’s grand Azorean narrative: virtually all the men with a pulse in the novel love her, for not only can six or seven worshippers be identified but the author holds her up like Dante’s Beatrice, or Goethe’s Eternal Feminine (*Ewig Weibliches*), a quasi-Marian figure, whether in a whaling boat and staying overnight in a cavern, emerging amidst a whole evangelical crew of coarse fishermen, or in a bullring, vying, as the target of general admiration, with the ritual of bloody masculinity going on in the ring. But they lose her due to shyness, and at the most appropriate moment, the two men who paradoxically most love her as she wishes to be loved—and the author has her fall like a blind captive (the serpent on her ring is blind), fatalistically submissive and desperate, for the most salutarily common and solidly bourgeois of her pretenders. (As a captive: the expression is used advisedly, since Nemésio’s symbols in this case are pointedly cynegetic.)

It is abundantly clear that Margarida represents the quintessence of all the (in 1920) fifteen Azorean generations of “*meninas belas, filhas umas das outras*” [“beautiful young women, the daughters of beautiful young women”], and moreover I believe that nearly ten thousand generations of young women of our species, *Homo sapiens*, a vinte e cinco anos topo a topo de nubildade média [“at twenty-five years of age are in their peak child-bearing years”]. And it is just as clear that she is the last Romantic angel-woman. She incarnates the soul of the people (*Volksgeist*) of the island, for besides being a fearful participant in the Pico fishermen’s whale hunt, and, as we recall, become our Lady of the Caverns amidst sleeping sailors, and later as a bullfighting godmother from Terceira, she serves as a nurse to a plague-ridden servant, as a sister of charity to impoverished mothers and sniveling kids, she speaks spontaneously



with the people in their own dialect, and like them, seems “given to superstitions and symbols,” and the sweet inner emptiness of prayer.

From *História Ilustrada das Grandes Literaturas—Literatura Portuguesa* (n.p.: Ed. Estúdios Cor, [1972]) 830-57. Reproduced in *Críticas sobre Vitorino Nemésio* (n.p.: Ed. Bertrand, 1974) 198-244.

### António Machado Pires

*Mau Tempo no Canal* is a novel deeply marked by islandness and Vitorino Nemésio's wealth of knowledge. It is a work that, moreover, benefits from the writer's experience of studying for some time in the city of Horta and depicting a rather picturesque Azorean geography, a “heart of the archipelago,” so to speak, with the close proximity of the islands and the Pico-São Jorge channel, seen from the city on Fayal, “the city [that] was a front-row seat for that year-round stage show”; from it one could attend the aerial shows featuring mother-of-pearl clouds in bizarre shapes, sometimes in a ring, other times jumbled, or in an “endless cloak-and-hood,” sometimes revealing Pico “with its purple mountain-tops intersected by a gray cloud.” It is these skies, from the dreamlike mist to the nacreous clouds to the “dirty-cotton-colored sky blanketing the archipelago” and causing *Azorean torpor*, that reveal one of the signs of the author's sensitivity to climate, which has become second nature to him. The climate, the sky, the clouds, the blue or the gray of the sea are not picturesque or regionalist features: they truly are the result of everyday experience lodged deep down in the personality and never forgotten. Yet the clouds and the gloomy climate (with its “sultriness in the stones and deathly ennui in the souls”), the “smell of salted meat,” the sea that is part of the view from every house's property and that is divined through the “far-off and undying resonance,” the volcanic rocks, the “clumps of demolished lapilli,” the “whiff of fig trees and the exhalations of hot lava” from the shores of São Jorge—are not all. There is still the rural, bucolic world of milkings and sunrises in the mountains, the unfathomable seafaring world in which lives are jeopardized in whale-hunting adventures, and, especially, the provincial and patriarchal world of Horta, “land in which everything is inheritances and business deals” and where a young girl's wishes matter little—Margarida explains, hurt by her father's wish to marry her off to Uncle Roberto to make her forget João Garcia... The latter, moreover, with his irresolute character,

despite being a diligent student on the mainland, could not aspire to marry a Clark Dulmo, the more so for her being distanced from him due to the conflict that had separated Januário from Clark & Sons, Heirs. In effect, resentment and hatred, frustration and isolation under the timid suns amidst the Atlantic clouds, the slow flow of time (at times frozen by the long digressions by the *narrator-historian* and learned chronicler), the surrender to Fate, which weighs on the uncertain future of the resolute and “capricious” girl, the enigmatic Margarida, who is *above and beyond* the society in which she lives—these truly are the predominant notes of the great novel that, Azorean in soul and substance, rises to the universality of Man confronting *Fatum*.

From *Colóquio/Letras* 48 (1979): 5-15.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following well-known interpretations of *Mau Tempo no Canal* were published as part of the sixth edition of the novel, *Mau Tempo no Canal, com uma Introdução por David Mourão-Ferreira* (Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1980. 7-33) and are here reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Where possible I have followed Francisco Cota Fagundes's English translation (*Stormy Isles: An Azorean Tale*. Providence: Gávea-Brown, 1998).—Trans.