

Rulers, Noblemen and Bullfighting: Images of Portugal in "Última corrida de touros em Salvaterra"

by Rebelo da Silva

Ana Paula Arnaut

Abstract. In this study Ana Paula Arnaut uses the short story "A última corrida de touros em Salvaterra" by Rebelo da Silva (1821-1871) to discuss the intriguing theme of the Portuguese bullfight as a widespread popular cultural event during the eighteenth century. At the same time, in accordance with direct or indirect value judgments, this essay offers an insight into the ideological universe of the author, and comments on the inter-referentiality of other nineteenth-century authors who, rather than referring to historical sources, draw from previous literary works.

"Ao princípio era o conto"

Roland Bourneuf

Alongside the folk tale and the traditional story, it is generally accepted by the critical establishment that a third major category of the genre in question exists: the literary short story.¹ Whilst the second of these (normally dealing with heraldic themes) may have resulted from gradual refinements or, as Moreno states, "the successive transformations of the years, or even the passing from mouth to mouth, text to text, copy to copy, edition to edition, or the passing from the oral story to its recording, its publication" (101), the third undoubtedly emerged out of the greater development and gradual, conscious embellishment of the features and themes that were already part of the folk tale and traditional story (397).

Moreover, and not by chance, the consolidation of the literary short story seems to have paralleled the increasingly complex and developing genre system. I refer here, in particular, to the genre of the novel and to the literary fortunes of this narrative form in nineteenth-century Portugal, following earlier, less assured attempts.

The fact is that, in each age, the different forms of literary expression—understood as meta-historical categories (lyric, dramatic, narrative)—have, as far as possible and in accordance with the relative complexity of the literary system and the language itself, always followed the aesthetic and thematic tastes of the context from which they emerge (encountering, in some authors more than others, greater resistance to new styles). This being the case, the literary short story clearly cannot be the exception to this rule, and it is perfectly understandable that the rapid development of the production of fiction in the nineteenth century (as well as its aesthetic and thematic concerns) also extends to this particular genre.

Thus, in the short stories of Rebelo da Silva it is natural that we should find an opportunity to enter into worlds that reflect the main trends of the Romantic spirit (and in some cases ultra-Romantic, it may be added). In some of the author's micro-narratives we can detect clear evidence of a longed-for return to a relatively remote past and discover, for example, episodes which, although based on legends, correspond to the generally accepted idea of that age. In some texts there is a prevailing notion of honorable justice and the historical overtones help create and sustain certain moral, pedagogical and also didactic inclinations.

Although we understand that we are dealing with fictional accounts in which the realms of fantasy feature frequently (as in "A Torre de Caim"), in other stories (such as "A camisa do noivado," first published under the title "Uma aventura de el-rei D. Pedro"), the historical framework is clear. In one form or another, there is evidence of its virtual representation. The characters and events that populate the text contribute in some way towards our understanding of what the experiences, beliefs and mentality of a particular era were, or may have been, thus embodying in concrete form the theory that (in general and relatively, by extrapolation), like the novel (and the historical novel in particular), a good short story may educate almost as much, if not more, than a history book—an idea that can also be found in statements from authors such as Alexandre Herculano:

Quando o carácter dos indivíduos ou das nações é suficientemente conhecido, quando os monumentos e as tradições, e as crónicas desenharam esse carácter com pincel firme, o romancista pode ser mais verídico do que o historiador; porque está mais habituado a recompor o coração do que é morto pelo coração do que vive, o génio do povo que passou pelo do povo que passa. (Marinho 15-16)

In certain situations, strategies are also employed that directly draw the reader's attention to the authenticity of the episode being narrated. In "O castelo de Almourol," for example, the narrator says: "O diálogo, de que acabamos de ser fiéis e escrupulosos expositores, era travado em uma antiga sala..." (Silva 56); or, in another part of the same short story: "No ano em que passaram os sucessos desta verídica história..." (Silva 75).

Although this is not the case with "Última corrida de touros em Salvaterra," it would appear that, particularly in relation to this story, there is a need to define the historical short story as a sub-genre within the short story genre. Without ceasing to be literary (like other sub-genres, such as the detective story), it contains certain other characteristics that justify this classification and which would otherwise be obscured by its all-encompassing designation as a literary short story.

Therefore, although the plot of the story unfolds during the reign of D. José (or the "reign" of the Marquis of Pombal), that is, a relatively short time away from the period when the author lived (1822-1871), it still maintains the temporal distance that, according to Avrom Fleishman, should be observed in the creation of a historical novel (40-60 years). In addition, and still within the context of the considerations established by this theorist, it fulfils one other fundamental condition: the presence of "a specific link to history: not merely a real building or a real event but a real person among the fictitious ones" (Fleishman 3-4).

We may therefore say that, even for the most unaware of readers or for a reader with an incomplete knowledge of history, the episode unfolds within a framework of clearly recognizable references. It is enough simply to cite the name of the King, D. José (r.1750-1777) or the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Marquis of Pombal.

Moreover, it only takes a small amount of research and a certain measure of curiosity for us to realize that there are many other indications that conform (or more or less conform, with certain reservations, to be explored later) to the accounts transmitted by official history. In addition to other authentic references

(such as the existence of the Count of Arcos and the Marquis of Marialva), we may refer here to one of the semantic mainstays of the narrative: the references to the war against Spain, following the breakdown of talks in 1762. This conflict, which became known as the "*Guerra Fantástica*" (arising out of the refusal of D. José I to join the Family Compact with Spain and France against England and Prussia), also constituted the raw material for an interesting historical novel by Mário de Carvalho: *A paixão do Conde de Fróis* published in 1986.

Even more importantly, however, from our point of view, is another mainstay of the structure of the story: the episode of the bullfight at Salvaterra and the subsequent death of the 7th Count of Arcos, D. Manuel José de Noronha e Meneses. As an interesting aside, it should be noted that this episode is also recounted by the elder of the Hilárias sisters in "*Singularidades de uma rapariga loura*" by Eça de Queirós. Although it is only reported in the space of a few lines, there are various indications (such as the presence of the King and the Marquis of Pombal, and the Marquis of Marialva's attitude) that Eça's source of inspiration was the Rebelo da Silva narrative rather than official history.

What this appears to substantiate is an interesting (and definitely literary) strategy which in general terms validates and accredits the facts presented by Rebelo da Silva. Similarly, the narrator of "Última corrida..." also opts at one particular moment to make use of a commentary delivered by Zeferino, one of the characters in *A Sobrinha do Marquis*, by Almeida Garrett, to shed light on the behaviour of Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo: "...foi um grande ministro e que fez muito pela nação. Hoje há menos quem responda assim à letra às ameaças dos estrangeiros" (Silva 169).

This signifies that, although the event referred to in the short story is fictionalized—presented as if it were an authentic royal bullfight, reconstructing the actual bullfighting, the reactions of the spectators, (particularly the 4th Marquis of Marialva who on seeing the lifeless body of his son, descended into the arena to kill the bull and avenge his death) and, essentially, relocating to 1762 an episode which took place in 1799 (and not in Salvaterra de Magos but in nearby Murteira)—, Rebelo da Silva still succeeds in providing a remarkable image of the age and a no less remarkable portrait of the personality of the King and the Marquis of Pombal. In terms of characterization, it should be noted that although the reactions of the Marquis of Marialva have not been historically verified, their authenticity in terms of his being/having been the "melhor cavaleiro de Portugal, e talvez da Europa, a cavalo," as

stated on page 172, is paralleled by references that can be found in accredited works. In these, we see him described as, for example, a “célebre cavaleiro” and “exímio picador” (“Tourada” 339).

In “Última corrida de touros em Salvaterra” we are therefore given an insight into the genuine popularity of bullfights during the reign of D. José, a character who, in the story, contradicts the Marquis’s attitude towards the spectacle (170) and in official accounts (such as the Royal Charter of August 26, 1767) actually reprimanded the Bishop of Coimbra for wrongly banning a fight in Abiúl, in the municipality of Pombal. Therefore, despite denying that his aim was to describe a bullfight, since “Todos têm assistido a elas e sabem de memória o que o espectáculo oferece de notável” (172), in fact the narrator—not accidentally—does not refrain from commenting that “O prazer ria na boca de todos” (168); and, also not by chance, does not hesitate to present a broad description of the bullfight scene in very similar terms to those which can be read in official reports and/or to the idea we have when we watch a traditional Portuguese bullfight:

Rompem as músicas. Chegou el-rei, e logo depois entra pelos camarotes o vistoso cortejo, e vê-se ondear um oceano de cabeças e de plumas. Na praça ressoam brava alegria as trombetas, as charamelas e os tímboles. Aparecem os cavaleiros, fidalgos distintos todos, com o conto das lanças nos estribos e os brasões bordados no veludo das gualdrapas dos cavalos. As plumas dos chapéus debruçam-se em matizados cocares, e as espadas em bainhas lavradas pendem de soberbos talins. Os capinhas e forcados vestem com garbo à castelhana antiga. No semblante de todos brilha ardor e entusiasmo. (171)

The popularity of bullfighting, normally associated with the idea of *marialvismo* (aristocratic machismo), is also supported by references in works by other authors. In *Os Maias*, for example, although the author’s preference was to describe horse racing and therefore no bullfighting episodes feature in the narrative, there are direct comments and indirect indications that the topic of bullfights is not entirely absent from the novel published in 1888. Additionally, the existence of one of the manuscripts of *Os Maias*—nº. 258—points to the theory that Eça had considered including a bullfight episode.² More concretely, there is the fact that in chapter X, Afonso da Maia observes that “O verdadeiro patriotismo [...] seria, em lugar de corridas, fazer uma boa tourada,” adding that, “Cada raça possui o seu *sport* próprio, e o nosso é

o toiro: o toiro com muito sol, ar de dia santo, água fresca, e foguetes" (308). As Carlos Reis and Milheiro stress,

Eça acaba por corroborar, por contraste, a opinião de Afonso, representando, sob o olhar crítico de Carlos, uma corrida de cavalos em modorrenta atmosfera provinciana, mal disfarçada por baldados esforços para tentar dar um ar cosmopolita àquilo que decididamente o não era; mas isto não quer dizer que o escritor não tenha ponderado a possibilidade de incluir no seu romance (também e ou em alternativa) uma corrida de touros. (146)

This particular portrait of Portugal in the second half of the eighteenth century also includes, as previously stated, the manner in which the King and his minister are presented. If, in the Rebelo da Silva story, it is observed that "O Senhor D. José, primeiro do nome, era em Salvaterra um rei de férias"—with "os maldizentes [...] em segredo" noting (on the basis of "na habilidade mecânica do monarca como torneiro, e no carácter dominador do Marquês como ministro") "que Sua Majestade em Lisboa estava sempre ao torno e o Marquês de Pombal no trono" (167)—in the *Dicionário de História de Portugal* we find that "o reinado Josefino tem sido objecto de amplos comentários: em primeiro lugar, discutiu-se se os actos governativos eram da sua responsabilidade ou da do seu ministro; em segundo lugar, pôs-se em causa a sua eficiência" (Serrão 407).

In addition to references that enable us to draw direct conclusions as to the character of these two figures, the idea that implicitly permeates the entire narrative is one that also corroborates this supremacy of the Marquis of Pombal over D. José. Of the former it is said—returning to the short story—that "prezava as artes e protegia e animava as classes médias" and that "Esse pouco que o reino progrediu deveu-se a ele. Se a indústria nunca acabou de sair da infância, a culpa quase toda foi dos maus governos que sucederam ao seu, e também do povo que não quis trabalhar deveras" (Silva 170). In the case of the latter, his lack of authority is stressed, on the one hand—the father of the Count of Arcos did not obey his commands (176)—and also his lack of interest in affairs of state: during his time in Lisbon, Sebastião José dealt with political matters concerning his Spanish neighbours, whilst D. José entertained himself in Salvaterra.

What is therefore also evident and is offered to the reader, both now and then, is an opportunity to make assumptions about the ideological position

of the writer. Whilst for some Portuguese people the Marquis of Pombal wielded power like a despot and his political activities did not genuinely enhance the nation, for others—which, following our line of argument, may be said to include Rebelo da Silva—Sebastião José is seen as a figure of fundamental importance to the social, political and cultural development of the country. It is not by chance that this era was known as the Pombaline period rather than the reign of King José...

Moreover, in the final pages, the condescending and somewhat censorious tone underlying the way in which the minister addresses the King, “de pé e muito pálido,” clearly contrasts with the haughty manner in which the latter appears (“coberto de pó e com sinais de ter viajado depressa”):

– Temos guerra com a Espanha, senhor. É inevitável. Vossa majestade não pode consentir que os touros lhe matem o tempo e os vassalos. Se continuarmos neste caminho... cedo iria Portugal à vela.

– Foi a última corrida, Marquês. A morte do conde dos Arcos acabou os touros reais enquanto eu reinar.

– Assim o espero da sabedoria de vossa majestade. Não há tanta gente nos seus reinos, que possa dar-se um homem por um touro. El-rei consente que vá em seu nome consolar o Marquês de Marialva?

– Vá! É pai. Sabe o que há-de dizer-lhe...

[...]

El-rei saiu da tribuna, e o Marquês de Pombal, entrando na praça em toda a majestade de sua elevada estatura, levantou nos braços o velho fidalgo, dizendo-lhe com voz meiga e triste:

– Senhor Marquês! Os portugueses como vossa excelência são para darem exemplos de grandeza d'alma e não para os receberem. Tinha um filho e Deus levou-lho. Altos juízos seus! A Espanha declara-nos a guerra e el-rei, meu amo e meu senhor, precisa do conselho e da espada de vossa excelência.

E travando-lhe da mão, levou-o quase nos braços até o meterem na carruagem.

D. José I cumpriu a palavra dada ao seu ministro. No seu reinado nunca mais se picaram touros reais em Salvaterra. (180)

What this final reference seems once again to indicate is the idea that, despite engaging in a faithful portrayal of the age and the personalities, absolute accuracy of detail does not seem to have concerned the author in his reconstruction of this space-time. It is, in fact, impossible to assess whether

King D. José I's promise was kept. However, from the information we have been able to gather on the subject and the debate which considered the spectacle barbarous and degrading (despite its long-standing tradition), there are indications of an absolute ban on bullfights, not during the reign of D. José I, but years later under D. Maria II. The Decree that officially put an end to this popular form of entertainment in a bygone age can be found in n.º 229 of the *Diário do Governo* of 1836:

Considerando que as corridas de touros são um divertimento bárbaro e impróprio de nações civilizadas, bem assim que semelhantes espectáculos servem unicamente para habituar os homens ao crime e à ferocidade, e desejando eu remover todas as causas que possam impedir ou retardar o aperfeiçoamento moral da Nação Portuguesa, hei por bem decretar que de ora em diante fiquem proibidas em todo o reino as corridas de touros. (n.p.)

The references which we found to earlier resolutions are not linked to an absolute ban on bullfights, but rather a ban on bullfighting without first severing the animal's horns (as stated in the Charter of February 24th, 1686, in accordance with the Decree of August 28th, 1684, during the reign of D. Pedro II).³

In any case, as previously noted, any deviations from what actually took place do not detract from the essential matter of the story: a believable portrait of an age, a King and his minister. Ultimately, the writer of the short story, like the novelist, is at liberty to renounce the ethical and aesthetic obligations that should, in principle, govern the work of the historian.

In addition, despite the fact that both the short story and its "concentração estrutural não comporta[rem] a análise minudente das vivências do indivíduo e das suas relações com os outros"—being limited to "Um curto episódio, um caso interessante, uma recordação, etc." (Silva 105-06)—the fact is that by using the "risco leve e sóbrio" (Ribeiro 211) that Eça de Queirós referred to, the short story as a genre (and this short story in particular) offers "amplas possibilidades" (Goulart 13). Amongst other possible explanations, this may be due to the fact that the empty spaces allow for a much closer dialogue with the reader's powers of interpretation. The words of Jorge Luís Borges, affirming that we should have faith in allusion only, are particularly apt in this context:

Afinal, o que são as palavras? As palavras são símbolos para memórias partilhadas.

[...] Creio que só podemos aludir, só podemos fazer o leitor imaginar. O leitor, se for suficientemente rápido, pode satisfazer-se se apenas sugerimos uma coisa. (130-31)

Notes

¹ According to Armando Moreno, "A popular story is referred to as such when it is widely circulated among the general population" (99, trans. mine).

² See Reis and Milheiro 427-28.

³ For another reading of the issues pertaining to bullfighting in Portugal, see Rita Costa Gomes, "Violent Games: Towards an Historical Understanding of the Portuguese Bullfight," *Portuguese Literary and Cultural Studies* 6 (2001): 297-314.

Works Cited

- Aguiar e Silva, Vítor Manuel de. *A estrutura do romance*. Coimbra: Almedina, 1974.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. *Este ofício de poeta*. Lisboa: Teorema, 2002.
- Diário do Governo*, nº 229, 1836.
- Fleishman, Avrom. *The English Historical Novel. Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971.
- Gomes, Rita Costa. "Violent Games: Towards an Historical Understanding of the Portuguese Bullfight." *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* 6. (2001): 297-314.
- Goulart, Rosa Maria. "O conto: da literatura à teoria literária." *O conto. Teoria e análise. Forma Breve* 1 (2003): 9-16.
- Marinho, Maria de Fátima. *O Romance histórico em Portugal*. Porto: Campo das Letras, 1999.
- Moreno, Armando. *Biologia do conto*. Coimbra: Almedina, 1987.
- Queirós, Eça de. *Os Maias. Episódios da vida romântica*. 13th ed. Lisboa: Livros do Brasil, n.d.
- Reis, Carlos and Maria do Rosário Milheiro. *A construção da narrativa queirosiana*. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1989.
- Ribeiro, Maria Aparecida. *História crítica da Literatura Portuguesa*. Vol. VI. Lisboa: Verbo, 1994.
- Serrão, Joel, org. *Dicionário de História de Portugal*. Porto: Figueirinhas, 1990.
- Silva, Luís Augusto Rebelo da. "Última corrida de touros em Salvaterra." *Contos e Lendas*. 2nd ed. Vol. I. Lisboa: Livraria Moderna, 1908. 2 vols.
- "Tourada." *Grande Enciclopédia Portuguesa e Brasileira*. Vol. 32. Lisboa-Rio de Janeiro: Editorial Enciclopédia, n.d.

Ana Paula Arnaut holds a PhD from the Faculdade de Letras of the Universidade de Coimbra where she is a professor in Contemporary Portuguese Literature (nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Her research in this area has appeared in numerous Portuguese and international journals, and she is the author of two book-length studies: *Memorial do Convento—História, ficção e ideologia* (Coimbra: Fora do Texto, 1996) and *O romance português contemporâneo. Fios de Ariadne-máscaras de Proteu* (Coimbra: Almedina, 2002). E-mail: arnaut@ci.uc.pt