

Jorge Arrimar's Long Journey Back to Angola: The Return of a Native Son

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Abstract: There is a long tradition of Angolan writers who have recalled their native land from exile, the most emblematic example of this condition being that of the founder of the nation, and many would argue, of modern Angolan poetry: Agostinho Neto. The independence of Angola in 1975, which brought Neto home from exile, in its turn produced another generation of “refugee” writers fleeing the ensuing civil war, whose work reflects a sense of “angolanidade” both on the move and rooted in memory. Possibly the most extreme example of this is Jorge Arrimar. This article will survey the work of Arrimar, paying particular attention to the themes of de-racination and the depiction of a regional Angola seen through the prism of memory and of history—the hallmarks of this particular writer.

An inevitable result of the great inter-continental movements of people, deriving first from European colonial expansion and then from decolonization and postcolonial migration, has been the proliferation of diasporas far from their countries and continents of origin. The global dimension of these movements of population is a phenomenon associated with what we have learned to call modernity, which is why literary themes linked to or deriving from the diasporic condition—exile, social and cultural alienation, displacement, a concern with so-called cultural “authenticity” (or otherwise with “hybridisation”)—is part and parcel of what we understand to be the anguish

of modernity. An example from the lusophone world at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was Camilo Pessanha, whose identification with Portugal, the country he abandoned as a young man, was most acutely expressed from his Chinese exile, but who yearned to return to the East on the few visits he made to Portugal. Indeed, in a letter written to a friend while on passage back to Macau, Pessanha manifested a desire for the journey never to end.¹ The idea of continuous movement, of a journey without end, is a theme to which I shall return later in relation to the work of Jorge Arrimar.

In the case of Angolan literature—not to mention the other literatures from lusophone Africa—the African consciousness of a whole generation began to be expressed as a consequence of exile and/or imprisonment. Here, the most obvious example is that of Agostinho Neto, most of whose poetry was written when he was a student and political activist in Portugal, or when he was in prison in Portugal or banished by the Portuguese dictatorship to Cape Verde. In spite of this, Neto was conscious that he belonged to a generation of African intellectuals profoundly convinced of their role as leaders in an irreversible political and historical process that would put an end to their situation of exiles. The very process that would lead eventually to the return of Neto and his fellow nationalists to Angola produced a rupture within the heart of the colonial population, which would lead to other exiles. While there were clearly many colonials who lent their unreserved support to the old regime and were unable to envisage any other type of political arrangement, there were others who abandoned the country on the eve of its independence for sudden practical reasons, among which, the very real threat of renewed war, or the impossibility of continuing studies thrown into upheaval by the mass departure of teachers and other skilled personnel. Some left, hoping to return, but ended up staying in their host countries, becoming permanent exiles. Many considered themselves Angolans, albeit Angolans in exile, Angolans on the move.

At this point it is important to stress that the Angolan roots of Jorge Arrimar lie in the highlands of Huíla, around the town of São Pedro da Chibia, where this author was born in 1953 and where he lived until the age of twenty-one. Huíla is therefore the geographical context for Arrimar's Angolan identity, for he is the product of a community present in the region for at least a century and a half, and which originated in the early colonial settlement of Atlantic islanders from Madeira and the Azores, surrounded by African ethnic groups with distinct cultures, and whose social organization was based on pastoral activity. On the other hand, some aspects of this

regional society, possibly as a result of the influence of Brazilians, who settled in the region after the independence of Brazil, or because of the activities of Portuguese and *mestiço* traders known as *pombeiros*, who penetrated the interior in search of slaves, led to some degree of miscegenation, albeit not to the extent that occurred in and around Luanda. Arrimar's strong identification with his region was evident in his first collection of poems, *Ovatyilongo* (1975), in which he demonstrated profound ethnographic and linguistic knowledge of the indigenous cultures of the southern highlands. These poems seem to illustrate the intentions of the group to which he belonged, explicitly expressed in an article in the cultural section of the regional paper, which spoke of the need to create a literature that was openly directed towards the specificity of Angola. The proponents of this type of literary and cultural aspiration attracted the attention of the Portuguese political police, who kept them under close supervision, but there was the added difficulty of their being unable to obtain any of the texts of the 1948 generation, whose main literary figures, poets like Neto himself, António Jacinto, António Cardoso, not to mention Luandino Vieira, were in prison or on parole in Lisbon after long periods of incarceration, while others, such as Viriato da Cruz and Mário Pinto de Andrade, were in exile. It was no doubt for this reason that they had to resort to older, and perhaps less controversial sources of inspiration: the article, "Literatura sem ambiente," originally written by F. Morais Sarmiento, and published in the newspaper, *A Província de Angola* in 1941, was rediscovered by Arrimar, who transcribed the article with his own commentary. Sarmiento's words seemed as relevant to Angola at the beginning of the 1970s as they had three decades earlier. He had criticized the literature produced in Angola for its portrayal of whites as not being attached to the land, while at the same time lamenting the absence of a literature that unequivocally declared itself to be Angolan, following the example of Brazilian literature, still under the influence of the modernist and regionalist movements, or of Cape Verdean writers who had launched the "Claridade" movement but a few years previously. Sarmiento, reproduced by Arrimar, had concluded:

Não se julgue (...) que este caso é um caso literariamente circunscrito aos escritores brancos de Angola. Não. Os pretos e os mestiços não descobriram por enquanto, como aconteceu já aos cabo-verdianos, o sentido angolano da sua mensagem literária. Nos seus escritos, quer sejam prosa ou verso, eles ainda não nos deram, como diria Sílvia Romero e João Ribeiro dos mestiços e pretos brasileiros.²

In writing this in 1973, Arrimar could not (or perhaps chose not to) predict the speed with which his vision of an authentically Angolan literature would be swept away, or perhaps better emerge with a vengeance as a result of political developments in the following year.

In October 1975, a month before the formal independence of Angola, with war already flaring up in the south, Arrimar abandoned his homeland. He completed a degree in history in Portugal and went into secondary school teaching in the Azores before eventually leaving for Macau in 1985. He lived there for the next thirteen years, publishing various collections of poetry, as well as organizing anthologies of poetry devoted to Macau. While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss his poetry in detail, suffice to say that each collection he published during those years focuses on a particular stage in the evolution of his consciousness as an exiled Angolan, and on the cultural fissures produced by his sense of dislocation.³ In *Murilaonde* (1990), his efforts to rekindle memories of his native land are still strong. This sentiment is maintained in *Fonte do Lilau* (1990), in which there is a limited attempt to identify, as the title of the collection suggests, with the land of his exile, while at the same time acknowledging the failure of his ability to integrate emotionally into the world of Macau. In *Secretos Sinais* (1992), the poet is still influenced by his Chinese surroundings, but there are now more fluid, maritime images that seem to draw him back towards his more remote ancestral Portuguese roots. Since his return to Europe in 1998, Arrimar has entered another phase in his evolution as a writer, switching literary genres and publishing mainly fiction. This phase has also marked his gradual return to Angolan themes. His two novels, *Viagem de Memória às Ilhas* and *O Planalto dos Pássaros*, were both published in 2002 and to some extent complete the author's long journey back to his native land.

Viagem de Memória às Ilhas tells the histories of personalities brought to light by Alberto Meneses, the author's *alter ego*, during his research in the archives in Funchal. Like Arrimar, Alberto is a dislocated Angolan, a descendant of Madeirans who had established themselves in Huíla in the nineteenth century. In 1975, his family fled to South Africa and then to Australia, but Alberto later decided to leave for Europe in order to discover his ancestral roots. However, his nomadic instincts had caused him to leave again, this time to a post in the Portuguese Embassy in Bangkok, mirroring the Asian experience of Arrimar himself. Alberto's trajectory thus seems to illustrate the following spiritual anguish: the greater the rupture with one's roots, the more

intense the urge to wander, the longer the period of wandering, the greater the desire to return to one's origins, the greater the importance of memory:

A vida tinha-o desassossegado demais para que ele agora conseguisse ficar calmo e tranquilo para sempre no mesmo sítio. A sua memória continuava ancorada a uma terra que ele precisava de reencontrar, para se encontrar de vez com ele próprio, ou então... perder-se inevitavelmente! (*Viagem* 12)

For Alberto, the greatest problem is his realization that memory is focused as much on people, acquaintances or family, as it is on place. The absence of this crucial element means that a return can never be complete, but merely another stage in an “incessante procura.” Alberto's anguish seems to coincide with that of the migrant as defined by Iain Chambers:

To return, rather than simply to re-visit or re-view, that is, to apparently turn back and return “fully,” to African, Caribbean or Indian roots in pursuit of a displaced and dispersed authenticity today hardly seems feasible. The impossible mission that seeks to preserve the singularity of a culture must paradoxically negate its fundamental element: its historical dynamic. (74)

Perhaps Arrimar himself was conscious of this condition when he revisited his native region in 2002 for the first time in nearly thirty years. In an article on his journey, Arrimar recalls participating in a dance—the *etanda*—that marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood:

Senti um apelo antigo e levantei bem alto o bastão bifurcado dos dançarinos, saltei a vedação do tempo e bati com força os pés no chão ao som compassado de palmas e cânticos... e eu dancei pela última vez a etanda sob os céus da Huíla.⁴

The reference to “última vez” not only suggests that the dance is unrepeatable, given that one does undergo this rite of passage twice in one's life, but perhaps indicates that the visit was necessary in order that he should leave again, for, as Chambers points out, revisiting is not the same as returning.

In *Viagem de Memória às Ilhas*, Alberto's restless spirit, his psychological instability, are partly due to the lack of any historical consciousness, and it is worth recalling here that Arrimar is a graduate in history who was responsible for the historical archive in Macau as well as for its national library. The

community to which Alberto belonged only had vague, fragmented notions of the origins of its presence in Angola:

Os primeiros descendentes angolanos desses ilhéus de oitocentos quiseram acreditar que eram de geração espontânea, como se aquele pedaço de terra africana sempre lhes tivesse pertencido. (*Viagem* 21)

It is as a researcher that Alberto is attracted to the documents in the Funchal archives, but as he reads between their lines, his imagination blurs the division between history and fiction, and so the book becomes a series of inter-related stories that explore the origins of the family in Madeira, with particular emphasis given to the Bettencourts, one of the oldest island family names, with ramifications in the Azores and the Canaries, and from whom Arrimar claims ancestry on his mother's side. The stories narrated correspond, for the most part, to episodes of love, and in most cases culminate in a journey, when the lovers are obliged to leave their place of residence, or their homeland, with the implied consequence that they will never be able to return to their point of origin. Thus, the orphan girl from Lisbon is given a king's dowry to marry the first *donatário* of Porto Santo; a disapproved marriage forces José António Bettencourt and his wife to leave for Angola; a Macanese, the son of the Azorean *Ouvidor*, or Chief Magistrate of Macau, Miguel de Arriaga,⁵ tires of the intrigues in Lisbon and leaves for the islands, where he falls in love and puts down roots—a *retornado* over a century before the term was first coined; the colonization of Lanzarote by the Frenchman Jean de Bethancourt, his love affair with a Guanche princess, ends with the withdrawal of this pioneer to Madeira, following the agreement between Portugal and Castile, which transferred sovereignty of the Canaries to the latter. Once again, an adventurer becomes the victim of *realpolitik*. Just as in his poetry, then, Arrimar seems to wish to reclaim his origins in a whole process of inter-oceanic migration that began with Portuguese maritime expansion. Apart from this, it is also clear that his concept of travel involves both a physical and temporal space, for while he sits in the archive, his research leads him on a journey into history:

foi como se tivesse feito uma viagem aos confins dos tempos e tivesse regressado ao porto do presente. (*Viagem* 169)

Equally important is the metaphorical role played by these islands in Arrimar's work: they are frontier zones, crossroads for generations of travellers and migrants, settlers and colonizers. At the same time, these spaces both are and are not Portugal. Without being strictly colonies, they are nevertheless peripheries. Hence to some extent their function as symbolic representations of isolation, fragmentation, and dispersed roots: the islands are physical embodiments of psychological states, confirming the cliché "every man is an island." Alberto leaves Porto Santo carrying in his luggage a tiny sachet of sand by way of a souvenir of his passage through his ancestral land, but also as a recollection of his rootlessness and angst:

Mas era apenas um punhado de areia... areia daquela ilha, onde ele havia tentado encontrar, ali também, alguns dos sulcos que as suas longínquas raízes islenhas haviam deixado gravados. Mais uma ilha, mais raízes soltas ao vento. (*Viagem* 208)

Finally, we can surely see some parallels between the archipelagos of Madeira and the Azores and the colonial archipelago that Arrimar inhabited in the south of Angola. While the presence of the surrounding ocean is fundamental to our understanding of the cultural sensibilities of the islanders—the symbiosis of sea and soil being a constant theme in the literatures of the Portuguese islands—the sea that Arrimar, as a boy and young man, contemplated, observed, and respected from his island of Huíla, contained the African cultures that first inspired his poetry. For Arrimar was a member of a community whose own cultural roots were, after all, alien to the region, just as islands are within the domain of the ocean, and, like the Portuguese Atlantic islands, Arrimar's Angolan community was not prototypically colonial in the sense that it had to some extent become Africanized, nor did it belong to the mass of the colonized population.

O Planalto dos Pássaros was published simultaneously in Portugal and Angola and marked a new phase in Arrimar's reintegration in Angola. Its launch was the occasion for his first visit to his native land since he had left it nearly thirty years before. Moreover, his acceptance as a member of the Angolan Writers' Union reflected a formal, institutional reconciliation with his past, while also indicating how Angola itself was opening up as peace was re-established in the country. The novel is very clearly fictionalized history complete with footnotes. The story opens and closes with the flight of a young man from Huíla in 1975. He is the descendant of one of the first

Portuguese families to settle in the southern highlands at the end of the eighteenth century. Through a series of flashbacks, it narrates the story of this family, the arrival of the first *capitão-mor*, the Madeiran António Jardim, nominated by the governor in Luanda in 1784. Much of the plot focuses on the relationship between Jardim and Huilana, the daughter of João Pilarte, a Portuguese *pombeiro* and backwoodsman who has long been resident in the region. The death of the local African chieftain, Kanina Gongga, who had protected Portuguese settlers in his domains, signals the end of a period of stability. The whites and their African allies (the so-called *guerra preta*) are defeated and obliged to take refuge in Benguela, bringing to an end the first attempt to establish a Portuguese administrative presence in the southern Angolan interior. The attempt would only be repeated some sixty years later, when a grandson of the first *capitão-mor* would join an expedition that would once again make for the Huíla highlands. But by relating the events of the late eighteenth century with those of the late twentieth, Arrimar is presenting us with a cyclical view of history, as if he were seeking to legitimize the long period of colonial settlement in the area and reclaim roots in this particular region of Angola. The introduction of two love stories, that of Feliciano and João Pilarte, the founding members of the family, and that of Jardim and Huilana, would seem to indicate some similarity with the foundational romances of Brazilian literature, except that here, the community disintegrates once it is established, and while it returns and lasts for over a century until its final rupture in 1975, Arrimar's Huíla is, in the final analysis, no more than a lost paradise.

When we speak of a foundational literature, and the concept of a national identity supported by a literary canon, we should not forget that such a literature is often the product of a profound sense of loss. It seeks out a future in the past. The great Brazilian romantic, José de Alencar, set a number of his novels during what he and his generation considered the heroic age of Brazil's construction as a nation, an edenic, rural Brazil prior to the technological advances and negative urban influences that the author felt typified his own age. His Indians were idealized, mythological figures, incorporated into literature at a time when the Indian presence had been almost totally eradicated from the Brazilian littoral and the vicinity of its coastal cities where most of the population lived. In the fiction of Mia Couto and of Pepetela, the attempt to reunite the divided self—a favourite theme of the romantics—is focused on a tale of love. Hence, Couto's *Terra Sonâmbula* is about love

between two individuals of a lost, transitional, or threshold generation, not born at independence and which did not die out with the end of colonialism. In Pepetela's *A Geração da Utopia*, the two main male and female protagonists, Aníbal and Sara sacrifice their love in order to create a nation. In Arrimar's *Viagem de Memória às Ilhas*, the relationship between Alberto and his Azorean lover, Mariana Arriaga (a descendant perhaps of the "Ouvidor" of Macau), is sacrificed in order that the "hero" may continue his journey and complete his story. But the quest to reunite the divided self, just as it was for the romantics, would lead us to agree with the philosopher Karl Popper, namely, that the self is an emergent and not an absolute entity, which means of course that identity is an unfolding process and not a fixed state waiting to be found or recuperated (Eakin 195). Travel, dislocation, and exile are, for Arrimar, just as they were indeed for Pessanha, a consequence of this process. The quest for his roots is, paradoxically, a cause of his deracination—or better, the author put down roots in exile and in a type of pluralism of identity based on his life's experience. The young refugees from Huíla (both in 1790 and in 1975) take with them one token of their African cultural inheritance: a *quissange* or thumb piano. When he leaves Madeira at the end of the twentieth century, Alberto sets off in search of the black metal effigy of Christ the child that belonged to the young wife who left for Huíla almost two hundred years before. Arrimar's travelling Angolan identity is no more than an attempt to reconcile these two extremes of his cultural inheritance.

Arrimar's reinscription into the literature of Angola does not, however, stop here. In 2003, he published a short story in Angola that seems to contain within its plot, its social archetypes, and its language, resonances of an earlier, pioneering literary age. *Os Infortúnios de Juvêncio* is set firmly within postwar Angola, but the scenario is remarkably similar to that depicted by Luandino Vieira in his story "Vavó Xixi e seu neto Neca Santos," which featured in the classic of Angolan fiction of the 1960s, *Luuanda*. Like Luandino's unemployed youth, Juvêncio has been brought up by his grandmother after his parents are lost in the war. Dreaming of a better life, he decides to go and seek work at an orphanage run by a nun, who has become well known in the hinterland of Luanda for her work among abandoned children. However, on his way to the town where this orphanage is situated, Juvêncio is caught stealing a banana and thrown into jail, where he remains without trial. In due course, he and other prisoners are let out of their cell to go and labour as contract workers. The story ends with a quote from António Jacinto's well-known poem "Monangamba,"

which had evoked the exploitation and plight of Angolan contract workers in the interior of Angola in the 1940s and 50s. Arrimar's language, replete with *kimbundu* words and expressive dialogue, is very different from that employed in his historical fiction. It is as if the cycle has turned and we are back in the Angola of the late colonial period, and, indeed, this is no doubt the author's intention: to suggest how the pattern of social inequalities and arbitrary justice is being repeated once again five decades after an earlier generation of writers focused on them. Once again, Arrimar presents us with a cyclical view of history, and this idea of an eternal return perhaps further serves to re-legitimize Arrimar as a literary voice within the social, political, and cultural mainstream of post-revolutionary and postwar Angola.

Notes

¹ Letter to Carlos Amaro, dated 26 January 1909, and written aboard a ship in the Mediterranean, during his fourth return to Macau. See Pessanha 93-95.

² "Literatura sem ambiente," in "Grucuhuila" 5, 9 August 1973, a cultural page run by a group of students known as the Grupo Cultural da Huila, and published in the newspaper *Jornal da Huila*.

³ For a study of Arrimar's poetry, see Brookshaw.

⁴ Jorge Arrimar wrote a report on his return to Angola: "Eu dancei a etanda na minha terra," *Seixo Review*, <http://www3.telus.net/eduardo-b-pinto/arrimar_regresso.html>.

⁵ Miguel de Arriaga Brum Silveira was Chief Magistrate in Macau in the first half of the nineteenth century. Arrimar, the historian and archivist, took part in an international seminar entitled "O Município no Mundo Português," held in Funchal in 1998, and presented a paper entitled, "O Leal Senado de Macau e Miguel de Arriaga na Primeira Metade do Século XIX."

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