

A Supplement to the White Man's Burden: Lobo Antunes, History, the Colonial Wars, and the April Revolution

Luís Madureira

Abstract: This essay opens with an examination of Portuguese novels about the colonial wars which seek to expose the referential emptiness of the Salazarist imperial mystique, and present its “civilizing mission” as an example of the very un-Historicity which Hegel notoriously ascribes to Africa. Such texts arguably employ “postcolonial” strategies of reading empire. It is precisely this gesture that Lobo Antunes refuses to perform. His fiction suggests that to try to link the protagonist’s colonial story with Angola’s narrative of resistance would only confirm his complicity with the colonial project. By the same token, the April Revolution appears bereft of historical meaning, reduced to one in an infinite chain of exchangeable signifiers mobilized to name a desire for totality that cannot but fall short of its object. In Antunes’s fiction, Portugal’s quest for universality seems as illusory as the *estadonovista* yearning for the resurgence of an etiolated imperial glory.

In an early chapter of Günter Grass’s *Tin Drum*, Oskar Matzerath, the novel’s narrator, expresses a characteristically neurotic desire: “I wish I could be a toasty warm brick, constantly exchanged for myself, lying beneath my grandmother’s skirts” (147). To repeat the question Oskar attributes to his implied reader: “What [...] can Oskar be after beneath his grandmother’s skirts? Oblivion, a home, the ultimate Nirvana?” Oskar’s answer is as pointed as it is star-

ting: "Afrika suchte ich unter den Röcken" ["I was looking for Africa under the skirts"] (*Tin Drum* 125)] (*Blechtrommel* 147):

This was the watershed, he continues, the union of all streams; here special winds blew, or else there was no wind at all; dry and warm, you could listen to the whistling of the rain; here ships made fast or weighed anchors [...] beneath my grandmother's skirts it was always summer [...]. Nowhere could I have been more at peace with the calendar than beneath my grandmother's skirts. (126)

Oskar may be paraphrasing here a Baudelairean wish to be here [*da*], there [*là-bas*], and nowhere—or anywhere out of this world [*n'importe où hors du monde*]. Like Baudelaire's oneirical land, the place beneath the grandmother's skirts is a paradoxical true fiction ("un vrai pays de Cocagne"), the uncharted harbor where numinous ships come to slumber at the end of parabolic journeys to Infinity, "un de ces pays qui sont les analogies de la Mort" ["one of those countries that are the analogies of Death"]; a place at once exotic and familiar: *l'Orient de l'Occident, la Chine de l'Europe* (Baudelaire 107, 179). It is an uncanny topos that turns out to be the common "entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and 'in the beginning'" (Freud, "Uncanny" 146). As Oskar later confesses, his "aim is to get back to the umbilical cord; that is the sole purpose behind this whole vast verbal effort" (179). About the "Uncanny" (or *unheimlich*) Freud has famously argued that the prefix *un* serves as "the token of repression," of something familiar (or *heimlich*) which has been repressed.

For instance, "whenever a man dreams of a place or country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming, 'this place is familiar to me, I've been here before,' we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body" ("Uncanny" 146). The Uncanny, then, "occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (150). Ironically, inasmuch as Oskar's "uncanny" life story is defined by a willed resurgence of childhood traumas, of the revenants of a primitive ancestry, as it were, it parallels the very politico-historical itinerary from which he so obstinately seeks to distance himself.

Oskar's drive to replicate the undifferentiated and ceramic recurrence of the Same shares in common with the Nazi project its barbaric gloss of the distinctively modern desire to obliterate the old order. In both instances, the

new departure turns out to be a return, and the point of origin is so radically original that it dwells outside of historical (or calendar) time altogether. It lies beyond the "origin" itself. Oskar's desire to reach the primal stasis of a perennially embryonic mode of being can thus be said to relate to the modern as Freud's "compulsion to repeat" does to the pleasure principle: it is "something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual, and which ends up overriding [the latter]" (*Pleasure Principle* 25). Insofar as it is an "unconscious mental process," it is unaffected by time. Indeed, the idea of time is completely alien to it. Oskar's instinct to restore an earlier state of things is, in this psychoanalytical sense, "the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life [...] of the *conservative* nature of living substance" (*Pleasure Principle* 43).

And this "initial state from which the living entity has at one time or another departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads" is of course death: a return to an inorganic existence immanent in the organism itself, the embodiment of its wish "to die only in its own fashion"¹ (*Pleasure Principle* 45, 47). In this sense, Oskar's *Afrika* becomes not only an analogy of death, but the figure for a wholesale civilizational collapse, for a cultural disposition "to give a deceptive appearance of being [a] force tending towards change and progress, whilst in fact [it] is merely seeking to reach an ancient goal by paths alike old and new" (*Pleasure Principle* 45). If one assumes, as one of *Tin Drum*'s possible tropological frameworks, Freud's assertion of the striking similarity between "the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual" (*Civilization* 51), then Oskar's obsessive desire to return to the uterine tropics suggests that the titanic battle between Eros and Thanatos, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction to which the evolution of civilization may be reduced according to Freud (*Civilization* 82), culminates with the absolute victory of the latter—with a retrocession into a primitive state in which "man" knows no restrictions to his savage instincts.

It is as though the absolute "end of History," which Europe signifies for Hegel (*History* 103), the principle of "self-conscious Reason" which defines the occident's epistemological impetus "to take back into itself, into its unitary nature" (*Mind* 45), the recalcitrant and protean alterity of the world confronting it; as though the "development and realization of freedom" which European civilization putatively embodies were to retrogress not just to the beginning of History, but to its "threshold," the Unhistorical and Undeveloped netherworld to which Hegel consigns Africa in *The Philosophy of History*. It is as though, in intimating that "the nation lives the same kind of life as

the individual," Grass wishes simultaneously to underscore a crucial "Hegelian" distinction between these two processes. In the case of the nation, "death appears to imply destruction by its own agency" (*History* 75).

This is the peculiar eschatology that appears to govern the plots of several recent (or "post-revolutionary") novels about Portugal's African wars. Hence, although in a very broad sense these narratives may certainly be classified as twentieth-century "adaptations" of Joseph Conrad's great Africanist novella, they nonetheless purportedly succeed in transcending what the late Edward Said has called its tragic limitation, that is, the fact that "even though [Conrad] could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism had to end so that the 'natives' could lead lives free from European domination" (30). By contrast, it is precisely this recognition that lays the epistemological ground for Portugal's latter-day novelistic journeys into a stereotypical "heart of darkness." In this light, the renowned cartographic blank upon which little Marlow's desire is inscribed ("when I grow up I will go there" [33]) turns out to be disquietingly self-reflexive. Like the hankering of the perennially and "willfully" diminutive Oskar for a matricial *Afrika*, Marlow's wish to "go there" is in the last instance a death wish, a desire to destroy, "in [his] own fashion" (*Pleasure Principle* 47), the culture and civilization that ultimately enable him to define himself as a human subject. By dint of an impossible return "to the earliest beginnings of the earth," to "a prehistoric earth" (Conrad 59, 62)—to the threshold of History in the Hegelian sense—both the young Marlow and Oskar strive to follow in reverse order the developmental itinerary that the West's particularist and fabular "universal history" has charted.

The Nazi project reproduces at the national level this *viaje a la semilla*, as Alejo Carpentier would call it, this return voyage to the infant stage. It initiates the backward movement across history's great epochs that, rather than culminating in the German spirit's "blissful self-rediscovery," as Nietzsche once exuberantly foretold (96), leads, in the words of the narrator-protagonist of Carpentier's *Lost Steps*, to the brutal interruption of the West's emancipatory narrative,² to an absolute modernity which is at the same time a kind of civilizational death fugue: "What was new here, unprecedented [*inédito*], modern, was that cavern of horrors, that ministry of horror [...] in which everything bore witness to torture, mass extermination, crematories" (Carpentier 94). Similarly, the "anticolonial" appropriations of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, exemplified in the writings of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and C. L. R. James,

among many others, suggest that the “master race,” in dehumanizing those with “a different complexion or slightly flatter noses,” ultimately dehumanizes itself. As the template to Nazism’s genocidal procedures, colonialism, Césaire asserts in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, becomes *la négation pure et simple de la civilisation*. As a consequence, the “white world” reveals itself “horribly weary from its immense efforts / its stiff joints [cracking] under the hard stars” (69).

From the early twentieth century onward, “anti-colonial” literatures endeavor variously to rewrite this imputed civilizational death-instinct as the opening—the *blank space*, as it were—upon which, in Gayatri Spivak’s terms, “a new magisterium [may] construct itself [from the West’s “magisterial texts”] in the name of the Other” (*Critique* 7). It is putatively this wholesale collapse of European civilization, and its attendant notions of progress, enlightenment, and reason that Conrad’s novella foreshadows as well. Only in this rather restricted sense would I be willing to go along with Alfred J. López’s provocative claim that Conrad’s novella produces “an opening into the post-colonial” (59). Grounding his own reading of *Heart of Darkness* on Guyana’s Wilson Harris’s designation of the text as a “frontier” novel, López argues that Conrad’s narrative clears the space in which postcolonial literature was later to emerge. For López, then, the novel betokens “a capacity, in the most general terms, for language—or more specifically, for a discourse with the [...] capability of representing *difference*” (46).

It is a similar “tampering” with the authority of “Europe’s long story” that Spivak identifies as one of the specifically postcolonial strategies of engaging with the West’s powerful and enduring narrative (*Teaching* 75). It seems to be in this disruptive spirit as well that the Portuguese critic Eduardo Lourenço, writing in the throes of the precipitate decolonization unleashed in the aftermath of Portugal’s 1974 revolution, reduces to *nothing* the impact on the national *psyche* of the vertiginous collapse of a 500-year old colonial empire: “Mas marcas duradouras na alma de quem ‘teve’ quinhentos anos de império *nada*, ou só a ficção encarecente que n’*Os Lusíadas* ecoa, não como mudadora da sua alma, mas como simples *nomenclatura* extasiada de terras e lugares que na verdade, salvo Goa, nunca habitámos como senhores delas” (*Labirinto* 43).³

More recently, Lourenço has spoken of Portugal’s “puro império de sonho,” describing its late nineteenth-century colonial enterprise in Africa as “a nossa fuga simbólica para o imaginário imperial” (*Mitologia* 130). Recent metropolitan narratives about Portugal’s colonial wars seek consciously (at times even programmatically) to elaborate as a discursive “capacity” the link with the

postcolonial that both López and Harris regard as a potentiality in Conrad's narrative discourse, and which Edward Said considers absent from it.⁴ They therefore attempt to recode what Eduardo Lourenço defines as a historiographic *nothing* as a metropolitan version of the very negation of History that Hegel notoriously imputes to Africa. Death in these war novels emerges as the unconscious wish not only of the colonial subject but of the metropolis itself. The backwardness or marginality that, in the eyes of several of the leaders of Africa's liberation struggles, belied even the pretense of a Portuguese "civilizing mission" would thus appear to be confirmed by this contemporary recurrence of an ostensible desire for the end of empire, a death-drive which, as I argue elsewhere, can already be glimpsed in the interstices of Portugal's sixteenth-century discourses of maritime expansion.⁵

In António Lobo Antunes's *As naus*,⁶ just as in Manuel Alegre's *Jornada de África* (1989) and João de Melo's *Autópsia de um mar em ruínas* (1984), this putative death-wish functions explicitly as the synecdoche of metropolitan disintegration. In Alegre's *Jornada*, this link is established with a sustained set of allusions to the conveniently metonymic death of King Sebastian I. As Alegre asserts in a poem written at least a decade before *Jornada* was published,

Alcácer Quibir foi sempre o passado por dentro do presente

[...]

Quinhentos anos dentro destes anos

Alcácer Quibir [é] este fantasma sobre a nossa idade

[...]

[É] ir morrer além do mar por coisa nenhuma

[...]

um tempo parado no tempo [...]

Porque um fantasma é rei de Portugal. (n.p.)

Similarly, in António Lobo Antunes's *As naus*, the ghost of King Sebastian haunts the entire narrative, as does the attendant threat of a Castilian invasion, of the country's untimely yet foretold death. At the end of the novel, in an obsessive-compulsive reenactment of the closing section of Pessoa's *Mensagem*, the returnees from a collapsing empire, ravaged by mental illness and tropical diseases, gather (like "a band of robed seagulls" ["um bando de gaivotas em roupão" (247)]) on the beach at Ericeira. Their aim is to prepare for the arrival of the Fifth Empire's ghostly harbinger: "o rei maricas" (241), "um ado-

lescente loiro, de coroa na cabeça e beiços amuados, vindo de Alcácer Quibir com pulseiras de cobre trabalhado dos ciganos de Carcavelos e colares baratos de Tânger ao pescoço" (247). Like King Sebastian, and indeed the *estadonovista* imperial mystique, these "dying colonialists" apparently suffer from the quixotic affliction as defined by Foucault. Their delusional efforts to decipher in Renaissance discourses of expansion a redemptive resemblance to Portugal's present-day imperialism, their stubborn insistence to read those ancient chronicles and its "rotting" twentieth-century avatar as belonging to the same hallowed text, verge also "upon the visionary or madness" (Foucault 47).

Ultimately, Salazarist colonial discourses also "have [no] value apart from the slender fiction which they represent" (Foucault 48). They are, in this way (and to borrow Eduardo Lourenço's sardonic definition of the Portuguese), "more Quixotic than Don Quixote" (*Mitologia* 14). At the end of *As naus*, the only thing the lugubrious group of ex-colonials is able to descry is expect- edly "the ocean, empty as far as the line of the horizon." They remain none- theless the willing prisoners of a kind of imperial sublime, "aguardando, ao som de uma flauta que as vísceras do mar emudeciam, os relinchos de um cavalo impossível" (247), performing the tenuous hope, already inscribed in the *Lusíadas'* invocation, that the willful young king would restore the decay- ing sixteenth-century empire to its former resplendent glory. In this restricted sense, Antunes's narrative fits Adorno's description of contemporary novels as "negative epics [:] testimonials to a state of affairs in which the individual liquidates himself" (35).

In Melo's *Autópsia de um mar em ruínas*, the fascist desire to restore the grandeur of Portugal's sixteenth-century empire is gradually refigured as a rep- etition-compulsion, a collective drive to return to a historical "womb" whose culmination is unavoidably death: "cada um procurava a segurança [...] um ninho onde esse corpo à beira da fragmentação pudesse ter ainda a ilusão de regressar ao óvulo e ao seio da mãe" (13), "e eis a morte [...]. O ar tornou[-se] gordo como a placenta onde fui gerado," "vai morrer um homem. Vai morrer um país que matou um milhão e quinhentos mil homens na guerra" (292, 293). Yet both *Jornada* and *Autópsia* seek to move considerably beyond the mere chronicling of an imperial death foretold. They apparently subscribe to the compensatory political posture which, according to Lourenço, Portugal adopts in response to a traumatizing decolonization: "o que perdíamos em espaço e em riqueza potencial (e real) era compensado pela *exemplaridade revolucionária*, ou sobretudo, por uma *exemplaridade democrática* que tinha

o condão de nos subtrair do lote das nações retrógradadas politicamente e nos conciliar a benevolência e estima do universo" (*Labirinto* 49).

As Lourenço has proposed more recently, "read in reverse" (*lido às avessas*) the "disaster" that the dissolution of the Portuguese colonial empire constituted "se converteu no acto fundador da Nova Democracia portuguesa" (*Mitologia* 139). Along similar lines, Alegre and Melo attempt to adumbrate what Paul Gilroy designates "the inversion of the relationship between margin and centre as it has appeared within the master discourses of the master race" (45) a reversal, which as C. L. R. James asserts, is embodied in the peculiar circumstances surrounding the collapse of Portugal's colonial empire:

Portugal which dominated areas of Africa for 500 years has not only lost control over them; but the revolutionary developments in Africa have affected the future of Portugal itself. In other words, the movement is in the opposite direction—instead of movements from Europe stimulating revolutionary developments in Africa, liberation struggles in Africa have unleashed movements of tremendous importance in Europe itself. (378)

It is this remarkable alteration of the trajectory which Hegel imposes on universal history that Melo's and Alegre's novels attempt to register. As in Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to My Native Land," the death of the metropolis prefigures the "birth" of a new humanity in Africa: "cabeças de homens brancos caem degoladas por cada golpe; seus pescoços antecipadamente condenados pelo dia grande que vai chegar ainda" (Melo 123).

In Lobo Antunes's *Os cus de Judas* (1979), the narrator-protagonist foresees the impending demise of his European homeland exactly in the ritual dances of "um povo cuja inesgotável vitalidade [ele] entrevira já, anos antes, no trompete solar de Louis Armstrong, expulsando a neurastenia e o azedume com a alegria musculosa do seu canto" (58), in the inflections of a "esquisita linguagem que eu entendia mal, mas se aparentava ao saxofone de Charlie Parker quando não grita o seu ódio ferido pelo mundo cruel e ridículo dos brancos" (181).⁷ This glimpse of a world which the narrator of *Os cus* places under the sign of authenticity not only glosses Langston Hughes's "Trumpet Player," but it repeats a cultural opposition pervasive in *négritude* poetry.⁸ Here, too, the vibrancy and vitality of the African world reflects back to the European narrator the inauthenticity and morbidity of his own culture: "sentia-me melancolicamente herdeiro de um velho país desajeitado e agoni-

zante, de uma Europa repleta de furúnculos de palácios de pedras de bexiga de catedrais” (58).

By the same token, the chapters from Melo’s novel that focus on Angola’s anti-colonial resistance adhere to Sartre’s postulate regarding the universality of any individual (existential) project: “Every project, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European [who] can redo in himself the project of the Chinese, the Indian or the African [...] as long as [s/he] has sufficient information [*renseignements suffisants*]” (69-70). Falling prey perhaps to the “Eurocentric arrogance” that Spivak ascribes to Sartre’s assertion (*Critique* 173), Melo attempts to incorporate, as a counterpoint to his own account of a metropolitan death, the Angolans’ project of liberation, the latter’s subterranean (and subcutaneous) narration of a nation yet to be born: “a história da libertação [...] escrita com sangue na memória do povo” (305), “essas histórias que ficavam escritas na terra-mãe [das quais] a pátria se fazia no tempo” (119). Melo’s *Autópsia* seeks not only to undermine dominant Portuguese colonial discourses but to reproduce, or at least gesture toward, Angola’s incipient nationalist project.

In his effort to establish a causal link between the death of the metropolis and the birth of a new Angolan nation, to interject an emergent “counternarration” into the fabric of his own narrative of imperial decadence, Melo thus exhibits that “revolutionary exemplariness” which Eduardo Lourenço ironically brands as a compensation for the empire’s loss—an exemplariness that in a sense supplements “the white man’s burden.” What distinguishes this supplementary mediation from the one Derrida describes is not just its “self-consciousness” but its expressed desire to take the place of the very term—colonialism—it defers. This is precisely the exemplary gesture which Lobo Antunes’s narrative refuses to perform. Other than the phantasmal guerrillas, the central figure of resistance in *Os cus de Judas* is the narrator’s African lover Sofia, an MPLA operative who is gang-raped and subsequently murdered by a PIDE station chief: “mulher liberta que nenhum pide, nenhum tropa, nenhum cipaio calaria” (187).

The narrator’s involvement with her is in fact the one facet of his Angolan experience that he deliberately conceals from his interlocutor. He invokes Sofia’s image, her “triumphant laughter” [“gargalhada vitoriosa”], but nevertheless refuses to transcribe her words, turning instead to his own pusillanimous silence before her extra-judicial execution: “saio deste aquário de azulejos como saí do quartel da pide [...] sem a coragem de um grito de indignação ou revolta, a acabar de cumprir esta noite como outrora cumpri, sem protestar,

vinte e sete meses de escravidão sangrenta" (192-3). The narrator's refusal to tell Sofia's story, his insistence on guarding her secret, stands in direct contrast to the PIDE agent's brutal tactics of interrogation. It stops short of reproducing what Spivak calls "the ethnocentric and reverse-ethnocentric double-bind" (that is, converting the native into the object of an "enthusiastic information-retrieval") (*Critique* 118). In this way, Sofia marks the site of an irretrievable alterity, of the novel's inaccessible exterior. She represents a diegetic limit beyond which Antunes's narration cannot proceed without reproducing the very violence and terror which it sets out to displace.

The silent acquiescence of Antunes' narrator to Sofia's torture and assassination, as well as his resigned collaboration with the *Estado Novo's* counter-insurgent campaign inevitably render him complicit with the colonial project he abhors. Any endeavor to incorporate the subterranean idiom of resistance (the struggle for which Sofia sacrifices herself) into his own (metropolitan) account of the colonial war would only exacerbate this complicity. It would, in effect, inscribe itself in the history of "the arrogance of the radical European humanist conscience, which will consolidate itself by imagining the other ... through the collection of information" (Spivak, *Critique* 171). In this way, *Os cus de Judas* sets itself apart both from Melo's *Autópsia* and Alegre's *Jornada*, which, in a broad sense, both endeavor to exhume a subterranean similitude between the colonial troops and the nationalist guerrillas. Rather than signal the double emancipation putatively unleashed by the abrupt fall of the colonial empire, Antunes's narrative of the colonial war annuls the utopian promise of April '74. The remarkable public silence that greets the empire's collapse in *Os cus de Judas*, the "unparalleled" absence of even a vestigial traumatic sign on the "national psyche," the collective refusal to rethink "[n]a sua totalidade [a] nossa imagem perante nós mesmos e no espelho do mundo" (Lourenço, *Labirinto* 45; italics in the original), marks the ineluctable closure of the revolutionary cycle. "Se a revolução acabou, e em certo sentido acabou de facto, é porque os mortos de África, de boca cheia de terra, não podem protestar, e hora a hora a direita os vai matando, de novo, e nós, os sobreviventes, continuamos duvidosos de estar vivos" (Antunes, *Cus* 73).

Not only is the radical temporal rift which divides the metropolis from its colonial "dependencies" during the armed struggle not transcended by the April revolution, but, as Antunes's later fiction suggests, Portugal's historical "stagnation" appears only to intensify in the post-revolutionary period. The inversion in the motion of History, which C. L. R. James views as inextricably

linked to “liberation struggles in Africa,” manifests itself in the metropolis as a lingering “backwardness,” as an effective reversal of the stereotyped hierarchical relationship between Europe and the “dark continent.” Small wonder, therefore, that in Antunes’s sixth novel, *Auto dos danados*, the third in a quartet whose last installment is *As naus*, a back-packing German couple, who “invade” a curio shop in the southern Portuguese province of Alentejo in the wake of the revolution, examine “as loiças e as peles, como os navegadores antigos as estatuetas de pau-santo dos pretos,” insisting on regarding even the most trivial act as some “ritual primitivo, executado em sua honra por um membro da tribo” (250, 251). In a general sense, the scene epitomizes the contradictory position Portugal occupies in relation to the “developed” world at the moment of decolonization. In the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos:

Portugal was the center in relation to its colonies and the periphery in relation to [post-industrial Europe]. In less technical terms, we can say that for a long time Portugal was simultaneously a colonizing and a colonized country. On April 25 1974, Portugal was the least developed country in Europe and at the same time the sole possessor of the largest and longest-lasting European colonial empire. (105)

In *Fado alexandrino* (1983), perhaps Antunes’s most full-fledged attempt to novelize the historical articulation between the disintegration of the colonial empire and the April revolution, the “unthinkable” desire to convert Portugal into a European Cuba (Lourenço, *Labirinto* 50) appears ultimately to produce a (historically) *necessary* displacement of the former metropolis into the margins of world history. The historical vacuum purportedly defining Portugal’s anachronistic imperialism is “superceded” in *Fado* by a post-colonial collapse of the historical which, on the face of it, recalls the slippage of History into parodic repetition undergirding Marx’s famous account of France’s 1848 Revolution (*The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*). The absence of historicity that was Portugal under fascism now comes to determine, indeed “overdetermine” its revolutionary phase. The novel, which relates the gathering of five veterans of the Mozambican front in a Lisbon restaurant to commemorate the tenth anniversary of their battalion’s return to the metropole in 1973, suggests that the April Revolution is as original as the title’s *fado alexandrino*. It resembles a melodramatic national (and nationalist) ballad corseted into the narrative

counterpart of the twelve-syllable neo-classical verse revived by French and Portuguese Romanticists alike. *Fado alexandrino* is therefore neatly divided into three parts of *twelve* chapters each.

In such a context, the Revolution becomes but the latest *fado* that the deluded nation croons to itself, the most recent wish-fantasy to replace the fascist imperial mystique. Or, borrowing Eduardo Lourenço's terms, April 25, 1974 signals the hasty reinvention of a "new mythology" (*Mitologia* 147). It marks a political instance of the Uncanny, an apparent revival and confirmation of repressed infantile complexes and primitive beliefs: "voltamos, quase sem transição, senão aos 'antigos tempos,' aos mesmos caseiros e deliciosos negócios públicos, instituídos pouco a pouco como uma festa permanente" (*Mitologia* 147). In accordance with this structure of repetition, the *Estado Novo*'s "construção mítica da imagem de um *Portugal-menino-jesus-das-nações* [...] 'eón' histórico predestinado à *regeneração espiritual do universo*" (Lourenço, *Labirinto* 39) would be at once supplanted and repeated in the "imagem de um *Portugal revolucionário*, exemplo inicial e iniciático de uma subversão democrática da ordem capitalista europeia, [que fazia] confluir para um povo sem espaço para um tal sonho os fantasmas da esquerda europeia que triunfava no Alentejo e na Lisnave por procuração" (*Labirinto* 49).

To be sure, this new mythic model of national regeneration was "de vocação não apenas revolucionária mas universalista" (*Mitologia* 147). For, as the communications officer, *Fado*'s most militant revolutionary, drunkenly confesses:

O que nós pretendíamos era uma verdadeira sublevação popular conduzida pelos camponeses, pela classe operária, pelos oprimidos em geral, a caminho de um socialismo absoluto [...]. Acreditei na revolução, na queda da burguesia, na próxima, iminente vitória final da classe operária [...]. E ocupava-me a imaginar ardentemente [...] a imorredora classe operária a subir a Avenida num frenesim de hinos e bandeiras, dependurando impiedosamente dos candeeiros os socialis-democratas, os patrões, os polícias, e os lacaios do Capital, e proclamando, na Rotunda, o Marxismo-Leninismo-Maoísmo [...]. [Erguíamos] o paraíso da autêntica democracia popular na Europa apodrecida. (166, 415, 417)

What is farcical about this revolutionary fantasy is its belated belief that a "petit-bourgeois coup" (166) could serve as the original "model for a democratic subversion of the European capitalist order" (*Labirinto* 45). The anachronism of Portugal's revolutionary project ends up both displacing and

reproducing the very terms of its anachronistic colonial enterprise: “as eternamente malogradas tentativas de alfabetizar os bairros da lata no intuito [...] de converter [“operários indiferentes”], como os missionários de África aos pretinhos prometidos ao inferno, ao Marxismo-Leninismo-Maoismo salvador do tenebroso purgatório capitalista” (*Fado* 425). And like the discarded notion of the “civilizing mission,” the Revolution becomes a fetish, the fetish with which incongruously vehement militants endeavor to combat the fetishism of the commodity: “o paraíso da autêntica democracia popular na Europa apodrecida, sordidamente invivível, poluída pela coca-cola, os isqueiros de atirar fora e as pastilhas elásticas, minada pelo cancro das multinacionais e pela exploração infame da economia liberal” (417).

The Revolution in Antunes’s *Fado* thus assumes its place in a metonymic chain of “inappropriate” and partial objects which “serve to symbolize the most profound lost object” (Lacan 198). It is endlessly displaced, deferred, only to emerge in a different guise. But it always and ineluctably signifies the lack that structures (revolutionary) desire: “What [the subject] is trying to see [...] is the object as absence. What [he] is looking for and finds is merely a shadow, a shadow behind the curtain. There he will phantasize any magic of presence [...]. What he is looking for is not [...] the phallus—but precisely its absence” (Lacan 182). Among the complex and imbricated narrative strands which make up the structure of *Fado alexandrino*, two contrapuntal phrases stand out in this respect. The first is an urgent whisper by one of the novel’s several farcical revolutionaries reported in the communications officer’s account of a failed and vaudevillesque left-wing coup: “O país inteiro aguarda de nós esta justa e imprescindível acção libertadora” (*Fado* 431). The meaningful rejoinder to this revolutionary wish-fantasy comes from the colonel’s concurrent and desultory narration of his agonizing courtship with his future wife, in the form of the following entreaty: “Mas que teimosa a sua torneirinha está, Artur, comentou a nuvem de perfume redobrando o zelo, a marota quantos mais beijinhos lhe dou mais minguada fica” (*Fado* 431).

The very same object that in *Os cus de Judas* signified “miséria e a maldade da guerra”—“a bandeira pendente do seu mastro idêntica a um pénis sem força” (199), “Salazar [“o *Capado*”] espetava o dedo, única coisa, decerto, que ele alguma vez espetou” (76), “eunucos ministros,” “ministros eunucos” (129), etc.—resurfaces in *Fado* as the signifier of the Revolution, or rather of its obsessively made-up absence. In effect, the consensus about 25 April 1974 is precisely that it never rises above the level of what the communications officer calls

“uma revolução de chacha” (166). “Não houve revolução nenhuma” (480), the private, the novel’s only proletarian character, concludes: “Não houve uma revolta a sério, os que mandavam antes ocupam o poleiro outra vez [...] de forma que continuamos na mesma terra de merda” (224); “a mesma inalterável, melancólica, estreita paisagem em que apenas se cabe apertado e de pé” (505), “e esta merda sempre igual a esta merda” (541). To go by what the second lieutenant affirms, this is the very same shit, it seems, that is emblematic of the fascist state. For if the anal drive, as Lacan indicates, is the domain of oblativity, of the gift, then the surfeit of human waste that is Portugal’s colonial war in *Os cus de Judas* compensates in the last instance for all the lacks (e.g., the “absence of History”) which the regime has failed consistently to make good.

As a “gigantic” lieutenant beseeches the protagonist of *Os cus de Judas* “in a little boy’s voice”: “Doutor arranje-me a tal doença antes que eu rebente aqui na estrada da merda que tenho dentro” (154); and the narrator himself later exclaims, “trazíamos vinte e cinco meses de guerra nas tripas, vinte e cinco meses de comer merda, e beber merda, e lutar por merda, e adoecer por merda, e cair por merda” (211); “passámos vinte e sete meses nos cus de Judas [na] mesma merda” (241). Excrement is all that the State, and its post-revolutionary dejecta, can offer its citizens in lieu of what it ought to have accorded them: democracy, freedom, human rights. To paraphrase Lacan once again, it is at the anal level that the fascist government inscribes itself “in its morality (*dans sa morale*)” (104). When, as a result of the gaping hole at its core, the *Estado Novo* is caught egregiously short even of its own paltry objectives, the only thing it can give its subjects is precisely shit. Rather than Hegel’s Idea, then, what the *Estado Novo* “ethically embodies” is ultimately shit as well. “É curioso como tudo se tornou tão depressa como antes do golpe” (638), the second lieutenant in *Fado alexandrino* laments, thus alluding to the very same *nothing*, the negation of History that, in the Portuguese war novels mentioned above, figures the Salazarist regime’s absolute lack of progress or development.

Not only does this absence of History return to determine what José Saramago in *História do cerco de Lisboa* terms the Revolution’s inaugural *yes*, but it has reemerged as the lack that structures and engenders desire itself. As with the “Purloined Letter” in Lacan’s famous reading of Poe’s detective story, it is not for a specific revolutionary signified—for instance, the authentic revolutionary *content* which Marx predicts will necessarily go *beyond the phrase*; it is not for the Revolution’s signified that *Fado*’s characters yearn. Rather, it is their closeness to the Revolution as signifier which appears to determine them

as subjects. What the April Revolution means is thus at once everything and nothing, either “the most profound lost object,” or, “the object as absence” (Lacan 198, 182). And the fullness or emptiness of its meaning depends precisely on each character’s perceived proximity to it.

As the colonel muses in reply to the private’s outraged question whether the Revolution was nothing but “os trutas a engolirem-se uns aos outros, à bulha, a ver quem se amanhava melhor” (*Fado* 317):

Não a revolução nem os que fizeram a revolução mas os vorazes micróbios cancerosos que dela se alimentavam e em torno dela se moviam, partidos políticos, jogos de influências, ódios pessoais, as insaciáveis ambiçõeszinhas dos frustrados: quero ser marechal, quero ser rico [...] quero um barco, uma casa com piscina, uma televisão a cores, uma amante cara [...] quero lixar os outros, quero esmigalhar os outros, quero enrabar os outros, quero ficar sozinho, heróico e de bronze, no cimo vertiginoso do pedestal. (317)

As though to subscribe to Flaubert’s memorable shorthand for his novelization of the 1848 revolution in *L’Éducation sentimentale*: “le sentimentalisme [...] suit la politique et en reproduit les phases” [“sentimentalism follows politics and reproduces its phases”], *Fado*’s parodically Dickensian plot is structured by a similar exchange of objects of desire. Hence, the private and the communications officer discover they have been in love with the same woman, the lieutenant-colonel’s wife becomes the communications officer’s lover, and the colonel’s daughter turns out to be the lover of the second lieutenant’s ex-wife. But, whereas in Flaubert, *style* emerges as the compensation for the baseness of the Real, in Antunes’s novel, literary space offers no such consolation. It has itself become simulacral. It is not only that *Fado alexandrino* has reduced the most significant event in Portugal’s recent history to a serial recapitulation of earlier models, a farce without even its tragic original, but its labyrinthine plot, the tropological exuberance of its descriptive language, the systematic imbrication of its narrative voices, and indeed its “alexandrine” structure itself, suggest an excessive diegetic control. They figure a modernist project which, like the Revolution, comes after the end of—and as a supplement to—a modernity which Portugal supposedly experienced only as an absence.

Fado alexandrino becomes, in this sense, the site of a temporal *post* to a *modo* that was always an empty place. In *Fado*, then, the revolutionary *no* [não] is never pressed into the service of a *yes*, as it is in Saramago’s conventional dialectical

reading of Portugal's recent history. It is canceled but not preserved. It remains *nothing*: an absence incessantly displaced and disguised as something else. Like the subject's desire for "that part of himself [that it] loses at birth," revolutionary desire, too, ultimately reveals its "essential affinity" with that "initial state from which the living entity has at one time or another departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads" (Freud, *Pleasure* 45), with "the zone of death," for "the [subject's] search [for] the part of himself lost forever [is] profoundly a death drive" (Lacan 198-9, 205).

In this way, the promise of new life which the April Revolution exemplifies in most of the war novels I examine above is radically refigured in Lobo Antunes' *Fado* as a familiar metropolitan death. Like Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, *Fado alexandrino* closes with a "sacrifice" of sorts. In the last chapter, "the communications officer [lies] crucified on the carpet" (492), apparently as symbolic a figure as Dussardier in Flaubert's novel, who falls, "les bras en croix" ["his arms spread out as on a cross"] (446), cut down by his former friend and mentor Sénecal's saber on December 4, 1852, "the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." Yet unlike Dussardier, Antunes's militant does not succumb with the name of the Republic on his lips. Indeed, echoing the claim of the protagonist of Manuel Alegre's *Jornada de África* that "tudo o que é ação e história e rasgo e risco se passa sempre do outro lado [...], nada acontece aqui" (19), he consigns to History's proverbial dustbin his radical utopian dreams:

Quem continua a preocupar-se com a revolução [...] quem persiste, neste país, em querer mudar o mundo, quando em Portugal, não é?, o mundo é que nos muda a nós [...] as pessoas alteram-se [...] mas as instituições nunca [...] terminam sempre [...] por regressar à tona, eternas, intactas, teimosas, invioladas, sempre [...] os mesmos ricos, os mesmos pobres. (*Fado* 504-5)

Occasioned by no identifiable motive or ideal (an accident, an obscure and senseless crime of passion?), the death of this former revolutionary is thus also supplementary, both too much and too late, yet another instance of narratorial and symbolic exuberance. An ironically fitting culmination to an abyssal utopian desire, it is as empty and exchangeable, as horrifically inconsequential as the meaningless sacrifices of Kafka's Joseph K. or Georg Bendemann. Ultimately, as all four veterans die in melodramatic succession at the end of the novel, the death of the communications officer is reinscribed in a chain of signifiers that mean always and ineluctably nothing. For Lobo Antunes, Portugal

after the April Revolution, and in the wake of a series of risible attempts to contrive for itself a protagonist's role in the very same narrative of emancipation which it had evoked to legitimate its grisly colonial adventure, locates itself once again outside History. For "em Portugal [...] tudo estagna e se suspende no tempo" (*Ordem* 19). In this light, the yearning for revolutionary salvation seems as deluded as the decrepit colonists' reverential waiting in *As naus* for King Sebastian's foretold ride across the ocean of time. And so it is that the Event that for almost half a century the whole nation had sedulously awaited at the edge of an historical void finally reveals itself in Antunes's *Fado* to be the very "História, com maiúscula ou com letra pequena, [que] já não passa por nós" (Alegre, *Jornada* 78).

In figuring the April Revolution as a foreclosure of History, Lobo Antunes's fiction reiterates its refusal to represent an "alternate" subjectivity. Whereas Alegre's and Melo's novels posit a third or "universal" moment in which an unrepresentable and radically heterogenous enemy is ultimately reconciled with a reluctantly imperialist self, Antunes's *Fado* insists upon the incommensurability of metropolitan and (post)colonial times. Between the former and the latter a differend, the "heterogeneity of two distinct and discontinuous phrase regimens" (Lyotard 181), opens up. It is to this gap between the "truth" of the African struggles for independence and that of the process that led up to Portugal's April Revolution that Lobo Antunes attempts to pay heed in his writing. His narratives try in effect to track the waning currency of the West's notorious long narrative, to chronicle its reiterated failures to accomplish the enlightenment project of emancipation. They seek to inscribe in their interstices what Lyotard has called the liquidation of the project of modernity.

Notes

¹ It is into a similar death wish that Oskar's "desire to return to the womb" (49) seems in effect to transform itself at his mother's funeral: "He wished to go down into the pit with Mama and the fetus. And there he wished to remain [...] until his mama for his sake and he for her sake should rot away" (165).

² "The goal of centuries moving steadily toward tolerance, kindness, mutual understanding" (Carpentier 96).

³ Lourenço's title is obviously a tribute to Octavio Paz' imaginative psychoanalysis of Mexico's national character, *El labirinto de la soledad*.

⁴ "This space is not a delimiting line, but rather a fissure or fracture of a line; it is the 'threshold of capacity to which Conrad pointed though he never attained that capacity himself'" (López 46).

⁵ In my book *Imaginary Geographies in Portuguese and Lusophone-African Literature: Narratives of Discovery and Empire* (2007).

⁶ Published in English translation as *The Return of the Caravels*, this novel, the last of a quartet written after the "Angola trilogy," in a sense "literalizes" a metaphoric section of the quartet's third novel, *O Auto dos danados*, in which a character appears to hallucinate about boarding a train which lands him "em Lisboa perto de um rio enorme no qual navegavam caravelas e guindastes, no meio de descobridores de gibão, de barbas iluminadas por tormentas, especiarias e coqueiros, morrendo de escorbuto nos bancos da Avenida [...]. De tempos a tempos, à noite, uma furgoneta da polícia, recolhia travestis e vice-reis a caminho dos calabouços do Governo Civil, onde os funcionários [...] recebiam, surpreendidos, ameaças de enforcamento ou de degredo, gritadas por almirantes [...] num português medieval que encantava os homens-mulheres" (272-3).

⁷ The reading which follows significantly revises the one I offer in "The Discreet Seductiveness of the Crumbling Empire: Sex, Violence and Colonialism in the Fiction of António Lobo Antunes." In elaborating this revision, I have been especially indebted to Phyllis Peres's thoughtful critique of my position in "Love and Imagination among the Ruins of Empire: Antonio Lobo Antunes's *Os cus de Judas* and *Fado alexandrino*."

⁸ "The Negro / with the trumpet at his lips / Has dark moons of weariness beneath his eyes [...] The music from the trumpet at his lips is honey mixed with liquid fire" (Hughes 114).

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Notes to Literature*. Vol. 1. Trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. New York: Columbia UP, 1991. Print.
- Alegre, Manuel and Carlos Paredes, "Explicação de Alcácer Quibir." *É preciso um país*. Lisbon: EMI / Valentim de Carvalho, 1974. Print.
- Antunes, António Lobo. *A ordem natural das coisas*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1992. Print.
- . *As naus*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1988. Print.
- . *Auto dos danados*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1990. Print.
- . *Fado alexandrino*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1987. Print.
- . *Jornada de África*. Lisbon: Publicações Dom Quixote, 1989. Print.
- . *Os cus de Judas*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 1986. Print.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *La Fanfarlo, Le Spleen de Paris: petits poèmes en prose*. Eds. David Scott and Barbara Wright. Paris: Flammarion, 1987. Print.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Lost Steps*. Trans. Harriet de Onís. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. Print.
- Césaire, Aimé. *Collected Poetry*. Trans. and ed. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith. Berkeley: U of California P, 1983. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness (with The Congo Diary)*. Ed. Robert Hampson. New York: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Ed. S. de Sacy. Paris: Gallimard, 1965. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. *Les mots et les choses: une archologie des sciences humaines*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966. Print.
- . *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1973. Print.

- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989. Print.
- . *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989. Print.
- . "The Uncanny." Trans. Alix Strachey. *Psychological Writings and Letters*. Ed. Sander Gilman. New York: Continuum, 1995. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994. Print.
- Grass, Günter. *Die Blechtrommel*. Frankfurt am Main: Lucterhand, 1974. Print.
- . *The Tin Drum*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.
- Hegel, G.W. F. *The Philosophy of History*. Trans. J. Sibree. New York: Dover Publications, 1956. Print.
- . *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind (together with the Zusätze)*. Trans. William Wallace and A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. Print.
- Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. Print.
- James, C.L.R. *The C.L.R. James Reader*. Ed. Anna Grimshaw. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. Print.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981. Print.
- López, Alfred J. *Posts and Pasts: A Theory of Postcolonialism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. Print.
- Loureço, Eduardo. *O labirinto da saudade*. Lisbon: Dom Quixote: 1978. Print.
- . *Mitologia da saudade, seguido de Portugal como destino*. São Paulo: Companhia de Letras, 1999. Print.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in a Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbele. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy (out of the Spirit of Music)*. Trans. Shaun Whiteside. Ed. Michael Tanner. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. Print.
- Madureira, Luís. *Imaginary Geographies in Portuguese and Lusophone-African Literature: Narratives of Discovery and Empire*. New York: Mellen, 2007. Print.
- . "Tropical Sex Fantasies and the Ambassador's Other Death: The Difference in Portuguese Colonialism." *Cultural Critique* 28 (Fall 1994): 149-74. Print.
- . "The Discreet Seductiveness of the Crumbling Empire: Sex, Violence and Colonialism in the Fiction of António Lobo Antunes." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 32.1 (Summer 1995): 17-29. Print.
- Peres, Phyllis. "Love and Imagination among the Ruins of Empire: Antonio Lobo Antunes's *Os cus de Judas* and *Fado alexandrino*." *After the Revolution: Twenty Years of Portuguese Literature, 1974-1994*. Eds. Helena Kaufman and Anna Klobucka. Lewisburg, PA and London, England: Bucknell UP; Associated UP, 1997. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. "11/92." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 29.1 (Summer 1992): 97-113. Print.
- Saramago, José. *História do cerco de Lisboa*. Lisbon: Caminho, 1987. Print.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Nagel, 1970. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999. Print.

———. Ed. and trans. *Imaginary Maps: Three Stories by Mahasweta Devi*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Print.

———. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Luís Madureira is Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He has written several books, including *A Nostalgia of Stone for the Indefinite Sea*, which studies figurations of empire, nation and revolution in Portuguese and Lusophone African literatures, and from whose second chapter the present article is adapted; *Cannibal Modernities*, a reexamination of the Brazilian and Caribbean avant-gardes from a postcolonial perspective; and *Imaginary Geographies in Portuguese and Lusophone-African Literature: Narratives of Discovery and Empire*. He has published several articles on topics ranging from Luso-Brazilian literature and cinema to early modern travel narratives and postcolonial theory. His current research focuses on Mozambican popular theatre and the time of the political in contemporary Portuguese fiction. Email: lmadureira@facstaff.wisc.edu