

Still Facts and Living Fictions: The Literary Work of António Lobo Antunes, An Introduction

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António Lobo Antunes is undoubtedly one of the best writers in contemporary Western literature. One may be skeptical to accept this assertion at face value, but the only way to check its validity is by reading the novels and volumes of chronicles published by the author since 1979.¹ As we read on we recognize: a) a particular sensitivity to important events in contemporary Portuguese history, which are related to major changes and trends in our civilization (fascist dictatorship, colonial war, democratic revolutions, the status of women, socialist endeavors, postcolonial issues, and terrorist attacks); b) the writer's individual experience, as a participant in Portugal's war against the pro-independence movements in Africa in the 1960s and 70s, as an officer of the so-called Portuguese Empire under Salazar's government, as a military doctor during the war and as a practitioner in psychiatric hospitals after his return home—as a consequence of which he associates colonialism and the practice of medicine with everyday life: childhood, family, marriage, love, eroticism, friendship, loneliness, social handicaps, old age, the proximity of death, and, above all, both the zeal and the pain in the task of writing; c) a very original conception of narrative and a beautifully organized verbal rhythm, which transforms the themes and social concerns of his novels into perfect fictional poetry.

As a matter of fact, while Lobo Antunes's work is shaped according to patterns of fiction, his entire *oeuvre* abundantly reveals an intimate cohesion

between fiction and poetry. This becomes most evident in his particular way of composing the literary text, as well as in the manner in which he brings autobiographical components into the fiction, making it come to life and rousing the reader's interest.

1. Still Facts and Living Fictions

Events and experience constitute the basic ingredients in all of the author's novels. They seem to be connected with a profound sense of space inhabited by the narrator (present in many of Lobo Antunes's novels, either as a specific character or as a figure representing the writer himself), both in a territorial sense and in the sense of the problematic insertion of the individual in the community. The events are mainly facts which occurred in the narrator's life (or have been transferred to the existence of other narrative voices driving the plot) or in the lives of members of his (their) family, relatives, friends, people existing within the narrator's personal environment. They are evoked in the enunciative situation of writing and, as such, develop a feeling for time passing (and for time retained), which is due to the power of memory and to the possibility of their being maintained by obsessive recurrences.

Lobo Antunes's fictional writing emphasizes the specific vision of particular events experienced by individual (and diverse) voices which try (diversely) to report facts and situations, much more through the resonance they create inside each character's being than through the actual way in which they are supposed to have happened. That is why the sense of space progressively loses its pertinence as a precise location: as each narrative develops, the relationship with space becomes simultaneously a relationship with time. Consequently, individual identity is framed within a dynamic perspective and with this comes a negative feeling of instability and loss, as memory both maintains the sameness of personal perceptions of life and evolves in its interpretation and in the emergence of new feelings, thereby shaping the problematic which is characteristic of the human soul.

Yet the senses of place and identity are strongly shaken not only by the precariousness of memory (in traumatic, dependent or obsessive situations) but primarily because historical and social circumstances lead the community and individuals within it to physical and psychological displacement, as well as to the existential and epistemological uncertainty of being. It is for this reason that subjectivity emerges on such a large scale in the novels of António Lobo Antunes. The uncertainty of being, or, more specifically, the problem-

atic sense of existence and the consciousness of life's senselessness are widely exposed in these novels. Interestingly enough, facing events (in one's family, surroundings or community) is barely an objective attitude. On the contrary, it is the act of looking at particular situations and considering the facts around them that conveys, in these novels, the evolving impression of a character observing what happens in his or her life and in his or her world, and experiencing common situations as well as exceptional circumstances.

The distance that remains between the act of looking at objects (facts, events, things) and the understanding of their possible meanings, or even of their meaningless presence, constitutes the very nature of space in the conception of the fictional world. This is shaped by subjectivity and by the collapse of identity, which means that any notion of historicity derives from a long, mutable way of looking. And what really develops in this fictional writing is not the story, neither the plot nor the specific situations (they are all recurrent), but the fiction in the configuration of its imagery, with a strong component of poetry and lyrical imagination.

Experience is the heart of fiction in António Lobo Antunes's work. Instead of taking some specific facts or general topics on which he might write a novel, Lobo Antunes clearly prefers to inculcate his personal views on these topics and to deform those facts, or at least to present them through partial or tendentious insights. Memory, ideology, conventions, destructive rebellion, traumatic acquisitions and painful losses are some of the conditions that regulate the particular view informing the subject-matter of the narrative, as we can see in his descriptions of indigenous Angolans:

The drumbeats of the Luchazi tribesmen were concerts of tachycardia, checked only by the shadows from racing out of control toward their own anguish. The eyeballs of the musicians were like phosphorescent boiled eggs, illuminated by straw fires made to stretch goatskin for drums. Each hut, flanked by identical images of the spirit Zumbi, lord of the forebears and of the dead, acquired the shapeless contours of unease and terror. The dogs added their fearful barks to the cries of the children and to the inquisitive cacklings of the chickens. The darkness was like a long corridor in which we wandered desperately searching through the silence for reminders of ourselves as we had once been. The sweat of the black bodies, fatty and juicy, had a different texture from that which ran down my spine, and I felt myself to be the melancholy heir of an old awkward and dying county, of a decaying Europe, confronted by a people whose inexhaustible vital-

ity I had first sensed, years before, in the Promethean solos of Louis Armstrong, exorcising bitterness with the muscular joy of his song. (*South* 35-36)²

It is a matter of fact that most of Lobo Antunes's novels are based on real events that occurred during the last few decades in Portugal and in particular conditions of his own life, but the main literary fact is that such events and conditions of existence are frequently transformed and deformed, subjected to the activity of fiction and, more importantly, dependent on the relation that makes experience overlap with textuality.

In other words, the plots in Lobo Antunes's novels develop out of specific events, which are determined from the very beginning by his personal experience, but can only be perceived through literary expression, in a sentence, using particular words in certain positions. And this is what really matters in the practice of writing developed by the author. If the "fabula" is a special organization of the world in fiction, then the time experienced in life can only be experienced in fiction through the continuity, or discontinuity, of the sentence—through the accidents of its syntactic construction, the choice of relations established between nouns and verbs, adjectives and pronouns, and other morphological categories which configure this world for the reader. By this I mean that experience, in Lobo Antunes's novels, is not only autobiography, knowledge of the environment, perception of current world problems, or feeling the impulse for life, but also the way in which narrative, sentence, and even the word itself is organized in literary discourse, in the author's own poetical composition. In reading Lobo Antunes's texts, we must separate the experience of living from that of writing, which, in final analysis, means that the concept of experience in relation to António Lobo Antunes (as well as a few other novelists, such as Joseph Conrad) has to be shaped according to a notion of activity inserted in the writing much more than in existence, although it cannot be exempted from it.

Facts and fictions are thus not alternatives in António Lobo Antunes's writing, but neither are they simultaneous. In reading his novels, the Portuguese reader recognizes (more or less) the psychiatrist the author is or the child and young man he was; s/he identifies (more or less) the places he describes, and may remember (more or less) the historical facts he puts into fiction, which deal (more or less) with the circumstances of his life and that of his relatives. But all of these possible facts are subjected to deformations: they present changes and demand new forms of perception in the reader's mind.

Facts are envisaged, in Lobo Antunes's work, as if they were quiet and permanent impressions of life that remain in the narrator's mind forever—that is, as timeless existential configurations, but developing an inner sense of duration (the legacy of Proust and Faulkner); the living circumstances as they occurred are fixed in a kind of aura, generated both by strong obsession and by a partial oblivion which erases their vivid characteristics. In so doing, it is the text itself that attributes to events the kind of life that they lose by their constantly remembered presence. And as facts are made constant by their permanence in the minds of the characters, they finally recover a kind of pulsation in the textual construction, and fiction is what really becomes life in Lobo Antunes's novels.

2. The Philosophy of Composition

Antunes's writing stems from a very well informed and educated sense of cultural heritage in literature and in art. It begins as a torrent of metaphors and intertextual allusions in his first novels (namely *South of Nowhere*) and develops into a very sober and lean literary discourse, in which the building up of detail concentrates more and more on stylistic repetition, lyrical implications and metafictional concerns (particularly in his latter work, following the publication of *The Inquisitors' Manual*). In this respect, it is worth recalling the role of some earlier writers who used this literary mode: Tolstoy (with his epic, or counter-epic, views and multi-faceted perception of events), Proust (with his specific feeling for time and his immense gallery of characters), Céline (through criticism, abjection, and the grotesque), Faulkner (through the disruptive power of memory), Beckett (with his concern with minimal and apparently insignificant notations) and William Gaddis (with his preference for continuous dialogue, chattering or stream of consciousness).

However, Antunes's mode cannot be completely assimilated to theirs, for many reasons. For example, Antunes's dialogue is constant but not continuous, as in Gaddis: in fact, it is constantly interrupted; minimal and insignificant details are concerted in Beckett and disconcerted in Antunes's discourse; the power of memory is determinant but organized in a multiple set of voices, so that disruption verges on dissemination; and, in Lobo Antunes, abjection refers to social criticism and leftist views of the world that carry grotesque and parodic intentions. Moreover, rather than a classic structure, as in Tolstoy's novels, the author of *The Return of the Caravels* privileges the manifestation of the characters (presence, physical details, voices, silences); and rather than

Proust's conception of time, Lobo Antunes enacts an emergence of place out of a theory of time—which we can see, for instance, when the narrator is in a Lisbon bar remembering Africa, in *South of Nowhere*, or in settings in small locations such as a house, an apartment, a room, a yard, a loft (as in *The Natural Order of Things*).

This leads us to the point that Antunes's composition of the novel is complex and differentiated. It approximates a kind of report concentrating on subjectivity, as mentioned above, especially in his first four novels, but has changed into the enactment of a multiple set of voices, beginning at least with the works published after *Fado alexandrino*, including *Act of the Damned*, *The Return of the Caravels*, and the three books that followed, which have been called the Benfica Trilogy, and arriving at a kind of poetics of distortion, derision, and erasure—the determinant components of his latest novels, since *The Inquisitors' Manual*.³

Distortion, derision, and erasure exist simultaneously, constituting a very particular way of representing individuals, communities, historical events, autobiographical data, fictional directions, and also the main character, but especially the specific relation between space and time that we have already examined in part. Also, the constant and obsessive presence of Africa in the author's novels reveals his concern with dissecting Portugal's former colonialist designs and with emphasizing a sense of place and dislocation, as we can see in *South of Nowhere*. Furthermore, when the author suggests a reversal of a long-lived historical situation by means of literary parody, as is the case in *The Return of the Caravels*, a new perspective, which can be related to postcolonial views and concerns, arises.

In his famous essay on *The Raven*, Edgar Allan Poe draws attention to the organization of the plot: "Nothing is more clear than that every plot worth the name must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" (104). If we accept the postulate, more than one century after the words were written, that the plot is still the basic element in the construction of a literary work (and I accept that it is, with some change of modalities in both expression and reception), then we may say that in Lobo Antunes's works the phase of the conception and realization of their fictional component corresponds to an inter-relation between the progressive movement of

the story and the stillness of an ending already captured when the narrative begins.⁴ In other words, what is acquired from the beginning in these novels is precisely the fact that the aforementioned progressive movement scarcely progresses and everything has already happened, given that the narrative report essentially works through the memory's activity, and that the sense of an ending has normally been determined from the very beginning.⁵

But I quoted Poe in order to emphasize that, in Lobo Antunes, this "air of consequence" is constantly assumed but at the same time eluded, and that what remains from Poe's felicitous words is that "air," which is precisely confirmed by two subsequent terms: the "incidents" and the "tone." Both are precious tools, if conveniently conceptualized, to approach compositional philosophy in the work of António Lobo Antunes.

Let us look at some of his novels from this point of view, while trying to give at the same time some general idea about their contents. In fact, that "air of consequence" not only constitutes the organics of each novel, it also establishes a very firm relationship among the books written by the author.

In *Memória de elefante* [**Elephant's Memory*],⁶ his first novel (1979), he describes a journey in the life of a young psychiatrist who has recently returned from military service in the colonial war in Africa (Angola) and has separated from his wife and daughters. After all these events, he now feels displaced in his homeland and psychologically disturbed by all of the changes and troubles that have happened in his life. The narrative deals with the morning appointments the psychiatrist has in a hospital; a meeting with a friend for lunch; two medical appointments he has as a patient in the afternoon (a treatment at the dentist's and a group therapy session with a psychoanalyst); a sudden impulse to see his daughters come out of school; a lonely dinner in a restaurant; and the evening tediously spent in the casino, playing, losing, and taking a prostitute home with him, before he finishes the night alone after all, looking at the ocean from the terrace of his apartment, in the midst of seagull excrement.

The basic narrative technique is the use of different temporal strata, mixing several moments of the past with various feelings in the present, combining all of them in the unity of one day (as in Joyce's *Ulysses*). Alternating first- and third-person narrative, the narrator presents himself simultaneously as a singular individual and as the epitome of a community in which individuals are oppressed by an ideological and political system that leads them to act against their convictions and feelings. Childhood memories and eagerness to

write are the only escapes from the pervasive sentiment of senselessness and loneliness experienced in the novel.

Published only a few months later, in 1979, *Os cus de Judas* [*South of Nowhere*] again portrays the same social situation as the previous novel. It presents a similar narrator, now telling a woman he casually meets in a bar the incredible and terrible experience of his participation in the colonial war, far away from his family, where he observed the oppression (in which he too participated) inflicted upon everybody and everything in Angola, both the inhabitants and the amazing landscape described in all its grandeur, and even the Portuguese soldiers sent there to fight a war without their being conscious of how they were used as tools for perpetuating the regime's erroneous intents. This dialogue is in fact a monologue, given that the woman, significantly enough, never speaks (in his talking, the narrator makes constant use of the conventional marks of dialogue, implying some possible utterances on the interlocutor's part, but these are never included in the discourse). This monologue, then, takes place after the main character's return to Portugal from military service in Africa, and the diegetical organization of time and space is similar to that in *Memória de elefante*, although the enunciative procedures (continuous talking, presupposing dialogue) are completely different.

In some respects, these two novels are intricately bound together and complement one another, for example, in the formal disposition of the contents, with a very elaborate sense of composition, as well as in the centrality of some topics. Two such central topics are medicine in *Memória de elefante* (in fact, as already mentioned, the narrator is both a doctor and simultaneously a patient on many occasions, which suggests that the whole system is ill, and that disease is not occasional but generalized and metaphorical) and travel, in *South of Nowhere*. In this novel, a conservative family assumes that sending a young man to war in Africa will make him grow up and acquire a sense of responsibility, whereas for the young man the return soon stops meaning returning to Portugal (in fact, he returns, but only briefly, and no longer recognizes his place and family, as if he had been living a nightmare since his first displacement to Africa), to mean instead returning to Angola, which he revisits twice, the second time taking his wife and daughter, even if only briefly.

This represents an important departure for postcolonial studies, in that the theoretical place is not only, or always, that of the colonized, but also in some cases that of the colonizer, when he effectively bonds with the place and voices concern for the oppressed in the colonized territory. Besides, in

his final return (to Portugal), the narrator feels definitely not at home. This conversation with the woman he meets in a bar takes an entire night, suggesting darkness in the mind and difficulty in discernment (as a kind of image of, and homage to, *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad), effectively placing him nowhere. Love emerges in a hymn to Sofia, an African woman he met before she was killed by the Portuguese political police. Death, on the other hand, is everywhere in the text, especially in the impressive description of the suicide of a Portuguese soldier at Mangando, brought about by despair in the war situation and by a sense of the futility of colonial fighting. Bursting through here and there, music (Beethoven and jazz) and art in general go hand in hand with the determination to write, as a way of trying to escape the meaninglessness of life.

Conhecimento do inferno [Knowledge of Hell] (1980) brings together two forms of violence in the author's conception: colonial war and psychiatric treatments in hospitals. The novel is built upon a car journey the narrator undertakes on his own, as he returns from holidays in the Algarve, in the south of Portugal. Softly and ironically, and again in stream of consciousness form, he criticizes the touristy side of vacations and meditates about his personal life, which strikes him as empty and wrong, after coming back from Africa and separating from his wife, and having difficulty in maintaining love affairs with women, who cannot stand his moodiness and need for freedom. However, here he deals mostly with the prospect of resuming his job as a hospital doctor, considering the world of psychiatry as a universe of horror and ignorance, and viewing madness as a kind of escape from the lack of meaning in everyday life. Notwithstanding the fact that he is alone whilst driving, he conducts an imaginary dialogue with his daughter Joana, a child, finally arriving in Lisbon, at his parents' house, late at night, to find in sleep and in the idealized image of his father the kind of peacefulness, albeit deceptive, he has been looking for.

The journey is the major component in this book, giving the sense of instability, displacement and dissatisfaction that dominates Lobo Antunes's works. Africa is still everywhere present in the protagonist's memory, mainly enabling him to describe the hospital as another type of hell, even more terrible than the colonial war, which ties in well with the "air of consequence" suggested by Edgar Allan Poe. Some compositional techniques are new in this novel, such as the succession of different characters (the patients) and, in a very special way, the progressive transformation of the narrator (and doctor) into a par-

ticular patient who suffers in his body and mind the stupidity and violence of psychiatric treatments. Facing the tragic possibility of feeling oppressed again, even in an imaginary situation, he nevertheless turns the serious meaning of his criticism and his rejection of the common, uncaring practice of medicine into burlesque by his facetious and ironical tone. Furthermore, dreams and anxieties intrude into the diegetical universe of the novel, giving form to a postcolonial sensibility and a heterogeneous discourse of communication, which reveals the desire for and impossibility of an affectionate relationship with others, and symptomatically expresses a boundless solitude.

Explicação dos pássaros [*An Explanation of the Birds*] (1983) is Lobo Antunes's first novel in which autobiography becomes a third-person narrative, and although still dealing with some personal data, a more objective and external fictional universe emerges in it. The central motif of the novel is the oscillation (on the part of the main character, Rui, a young historian) between luminous childhood memories (in particular the scene, in the woods, where his father explained to him how birds were able to fly) and the disillusionment created by present day-to-day life. Disappointment with his family, a divorce, and a new woman who appears to be unworthy of his affection drives him to suicide, with which the narrative ends in pages that resemble something of an apotheosis, both in the tragic sense of his death (near a lake, and surrounded by hundreds of birds screeching over his body) and in the monstrous perspective of life as a show, where he himself is played by a clown and all his family and friends are part of a musical grotesquely acted out:

The audience applauded his domestic doubts as he wiped his chin on his napkin, pushed back his chair, and stood up. In the windows the fog was unraveling like a frayed garment while the boats, facing the opposite direction on the sliver of sand near the inn, were taking on faded colors, like faces waking up from long comas. Melted streaks of sunlight wandered aimlessly among the clouds, and the horizon was deserted, forsaken by the birds and the dogs.

"Me explain the birds to him, imagine how absurd," his father said with a resigned grimace. "As if I, a simple businessman, could turn into a biologist just like that."

On his way out he brushed the table where his mother should have been and took a large, serrated knife from the buffet with the plates and glasses while the dwarf, suddenly lit by a violent lavender spotlight, bawled out:

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, distinguished audience, please be so

kind as to take a moment and observe the terrible suicide weapon: there's no trick, no sleight of hand, no gimmick." (221-22)

But Lobo Antunes's style remains, and more and more the alternative presence of a narrative first person, which is related to the character, and a third person, which evokes a more distant narrator, tend to merge into one single level of the enunciative process. Besides, the entanglement of different coordinates of space and time transforms the stream of consciousness into a syncretic view of different perspectives on fictional situations, giving voice to different characters, without clear indications as to their identity. Furthermore, the multiplicity of times, places, speeches, and thoughts appears as the impossibility of determining which direction to take in life—the futility of any project, for death will put an end to all of them. As it happens, here, too, the composition is based on a journey undertaken by the narrator and his wife, as they drive to attend a conference outside of Lisbon, when at the last moment they change plans and decide to stop and enjoy the weekend near the lake. The detour clearly appears as a process, just as joy for this couple turns out to mean separation and committing suicide.

Fado alexandrino (1985) is the first great (and very long) novel by António Lobo Antunes.⁷ Since 1990, and especially since 2000, his novels have become impressive for their length. In this, his fifth book, the multiplicity of voices and temporal levels acquire a definite structural sense. Traveling is again a main theme, but here there is no journey being undertaken; instead, there are moments of departure (already present in the first two novels) and particularly moments of arrival—the homecoming of the soldiers who fought in Africa. Thus, *Fado* deals once more with war, but this time with an entire battalion returned from Mozambique, and the colonial war is seen within the context of the political changes that occurred in Portugal in 1974, brought about by the democratic revolution of April 25. Both events are viewed from the perspective of common and apparently less significant details, with both being seen to cause the same deceptive reactions, and considered often in a ridiculous and ironic way.

This is a peculiar attitude on Lobo Antunes's part; he differs from the majority of Portuguese intellectuals, who generally applaud this historical upheaval, in his attempts to survey its various facets. And death, as in the preceding novel, is the main theme—not only death at war and through general destruction, but also the havoc it wreaks on returning soldiers, who lose

their zest for life, assume arbitrary attitudes, and even go as far as committing murder. More precisely, the members of the returned battalion meet regularly after April 25 for a convivial dinner, in order to keep in touch and to have fun. The entire narrative is built, to great effect, upon the cross-conversations between members of the battalion during this dinner, and particularly between four of them, who talk to each other and, more respectfully, to a fifth member, the captain.

This kind of polylogue has now become the hallmark of Antunes's work: the mix of spatial and temporal levels with the intersection of voices. Life's continuity in a way erases the manifest importance of war (which at a deeper compositional level is actually emphasized) and the problematic importance of the revolution, which they tend to criticize, as representatives of an army that tried to keep a colonial empire as late as the second half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, murder returns at the end of the evening, when one of the four main characters is killed by accident, and, even worse, as a joke. Thus, suddenly, all the horror of war (as in Conrad) is revealed at the end of the novel's six hundred pages, by this unexpected process of deviation. Deviation and erasure will be the determinant in the composition of Antunes's subsequent novels, creating implausible "tones" that make the difference in the composition of the narrative.

Auto dos danados [*Act of the Damned*] (1986) continues to deal with the democratic revolution, presented from the point of view of those against whom this revolution was made: major landowners, landlords, wealthy and privileged families. But death is here too, polarizing the action once more in a journey undertaken by a member of one such family, who travels in order to be present at his grandfather's death. However, death, here, is not viewed as a form of destruction, but rather as a normal contingency of life, representing, in a symbolic way, the protracted death of the political regime (Salazar's, and then Caetano's dictatorship, before 25 April 1974), and also the hypocrisy and cupidity manifested by family members. This is violent criticism against the dictatorship, and yet Lobo Antunes portrays the character of the dying patriarch with traits of dignity and honor, although not failing to present as well all of his despotism and heavy-handed oppression. What is most impressive in this novel is the meanness and contemptibility of most of the family members, who try to gain profit from the old man's will and could not care less about the state of his health.

This is poetically conveyed by drawing a parallel with a bullfight taking

place at the same time (during festivities in the country town where the landlord lives), with the patriarch and the bull dying simultaneously, one in the family mansion, the other in the bull-ring, accompanied by music and by the screams of people who enjoy the show, as the family enjoys the grandfather's death. This entire ambiance is provided in terms of pathos, parody and burlesque. Art and spectacle (music, film, dance, etc.) are present in this book (in some of the narrator's references and in certain episodes), not only as an element of imagery but also as the basis for compositional concerns. But what remains most striking is the attitude of cruelty and fear that prevails in the characters and drives most of them to express common, lowly dreams and feelings poetically:

I remember that it was almost night, for they had already turned on the lights and there was silverware jangling in the kitchen. In the dark of the hallway werewolves darted through the olive trees, along the bank of the Guadiana River and past the boats of the drowned fisherman, and I cowered under the sheets, in spite of the heat, so as not to hear the fig tree that kept creaking in the yard, so as not to hear the voices of the grown-ups downstairs, suddenly cruel like gigantic prehistoric birds, trying to peck out my eyes as if they were cherries. One of these days I'll ask you for the key to the mansion and take you on the bus to Alentejo, to visit the village, the castle, the cemetery, the room where the electric train tracks are rusting away, the bed where my grandfather died seven summers ago, my secrets, my fears, the hand-carved angels and the copper sun that blinds the stray dogs on the steps of the church. Yes, I'll take you to that expired land where the clock hands are paralysed, but don't be surprised, when the cemetery is reduced to an indefinite polygon and the shadows of trees stretch out on the ground like sleeping arms, if then, without warning, I squat under the heavy old dining table to hide from the ghosts of the photographs. (129-30)

As naus [The Return of the Caravels] (1988) is a very peculiar book. Focusing on the period of Portuguese maritime discoveries, Lobo Antunes turns some of the great navigators (Gama, Cabral and others, as well as King Manuel) into the main characters of his book, but producing two enormous reversals in this historical situation: first, he deals with them as if they were living in the twentieth century, with behaviors and ideas belonging to both periods, thus mixing past and present, which results in parody and humor. Secondly, he does not refer to their glorious departures for the great voyages of discovery or to spectacular arrivals in unknown lands

(which was the common way of celebrating the navigators under Salazar, in a perpetual celebration of the past and as a way to reinforce the notion that colonialism was acceptable and admirable); rather, he points out the unexpected and sometimes erroneous side of their return, miserable and downtrodden, which results in a literary satire and an intense rejection of imperial ideology.

The author here continues with his characteristic technique of taking one character in each chapter, as in the previous three novels (and as is also the case in subsequent works), but he also develops his procedure for mixing voices, places and times, disfiguring both the historical and the present circumstances. Thus he composes one of the most interesting books we can read according to a postmodern sensibility and to postcolonial insights. Hybridism is here not only a perspective on fiction developed by postcolonial studies, but, more importantly, it is a process of composing narrative according to some patterns of postmodernism, actually going beyond them and reaching original results and poetical effects.

Tratado das paixões da alma [**Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*] (1990) is the first volume in a trilogy of sorts, which has been called the Benfica Trilogy, because although the three volumes are independent from each other, they constitute a sequence focusing on some particular Lisbon suburbs. This does not exclude, as always in Lobo Antunes's work, the fact that the plot also refers to other parts of Portugal, and even other parts of the world, with the corresponding shifts in time, irregularly rendered by memory and as the result of interference by different and multiple characters. Childhood and friendship are central to this novel's organization. The plot revolves around a judge prosecuting a political criminal, who happened to be the protected child of a rich family, for whom the judge's father once worked as a gardener. Thus, both men were close childhood friends but became distant as time went on. The novel addresses questions of social and professional success, as well as political deviation, concentrating on criminal attitudes institutionally assumed by the police and central administration. The intensity of human affections is the ultimate effect brought about by diverse storylines in the organization of the plot. Thus, the rich boy, presently an outcast, is murdered with the painful connivance of the judge, who also ends up being murdered because of his obvious understanding and compassion for his childhood friend's attitudes.

The second volume of this trilogy is *A ordem natural das coisas* [*The*

Natural Order of Things] (1992), one of the most beautiful and devastating novels written by this author. Loneliness is the keyword in this text, where changes in contemporary Portuguese history are viewed from various sides of the political spectrum. The novel emphasizes once again the human component of wickedness and suffering, and the general feelings of uneducated people who are unable to distinguish between right and wrong moral positions in complex social situations. They are presented to the educated or at least to those in positions of leadership (as was already the case, for instance, in *Act of the Damned*) as the cruelest of all characters. The reader will be moved by the solitude of an elderly man who is in love with an ill young woman who shares his bed but refuses to give him love; or by the ludicrous decisions by a former member of the political police who considers the democratic revolution as a mere inconvenience in his everyday life; or by the story of a girl who grows up imprisoned in a loft because she was born out of wedlock, or that of a poor woman who lives with the constant memory of her seducer, a man who used to run a cinema and had sex with her in the woods, by the seaside, teaching her both physical pleasure and the feeling of being deserted:

rockroses, so many rockroses, “my heart’s desire, I love you” [...]

not rockroses, not broom shrubs, but flowers, flowers, red flowers, blue flowers, white flowers, I think magnolias, I think marigolds, I think daisies, flowers, flowers, ribbons, and bows with silver and gold letters, flowers, flowers like I’d never seen, the rockroses were later in Esposende, the rockroses were next to the sea, in February when the movies from the collapsible cinema blended with the waves and your body got up from mine, “See you later,” with a cigarette in your mouth, [...]

rockroses rockroses rockroses rockroses rockroses rockroses rockroses, the juice of my thighs, the blood of my thighs on the rockroses. (112-16)

We must emphasize that “the air of consequence” singled out by Poe is here achieved by a very specific compositional strategy, where repetition and alternation combine with deviation and obsession, and where details result from shattered images. Such images stem directly from memory, and they become “incidents” in the plot by being incorporated in the whole ambiance of the story, that is, by assuming the general “tone” of the writing. This writing deals simultaneously with society, culture, desire and neglect, and nature, but primarily with words, a set of words chosen out of a myriad of possibilities in the dictionary and in grammatical usage, in order to signify particular

affective human insights and isolated concerns, with the very isolation they presuppose for each life and soul.

This trilogy ends with *A morte de Carlos Gardel* [**The Death of Carlos Gardel*] (1994), which further develops the sense of solitude and shattered perceptions of life and the world that we have seen before. Here, a young man is dying from a drug overdose, in desperation over his parents' divorce and following successive disappointments with many failures in their attempts to rebuild their lives. Each member of the family comes to the hospital to see him and later leaves, contemplating the waste that his death constitutes. The poetics of composition turns each of them into a kind of single, abandoned heart and body, as the young man was, and a center for decentered perspectives on life, uncertain, erroneous, and ultimately empty. At the moment of his death, the young man feels as happy as if he were singing, and, curiously enough, the book is composed around some of Carlos Gardel's (the Argentinean dancer and singer) tangos. Here, song acquires the sense of existence, mixing joy with pain, and even fiction, given that Gardel is somehow resurrected in a parody that makes music become ordinary and irrelevant. Human life thus seems to be, in a postmodern conception of absurdity, a mere incident in the ordinary environment.

O manual dos inquisidores [*The Inquisitors' Manual*] (1996) further develops narrative techniques already put into practice in the previous trilogy, and it initiates another series of three books which are decisive for the recognition of António Lobo Antunes as a master of contemporary fiction. In particular, a different conception of the novel emerges here, which relates composition and the complex perception of time and space with a delicate sense of verbal expression. The entire text is organized as a map of different kinds of discourse, according to characters, to different types of speech, to specific periods in time, or even places. Here again, semantic concerns focus on political change, mainly as to the way in which such changes affect social and human relationships, for example, the progressive isolation of Francisco, a landowner on a farm near Lisbon, and his son, João, who appears to be a secondary character but in fact turns out to be the protagonist. So, too, do many other characters initially appear to be secondary, only to subsequently become subjects of the narrative. This is especially the case with the mother, Isabel, one of Antunes's most impressive female creations. She is barely and discreetly present in the narrative, but by her absence she dominates the ambience of the text, its "tone," with an elegiac and nostalgic aura. The conflict between

father and son is central to this novel, and it disseminates agonistic impulses over most of the other relations between characters, including oppressive class relations (economic and sexual, between the landlord and his employees) and some parodic intra-familial behaviors, such as those created by lies in the family and the companies run by relatives. But the heart of the narrative is located in a very subtle procedure consisting of a kind of inquiry to which some of the characters give their answers; and that is the drawing up of various reports, supposing the entity of a writer or at least of someone taking notes, that makes up the book we read.

O esplendor de Portugal [*The Splendor of Portugal*] (1997) reveals the author's virtuosity in the arrangement of progressive levels of time and different places—both in Angola, before and after that country's independence, and in Lisbon, where the grown-up children of Portuguese settlers return to escape possible acts of revenge on the part of the Angolans against their former colonizers. A woman, Isilda, tries to keep her family home near Luanda, and recalls the glamour of the colonial past at the same time as she wonders about the future of her children—two boys and a girl whom she has sent back to Portugal after the 1974-75 political changes. All of the fictional situations, in both countries, are experienced around a precise moment of enunciation, Christmas Eve in 1995, with characters' lives developing on one side (Angola) from 1987 until 1995, and on the other (Portugal), concentrating around this narrative present in 1995. The symbolism of the birth of a nation is clear, with all the conservative connotations here implied by the reference to Griffith's film, and conveying a precise meaning of renewal, which mainly implies destruction of the old ideals associated with the devastation of the land due to the war in Africa, and the inability and incapacity for living revealed by Isilda's children transferred to Portugal. The crucial meaning of this novel lies in the depiction of the sense of displacement, as well as other components of a postcolonial sensibility.

Exortação aos crocodilos [*Exhortation to the Crocodiles*] (1999) also deals with concerns about the Portuguese social and political situation over the past two decades, focusing on acts of terrorism carried out by right-wing extremists. However, the narrative does not dwell on the conflict of ideas; instead, it examines ordinary characters unable to understand the real meaning of what they are doing. This then presents an obvious deviation, both in terms of alienation and in terms of writing techniques, which points toward a decentered narrator appearing for the first time in António Lobo Antunes's

work. In fact, there is no narrator in this text, and the four main characters, all women (Mimi, Fátima, Simone and Celina) and all behaving submissively to males and resenting that submission, develop complementary versions of the same story, which revolves around terrorist attacks carried out much more for psychological than ideological reasons. One of Lobo Antunes's specific stylistic procedures is central in this novel, namely the transferring of human feelings to objects, and also to plants and sometimes animals. This includes also the transferring of actions and reactions to be expected from humans, which here find expression in some elements of the environment, such as birds, trees, flowers, and pieces of furniture or mere small objects. This means that Lobo Antunes's writing is moving more and more towards a chain of verbal propositions, instead of representing the common world by direct description or by the accepted rules of organization of possible worlds in fiction. Moreover, the verbal chain thus constituted in his novels is never a formalistic construction referring to a kind of empty meaning; on the contrary, it is a constantly interrupted series of living details of observations or actions, and even of feelings, deviated from human sensibility and therefore creating an impression of the senselessness of life, or of the lifeless everyday behavior of ordinary people.

The general devices we have been pointing out in Lobo Antunes's novels are curiously present also in some small texts the writer has been producing regularly for many years, to be published in magazines and other periodicals, which he calls his chronicles. These chronicles have been collected in two books, the first entitled *Livro de crónicas*, (1998), and the second *Segundo livro de crónicas* (2002). It is worthwhile to analyze these books, in order to examine how autobiography is always more or less present in Antunes's evocations of impressions of this or that, and particularly the way in which fiction interferes constantly in what appears to be mere autobiographical data. One may say, as the author himself writes in his first novel, that childhood is a theme over which his later existence develops multiple and monotonous variations (*Memória* 27). But what the chronicles reveal is that some episodes the reader is prepared to interpret as autobiographical are in fact mere fictional constructs, nevertheless leaving open the possibility that they may have been inspired by biographical events.

Não entres tão depressa nessa noite escura [**Do Not Go So Fast into That Dark Night*] (2000) is precisely a book in which indecision, deviation and procedures of transfer are central, in a new way of composing fiction with

which Lobo Antunes has begun to experiment, and which he has developed in his latest novels. It inaugurates a series of books with particularly long titles, taken from poems and imaginary or literary phrases, and where representation and imagery lose their usual fictional characteristics to become short, impressive details, flashes of verbal expression, transferred subtle feelings and reduced, “pointillist” rhetorical recurrences. The entire novel stems from the idea of disease and death (that of a cheerful relative—a father, a wife) viewed as the symbolic night of absence of knowledge, or of the naïve ignorance that allows young people to progress toward understanding and love. Maria Clara, the main character, is a young girl who tries to poke into family secrets and to discover the as yet unknown appeal of her body; she writes a kind of a diary that provokes the narrator’s report. On the whole, the text develops the first pages of Genesis, bringing into itself the inspirations and principles of the essential book of Christian tradition, the Bible, and viewing common existence as the real possibility for whatever sacred events one may be prepared to accept.

Que farei quando tudo arde? [*What Can I Do When Everything’s on Fire?*] (2001) continues with this general project by means of a plot which this time deals with a supposedly marginal matter, the life of homosexuals and transvestites. The question of indecision is again crucial, not only as to signification (the main protagonist, Paulo, tries to understand the identity of his father, a transvestite who abandoned his mother, leaving her to take up alcohol and prostitution) but also in expression. In fact, recurrences and fragmentation of discourse become even more frequent than in the previous novels. And the general interrogative attitude (present in the very title) leads to an observation of the multiplicity of people and situations, in what might be described as literature of manners, but it is ultimately an appeal from the human soul for the practice of writing to be seen as a possibility of knowledge (Paulo takes notes in order to understand himself and his family) and a prayer to a common God—as if it were possible for God to be one of us, to give us personal advice, and to appease human perplexities and sorrows (in a wonderful and unexpected chapter, Paulo goes upstairs to a loft where God lives in squalid conditions due to his poverty and in a frail state of health, and asks him about his father’s nature). The anxiety of burning means here rebellion and destruction, and curiously enough it establishes a connection between this book and some aspects of the first three novels by the author, as well as with *The Inquisitor’s Manual*, simultaneously revealing an interest in

different forms of eroticism and the spiritual search for survival.

Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo [**Good Afternoon to Things Down Here Below*] (2003) is a book where many things are burning too. The novel recalls a love for Africa and the unhappiness which results from the devastation imposed on the land and its inhabitants—evoking, in several respects *O esplendor de Portugal*. Postcolonial concerns come to the fore once more, since the family that this novel focuses on includes black, white and mixed-blood people. The colonial war is gone but neocolonialism has replaced it, particularly in the agonistic attitudes pitting members of the family against each other. Diamond smugglers now replace the soldiers of the colonial period, but political intentions are viewed as new economic trends and interests leading to a corrupt regime that is encouraged by the ex-colonizer. The plot revolves around a Portuguese secret agent sent to Angola to kill a diamond smuggler, but he ends up being involved in a complex family dispute, which includes love, death and crime. Feelings of sorrow overwhelm the agent, who stays there waiting for another secret agent sent to meet him. The former does not know that the latter's mission is to kill him and to make sure that all of this business is kept secret. One more episode will be repeated in a similar manner, hinting at the cruelest side of European exploitation in Africa, which knows no boundaries and allows for no unexpected renewals, even today. The importance of this novel derives from the fact that António Lobo Antunes here reaches the highest degree of compositional complexity, based on extremely sober verbal expression, banishing adjectives and diverse forms of qualification, omitting verbs, interrupting arguments and reasoning, reducing sentences, and insisting again and again on the sameness of the thoughts and words, as obsessive fictional components, in order to emphasize the otherness of human behaviors, the unacceptability of certain situations, the strangeness of attitudes and the rebelliousness of human desire suppressed by destruction and death.

Eu hei-de amar uma pedra [**I Shall Love a Stone*] (2004) still relies on this novelistic ambience. Although the overall structure becomes formally irregular (in the number of chapters and the length of each part), stillness prevails in the composition of single sentences and in the tentative moderation of intensive meanings. Moreover, the love story, which is the basis of the “fabula,” is organized within the plot in order to avoid tensions or disruptions, and all of the chapters are built around the same situations of discourse, which create homogeneity in fiction: photographs, in the first part; medical

appointments, in the second; social gatherings, in the third. Only in the last part, made up of narratives, does the novel become dynamic, with the leit-motiv of a lady with a beautiful hat running on the waterfront establishing a connection between all of the reports presented by the characters, who are finally manifesting themselves. Love and the stone, revealing a potentially dynamic attitude, but remaining pure intent and desire, let us recall, are already there in *Memória de elefante*, the first of the author's novels, where "pathos" stems from love and war, turned dramatic separation and restless peace, and where his compositional philosophy already appears as a poetics of the novel: "uttering dry and exact words, as if they were like stones" (*Memória* 105).

Once again, in Lobo Antunes's work, fiction represents a still way of viewing facts and events, and all the living effect passes on to situations which are incarnated by characters, sentences, and mainly by words—sometimes by words that have been erased, leaving us to try and guess ones that they might have said had they been present in the text. As if a novel were in fact an entire world, a world made of words; and as if it could only exist, and acquire its form, and breath, through the friction produced by these words, and by the stillness (or the alarm) of the pauses between them.

3. A Poetics of Fictional Narrative: Writing Distortion and Erasure

At the end of *The Inquisitors' Manual* we read:

at an intersection of two narrow streets we heard music playing on a windup phonograph in a shack ravaged by war and rain surrounded by other shacks ravaged by war and rain [...]

'Burn all this crap to the ground'

the agents [...] brought cans from the jeep, uncapped the cans, doused me with kerosene, tossed a lit match, and I started to burn, I swear I started to burn [...]

and the corpses of things burning, the horrible, mutilated corpses of stoves burning [...] so please tell my idiotic son [...]

how can I say this, how can I make it clear, please tell my idiotic son that I may not have been but that, tell him that I may have made mistakes but that, tell my idiotic son, do you hear, tell my idiotic son [...]

please don't forget to tell my idiotic son that in spite of everything I [...] (429-31)

Burning a territory for unfair political reasons and for economic interests

amounts to an unforgivable engagement with history, and that is what Francisco, the landowner in *The Inquisitors' Manual*, feels. That is why at the end of the novel the fire is metaphorically displaced from its object and is transferred to burning Francisco himself. Feeling guilty for his actions in the past, he knows that he has neglected his son, and he tries to speak to him now, when he is dying, or at least he tries to pass on a message to him, when it is already too late and the end occurs—the end of his life and the end of the novel. Thus we can observe in the text techniques of deviation (concerning situations and objects), distortion (constituting anamorphosis) and erasure (which can consist of ellipses, in incomplete sentences or in literal gaps in the narrative discourse). Writing secrets or silences, writing the absence of expressed words, is one of the most remarkable skills of António Lobo Antunes, who invents in his novels a kind of poetics of distortion and erasure.

As to the historical guilt being attributed to certain individuals, one has to consider the particular way in which this author deals with the past, namely the so-called glorious maritime discoveries, that is, the beginning and the basis for colonialism. Working consistently with the technique of distortion, Lobo Antunes elaborates an intensively violent parody of this period in *The Return of the Caravels*, as we have already mentioned; but here we must add that he also works with the technique of erasure, giving us only part of the actions of the navigators he takes up as his main characters (Gama, Cabral, King Manuel, etc.), and always insisting on the conjunction of ridicule and praise, and mostly mixing two time periods (the sixteenth and twentieth centuries), thus creating a type of impossibility that fits in with his general preference for derision, hybridism, the bizarre, the grotesque, and diverse forms of negativity. This is how he presents Vasco da Gama:

Everything had happened to him in life, from discovering India and cleaning up the diarrhea and vomit of my dying brother Paulo da Gama with my own hands to helping seal up with stearin plugs the coffin of the father of some poor devil who was voyaging to the realm in the hold of a ship after the revolution in Lisbon, from playing cards with my heart not in the game until, as now, coming to live in this place in the run-down neighborhood between Madre de Deus and Chelas that parliament unanimously voted to award me along with a medal and a diploma as payment for my services to the nation and where the king Dom Manuel could come to pick me up on Sunday morning for drives in his car to Guincho. (151)

Multiple voices, facts and invention, parody and fake are some of the forms of general negativity in Lobo Antunes's work (negativity as a poetic construct which challenges fictional representation), definitely trying to underscore the impression of senselessness (in his first books), and the devastation of the land and the human soul in most of his writings.

From this perspective, negativity can be seen to have three components: interdiction (the construction of the sentence, as we have already seen, indicates the suggestive presence of gaps and the constant need to stop writing because the character has to stop thinking); crime (semantically present in war, destruction, punishment, hostility, wicked attitudes, tricks, defamatory statements, and murder); and impossibility (which is revealed in the slippery way in which serious purposes become jokes, or tragic situations become parody and burlesque). Negativity thus involves most of the procedures of distortion, derision and erasure we have already mentioned.

On the other hand, deviation and distortion can be understood to be based, beginning with Antunes's first novels, on different modalities adopted for the conjunction of semantic and ideological concerns with rhetoric and stylistic devices. Recalling the whole of his work, it becomes clear that in his first novels the author is interrogating the past, himself, his family, his circle, and his readers, in a modality of interpellation that makes his writing full of life and disquietude, torrential and impetuous. From *Fado alexandrino* to *The Return of the Caravels*, the modality is much more that of considering deviation in life, history, narrative, or through misunderstanding and crime—mixing both in a way that juxtaposes tragedy and burlesque, a procedure Lobo Antunes still adopts in his latest novels. The first trilogy emphasizes deviation (by detective novel techniques, in *Tratado das paixões da alma*; by insisting on crime, in *The Natural Order of Things*; and by escape, which here means drugs, disappearance and death, in *A morte de Carlos Gardel*). The second trilogy (from *The Inquisitors' Manual* to *Exortação aos crocodilos*) seems to ask questions for the narrative, and asks them as to the possibility of love, the exercise of power, and the convention of family, and, in the latest books, António Lobo Antunes develops the strategy of silence as a kind of answer, or as the recording of the impossibility of any kind of answer. This can be revealed through darkness in *Não entres tão depressa nessa noite escura*, fire in *Que farei quando tudo arde?*, farewell in *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo*, or oblivion in *Eu hei-de amar uma pedra*. Indeed, the latter book appears to have been entirely written in order to hide what happened, or to downplay its emotional intensity, which is

nevertheless very real (the book downplays it in the writing, but it still comes through strongly in the reading).

Asking questions essentially involves the Other, and this may be the reason why questioning is a major fictional structure in most of Antunes's novels. The difficulty in fixing the boundary between speech and writing is another important work directive when we decide to interrogate these texts. When we examine them, we constantly realize that every device is meaningful, in the sense that it is always contested by another one, which may reinforce it or, on the contrary, oppose it, and it is the indecision thus created that serves as the crucial interest of all of these novels, where writing supposes erasure and every gap highlights the left out words, or the implicit ones.

In Lobo Antunes's first novels, the reader feels that everything has already happened, and that memory, as a kind of imposing world, determines the conditions of the narrative. In his later work, however, it is as if one had to guess everything, and words were subtle and light clues (although sometimes undoubtedly heavy, even sinister, and deadly) for an impossible account of an impressive existence, which we cannot fix, or apprehend, by any means. The rest is, in fact, the book, and the silence it keeps written, still staying alive.

Notes

¹ The twenty-second came out in 2010: *Sóbolos Rios Que Vão* (in English: *By the Rivers that Flow*).

² This translation substantially reduces the body of the text, omitting here and there a good deal of sentences.

³ The "Benfica Trilogy" includes *Tratado das paixões da alma* [*Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*], *A ordem natural das coisas* [*The Natural Order of Things*], and *A morte de Carlos Gardel* [*The Death of Carlos Gardel*].

⁴ I borrow the term "captured" specifically from a sentence by Conrad: "That notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams" (*Heart of Darkness*), implying that text reception partly overlaps text composition on the level of the presupposition of imagination. Moreover, Lobo Antunes manifests great admiration for Joseph Conrad's work.

⁵ I am obviously referring to Frank Kermode's work, *The Sense of an Ending*.

⁶ The * indicates a novel which has not yet been translated into English; tentative titles in English are given in square brackets.

⁷ "Fado" is a traditional Portuguese song, and "alexandrino" refers to a particular kind of this genre of song.

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