

## Portuguese Articles: The Talk<sup>1</sup>

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1.

The German poet Heinrich Heine wrote a famous poem that begins as something like “Denk ich an Deutschland in der Nacht” (When I think of Germany, at night). His attitude, more than his poem, describes well my predicament and my topic. I say his attitude, not his poem, because the poem talks about Germany and about what, according to Heine, Germany is. I will have a few things to say about what I think his attitude is later on. However, I have almost nothing to say about the poem or, rather, about what countries are. Allow me then to briefly get it off my chest.

I am not a believer in any kind of profession of faith in a country's identity, certainly not in my own. Nor do I think that by telling you who I really am I might save myself the embarrassment of further justifying my claims. Telling who you really are is telling who you think you are, and what you think is only what you think. Identity-talk is like wearing some kind of baseball cap or local costume and then imagining that similar caps correspond to similar thoughts, desires, and beliefs. People who talk in this way think, by implication, that only those who wear similar caps are capable of understanding whatever they do or think. The only demeanor that seems appropriate to them is a form of diffuse ethnological admiration for everyone else that does not require any kind of commitment: it costs nothing and brings nothing in return.

I am puzzled by decorous agnosticism. Having opinions about caps, costumes, or neighbors does not amount to genocide proper. My reservations

concerning cannibalism, root-beer drinking, and single-child policies do not translate in any wish to physically eradicate those who support such practices. I simply think that they are all ideas with grievous consequences, ideas that should be averted and fought, though not through genocide. Genocide is a *very* bad idea indeed, one of the worst.

There, I've said it. And now to business. My talk has four parts: the first is rarefied, but short; the second is in a friendlier vein; in the third, an argument on translation will be presented by way of an example; and the last part is, as you would expect, a conclusion to that argument.

Let us begin by going back to the Heine *attitude*. His attitude is similar to a variety of free association. It is as if he were saying that thinking of Germany reminded him of something, and this reminded him of something else, and that reminded him of yet another thing. I do think that free associations are the most adequate avenue to pursue the vexed question of national literatures. The attitude I oppose is a fanciful form of deduction wherein from a general description of a national essence one feels entitled to derive particular descriptions of several articles that allegedly fall under that general description.

The opposite of Heine's attitude we recognize in the early days of literary Romanticism, and in the beginning of the study of literature proper. In more than one respect Romanticism is alive and well. I am of course referring to the tendency to trust some general description of the customs of a particular tribe as a way of figuring out true descriptions of particular customs of that tribe. We say things like: "Given that the Portuguese are P, and given that Mr. X is Portuguese, Mr. X is P." Literary people have a particular fondness for this kind of inference and for the accompanying premise. The reason why I think the tendency is regrettable has less to do with the dubious inferences drawn from those premises than with their allegedly apodictic nature. In fact, I believe there has never been anything like a general consensus about any of these premises and it seems fair to say that those general descriptions are up for grabs at all times. All things considered, the tribal disputes of the Portuguese show no signs of having reached an end. In general, in tribe-descriptions, the premises are always the magnified version of particular descriptions of localized customs. A great anthropologist such as Claude Lévi-Strauss could never have come up with a general theory about the opposition between the raw and the cooked had he not described the antics of the Bororo. A great literary critic such as William Empson could not have come up with a general theory about the pastoral had he not described the antics of Karl Marx and Lewis Carroll.

What I am claiming is thus that there is no such thing as a literature, or a culture, but rather descriptions that, no matter how they present themselves, are descriptions of literatures and cultures according, or in constant reference, to what counts as a particular instance of what is being described. This is why some people, when they think of Virginia Woolf, the Alamo, or Buenos Aires, immediately dream up a whole world. I have no quarrel with that. My quarrel is with imagining that, at night, when we think of things (say Germany, Portugal, or nothing in particular), we think of things as-they-really are, forgetting that such imaginations always originate in particulars. This is especially important in the case of art, since everything we can say about poems, plays, novels, paintings, buildings, and music, is the *example*, that is, the description, of at least one particular poem, play, novel, painting, building, or musical piece. I also think this applies to political science, moral knowledge, and knowledge of other people.

There are however many people who believe that their dreams are more than wishes they wish to come true. These people tend to believe that poems are the tokens or examples of their own true descriptions. It comes easy to them to devise complete theories of art without actually having seen a single artwork. They have only to deduce the properties of the particulars from the general description of an essence, that is, to extract a description of any given painting or poem from the general ideas they have about painting or poetry. They can thus in principle find the same great laws of history at work in a Klee watercolor and in a dogs-playing-poker print. This is why when we think about general things at night what we really are doing is thinking about many sorts of particular articles that we patiently weave together.

Allow me to interject a personal anecdote. A few years ago, when I was in the process of collecting a number of essays that I had written about Portuguese writers and poets, I thought about the process of weaving together those articles and ended up calling that book (in Portuguese), *Portuguese Articles*. There were then two main objections to the title: the first was that, given the idiosyncratic nature of the choices, they would never amount to more than my own private Portugal, and so could not possibly be of any general interest. The second, that by calling them *Portuguese* articles I was contradicting myself, since I would be assuming that they already had something non-idiosyncratic in common, namely their being Portuguese, whatever that could mean.

The first objection can be countered by remarking that however idiosyncratic, and even wrong, my choices, by having become public, immediately

became part of a larger debate. They might have originated in some very private spasms, but when they were disputed they became claims, and so, to all relevant purpose, they were never less than public. "Public" does not mean universal: it just means candidate to rational. As the spastic becomes heuristic, so the private becomes public. In short, there is nothing necessarily private about my ideas being my own. That's how it is with ideas.

The second objection has to be met in a different way, not by remarking that certain assumptions are contradicted by everything we do and how we think, but by suggesting that labels such as "Portuguese" have several usages, not all of them objectionable. A Portuguese writer, in what for me is the unobjectionable sense of the term, is someone whose works I can find in a particular section of a library or bookstore, rather than someone who shares with his fellow Portuguese writers the benefits of some historical fluid, certain psychological dispositions, or even a language. In fact, by "Portuguese writer" I don't always mean to refer to a writer who writes in Portuguese. Some of my favorite Portuguese writers have written in Spanish, and quite a few were not born in Portugal (indeed it is debatable whether there was anything like Portugal at the time some of them were born). And just like Galician-Portuguese was the language for Alfonso El Sábio and for his *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, so Castilian played an important role in the works of, e.g., Gil Vicente, Camões, and D. Francisco Manuel. It is telling that the first major commentary on *The Lusiads*, and in many senses the greatest, was written in Spanish and published in Madrid, in 1639, by a Portuguese writer (Manuel de Faria e Sousa). And I can conceive of no serious examination of Peninsular and Latin-American Baroque that is not bilingual, or of any Isabel Allende novel that is not in English.

I don't mean by this that a language, in the linguists' sense of "language" cannot be a criterion: it sometimes can. This is probably why it sounds funnier to call Conrad a Polish writer than to call Beckett an Irish writer. And, since we're talking about Beckett, wasn't he also a French writer? In the linguists' sense of "language," what we call literature is not made of language. This is a claim I will not develop here. It is enough to remark that, when we talk about Dante's language, or Ashbery's language, we do not mean late medieval Tuscan dialect, or contemporary American English. We mean quirky Ashberic, or recognizable Dantic. And this, I submit, is again the structure of our nightly dreams, where the particularity of the thought is the context for the theory: Italian-according-to-Dante, English-according-to-Ashbery, and so forth. It



may often prove useful to describe Italian-according-to-Dante in reference to Provençal-according-to-Bertran de Born, and English-according-to-Ashbery according to Italian-according-to-Dante. In more complicated cases, the language in which it is useful to redescribe a poem is itself affected by the poem which it purports to redescribe. This is why in matters of literature it may help to know many things, meaning many writers, but also why so many Dante scholars painfully begin to write like Dante, as if they had developed a limp or a rash.

Our knowledge of a writer, however, is nothing in itself. It is completely transitive, in the sense that it becomes a tool for our being able to describe many other things, writers and not. In fact, I submit that the consequence of having read X is not a mental episode which we could call knowing-X, nor a change in attitude that we could call being-affected-by-X, but rather changes, localized or global, in many of our other descriptions and beliefs, often announced by references, little tricks, and analogies that we can trace back to X's works in the context of various kinds of justification.

There is a form of anxiety particular to literary people that consists in suspecting literature and art of never being sufficiently mundane, and so in imagining laborious forms of causal connection between aesthetic events and certain ripples in the world. We then speak of imitation, reflection, and superstructure. But so speaking is just a consequence of fashioning our notion of criticism according to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, rather than *Pride and Prejudice*. In fact the only available test for the importance of art is the appeal to the role of art and to particular works of art in retrospective justifications, prospective imaginings, and every kind of action, including daydreaming and the very making of works of art. When I think of X at night certain articles come attached to my thoughts, and some of them I also call art.

## 2.

I should at this point say something about my use of the word "articles" and so what I mean by the phrase "Portuguese Articles." I use the word "articles" in a very casual way, rather like "things" than like "cultural artifacts." I see however little point in speculating about the notion of things, and less even in secreting any brilliant doctrines about the thingness of things. My use of "articles" suggests an old-fashioned grocer-shop, or haberdasher, an ur-scene that I think is apt to express the difficulties of a minor literature such as Portuguese literature (I don't have any fancy theory about minor literatures

either: a minor literature is a literature with a scarce number of articles available—we will return to this point). Be that as it may, I use “articles” as in “goodies,” not as in “articles of faith.”

The Portuguese who talk about their literature like to complain about the fact that such a widely spoken language is ignored by the rest of the literary world and in fact by the world at large. In support of the first claim (that the language is widely spoken) they quote figures and impressive geographical and linguistic data. Most of the speakers of this language, however, are illiterate, and most of the rest are only marginally not so. It is true that some people in Malaysia still pray in Portuguese, and I understand there are vast numbers of Brazilians. There appears however to be a disproportion between those figures and the actual number of readers, books sold, and so on.

Statistics notwithstanding, the Portuguese empire is still very much thought to be a fact, not least by the Portuguese. The purity of seventeenth-century literary diction may have migrated to the Portuguese that is currently spoken, often as a lingua franca, in Angola, the open-vowel Italianate accent of late-medieval Portuguese is only retained in Brazil, and, yes, “tempura” was once a bona fide Portuguese word (though not, it seems, “arigato”). No matter: even unprovoked, the Portuguese like to quote a prose passage by Fernando Pessoa, one of their greatest poets, as “My fatherland is the Portuguese language” and amorously dwell on their present cultural policy, which some see as war by less costly means.

Pessoa, however, had a different idea of cultural policy (and indeed of foreign affairs), at least judging from how the passage proceeds. The passage in fact goes on in a substantially different direction:

It wouldn't trouble me at all if Portugal were invaded or occupied, as long as I was left in peace. But I hate with genuine hatred, with the only hatred I feel [. . .] the badly written page itself, as if it were a person, incorrect syntax, as someone who ought to be flogged, the substitution of *i* for *y*, as the spit that directly disgusts me, independent of who spat it. (*The Book of Disquiet* 259)

I submit that, for all literary purposes, and to avoid any embarrassment, Portuguese should be compared not with Latin, Spanish, or English, but with other minor literary languages such as Norwegian (one and a half export articles), Danish (two and a half), and Dutch (half an article). Such a change in attitude would make it less surprising that the rest of the world tends to ignore the wonders of Portuguese literature.

Indeed, and as a reaction to the situation, Portuguese literary historiography has promoted the reputation of a few select export articles. The role of translation, not as a theoretical problem but as an empirical fact, is here crucial. There is little to be gained from advertising articles that cannot be easily accessed. So when someone asks me about the articles the Portuguese have in store, I tend to produce as evidence those that were translated, Portuguese export articles. Some of the most important Portuguese texts have been widely translated. There is now in English an adequate selection of medieval poetry, significant anthologies of Pessoa, Luís de Camões's sixteenth-century epic poem *The Lusíads*, collections of Camões's other poetry, several novels by the nineteenth-century writer Eça de Queirós, some samples of contemporary poetry, and a few other good things. And yes, a few contemporary novelists. Like everywhere else, only the contemporary novelists sell.

Not every translation is philologically reliable, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. The best English translation of *The Lusíads* was made in 1655 by Richard Fanshawe (a sometime secret agent who also translated Guarini, Horace, and comedies by Mendoza). However, Fanshawe knew next to nothing of the language. He was blessed instead with a very keen ear and, I believe, a proto- and preternatural Miltonic sense of the epic poem. It matters little that many stanzas have been rendered by him in a plainly wrong way: very often the Portuguese for "the cat is on the mat" appears there as the English for "the mat is on the cat." In fact, a consequence that follows from my idea that literature is not made of language is the notion that translation is *not* a linguistic problem and so the possibility that an excellent translation can be made by someone who knows next to nothing of the original language. Conversely, many acribious translations are simply off. The old Penguin translation of *The Lusíads* gets most words right, and still sounds much like what it is, namely the English prose of a Glasgow don.

Of course a nominal export article is not ipso facto an export success. And then, not every translated text is really worth reading. Here too, translations can be much better than the original. Perhaps the best-known contemporary Portuguese author is José Saramago. I've heard it also said that his English translators have managed to produce something altogether different from the original. Not being familiar with either, I wouldn't know. Perhaps the Saramago translators have found a recognizable diction that has made him comparable to already well-known authors. The fact is that it was his works, not his language that have been made comparable. There is in literature such

a thing as what was known as the international style in architecture. Most of the international reading public consists of accidental tourists, people who like to find everywhere the comfort of the things to which they are better used.

Finally, and perhaps most important, not every text I believe needs to be translated has been. This poses an interesting problem that is not merely a literary problem, a problem that has to do with our preferences and justifications. As some of you may have noticed, I have been using aesthetic adjectives and gustative pronouncements rather liberally, but have been providing scarce justification for such usages and pronouncements. This comfortable position suggests a comparative advantage on my part. Since I happen to speak the languages and since it is assumed that I have also read all these authors, audiences, politely or enthusiastically, tend to defer. I fear however that the position of people such as I, people who occasionally advertise Portuguese articles, would often appear to be similar to that of traveling salesmen of sorts, mystery-mongers making propaganda for some secret formula. In the comfort of my own position I describe to various audiences wonderful aesthetic tricks performed by remote natives, tricks that I know in advance can only be taken on trust, and to whose descriptions I can at each time add brilliant new insinuations of my own. In short, I feel like I am almost ever adding linguistic insult to literary criticism.

And still I often feel compelled to talk about poems and novels that none of my interlocutors has read, and, more to the point, could not have read. Not always do I do this out of vanity, and yet I do not think that what I do is just like those endless slide-shows of exotic vistas that freshly arrived tourists used to inflict on comparative strangers. The fact is that I sometimes need to explain that certain unavailable articles are useful for establishing intelligible connections between available articles. At times a paraphrase will be enough. Other times, a tortuous, improvised translation is required. In emergency situations I have been known to commit translation myself. Translation however is neither a legal right nor a moral duty, is not the linguistic equivalent of a sentence on a human rights case or on a trade dispute by an international organization. It is part and parcel of the many things we do to explain things, suggest connections, justify actions, and so forth. It begins in one's dissatisfaction with things as they are, rather than from any clear notion of things as they should be.

### 3.

I will now give a more detailed example of a predicament which appears to require various measures of all of the remedies above, essentially several kinds



of paraphrase and translation. In order to do it, I shall produce a compact version of an episode in Portuguese literature before your very eyes.

You will remember Harold Bloom's well-known ideas about what he called the anxiety of influence. These are ultimately ideas about the role of Shakespeare in the canon of English-speaking poetry. However, he also suggests that his own ideas are ideas about poetry in general. As I said earlier apropos Lévi-Strauss and Empson, I believe that general ideas about poetry are consequences of a certain kind of concentrated attention paid to a small number of particulars. In Bloom's case, these particulars are a number of English-speaking poets such as Milton, Blake, Shelley and, of course, Shakespeare.

A student of other literatures that has fallen under the spell of Bloom's powerful arguments can be tempted to play the game of finding the equivalent to Bloom's Shakespeare in his or her own literature of choice. As it happens, Portuguese literature, unlike Spanish or French literature, has the one perfect suspect: Luís de Camões. The reason for this is rather prosaic and well-known: there was no Portuguese Siglo de Oro. Conversely, in Spain, the game of choosing between, say, Cervantes, Quevedo, and Saint Teresa causes little commotion among seasoned literary historians and this for the simple reason that there is in that region no one obvious candidate for the role of ersatz Shakespeare.

Ever since his major poem, *The Lusiads*, was published in 1572, the damage done by Camões to all of those Bloom would have called his ephebes has been massive. And the first, posthumous, 1595 edition of his *Rhymes* only compounded the damage. There was a long-lasting outbreak of lesser epic poetry and the poetic diction of the following two hundred years remained heavily indebted to Camões. This is all part of the standard historiographic lore, and falls under a less outrageous notion of influence, and one that is not of Bloom's concern.

More interesting however is the history of the reaction to Camões, to which (to use again Bloom's terminology) every strong poet in the language has contributed in some way. Fernando Pessoa, in his very first published text, a series of journal articles that appeared in 1912 on "The New Portuguese Poetry Considered from a Sociological Viewpoint," while apparently bowing to Camões, announces the imminent coming of a "supra-Camões" (this is the exact term he used), of a poet who will finally "cause the hitherto prominent figure of Camões to recede into the background" (*Crítica* 16).<sup>2</sup> This has been interpreted first as a display of inordinate cheek by a twenty-four-year-old unpublished poet, and later as an unabashed self-description.

The story however becomes more complicated. One reason is that Pessoa was also reacting in those articles against a series of other poets, namely against the other strong poet of his generation, Teixeira de Pascoaes, not by chance the editor of the journal in which Pessoa was putting himself forth as the sole heir and sole slayer to Camões. The acerbic backhanded compliment he pays to Pascoaes ("what was given to him by the faith and the intuition of the mystics will now our reasoning mathematically confirm" [15]) should be understood in this light. The compliment has moreover proved an effective curse, and Pascoaes remains almost forgotten and untranslated (he was translated into Dutch, Magyar, and German but most of these translations are no longer in print). To be sure, a sense of the threat Pessoa anticipated from Pascoaes can only be acquired through careful consideration of his work, as well as through a notion of the relative strength of these poets in 1912. Pessoa was the clear underdog: Pascoaes had scores of disciples, friends in high places, and an influential journal. How is one to convey all this? And how is one to suggest that a given article has disappeared when it no longer is available as an example? The answer is: critical paraphrase and imperfect analogy. In short, as the Heine poem recommends, free association.

Pascoaes was not Pessoa's only target. In the previous generation, three equally strong, and, like Pessoa, essentially posthumous, poets, have determined in more than one sense some of the best parts of Pessoa's oeuvre: I mean Cesário Verde, António Nobre, and Camilo Pessanha. One of them, Cesário Verde, had been the author of a long poem often referred to by Pessoa, where, as a virtually unpublished twenty-five-year-old poet, he decides to settle his score with no less than Camões. Critics see in this poem a mere consequence of certain changes in poetic diction brought forth by Baudelaire. It is indeed an urban poem, which, like much of Baudelaire's great poetry, combines bile and alexandrines. Its title is however oddly ambitious and certainly un-Baudelairean: "The Sentiment of a Westerner." And the poem was first published (to no great success) in a collection dedicated to Camões, in 1880, for the tricentennial commemorations of his death in 1580.

The year 1880 was a decisive one for Portuguese literature, not because anything important (with the exception of the Verde poem) was published in that year but because it was the year in which Portuguese literature as a topic of conversation was first given any local exposure. The notion of a Portuguese literature, like the notion of any other national literature, was very much the product of the literary history secreted by universities and newspapers,

which had always insisted that the spirit of a nation had a history that rhymed with more sublunary events. The nuptials of infrastructure and superstructure were in this case conducted by the squad-commander of Portuguese literary history (who many years later became the head of the provisional government of the Portuguese Republic), and the lights of the Lusitanian literary firmament (not one of which is still remembered let alone read) duly paid cult to a brand new, immoderately sized, statue of Camões, the poet, who became then, if posthumously, the founding father of the country and the picturesque inspirer of a national holiday.

Cesário Verde's "The Sentiment of a Westerner" is the crucial poem of the Portuguese nineteenth century, and, as far as I know, is not widely available (it has been twice translated into Spanish, once into Italian and, only very recently, into English).<sup>3</sup> Those who don't know the language or who haven't read the poem will have to take my word for it. More importantly, it is indeed a poem about a melancholy *flâneur*, though one who, in the course of his errands, comes across no less than the very statue of Camões (we would hardly imagine a Baudelairean *flâneur* coming across a statue of Ronsard). The statue shows up in a square, surrounded by pepper-shrubs, and Verde clearly emphasizes the difference in size between the statue (and thus Camões) and its immediate surroundings. Even as a dead poet, even as the *statue* of a dead poet, Camões appears to be bigger than anything and, certainly, bigger than life. The allusion to Camões is, to be sure, periphrastic: he is described as "an epic poet," not as Luís de Camões. Still, as it very often happens, the statue is also personified. As Cesário puts it, the epic poet "ascends." So far so good: this is the stuff classic triumphs are made of. By such means a dead poet often becomes tractable.

You will have remarked that so far I have managed to describe pretty much what I believe is going on in these lines without any meddling in the complexities of the original language. And, as we shall presently see, if most of you were to be native speakers of the original language of the poem, that wouldn't have made you any fitter to understand such complications or any less grateful for having been spared them. No one should be required to remember any poem, and so, once more, those who don't will have to trust those who say they do. The trick usually works. The blending of my paraphrases and your trust has just produced a classic scene of triumph, and one which moreover is fully congruent with the context of the homage to Camões, the context of the special issue of the newspaper where the poem was originally published (incidentally, the poem was dedicated to *another* poet, and a live one at that,

but let's not complicate things any further). I should however add that I agree with everything *I* have said about the poem so far, and so I am not deliberately feeding you any false paraphrase. More important, and as far as I know, no critic in more than a century has disagreed with what I have been saying about the passage so far. I will even risk a translation of the full line:

An epic poet of yore ascends, from a pillar!

This translation adds several details that I haven't mentioned yet: the first is the unequivocal reference to the statue by means of its plinth, described as a "pillar"; the second is the exclamation mark at the end, the special form of emphasis that is used in Portuguese very much like in English. There is however one third detail that requires more attention. I am referring to the comma, which breaks both line and proposition in two pieces. Translated as it was, the line appears to do justice to the comma though the comma may seem a little excessive relative to the *preposition* that follows. As very often happens, translation, like any paraphrase, dies at the hands of preposition, and here, actually, what is being asserted, the proposition, follows the same unfortunate path. To make my English translation sound idiomatic or natural (those much-favored words) I used the preposition "from." In most Romance languages, as in real life, one ascends *from* somewhere and *to* or *towards* somewhere. In this at least both English and Portuguese appear to follow the semantics of Latin prepositions.

As it happens the line says something else. The difference is so inconspicuous that it has eluded the attention of the so-called native speakers (which suggests again that the natives are not always to be trusted). And, interestingly enough, given the shared semantics of prepositions, it can be easily translated into English. Cesário wrote:

Um épico d'outrora ascende, num pilar!

The crucial word here is "num," the contraction of a preposition and an indefinite article (or perhaps a numeral). The preposition is, in Portuguese, "em," and the article is "um." The contraction of "em" and "um" is "num." As it turns out, the best way to attempt to explain my point about "num" to native speakers is not to appeal to their native linguistic intuitions. An obvious alternative would be to try to translate the line into a language most of



them would more or less know. A few years ago this would have been French. Now it is English. Both “em” and “um” have Latin roots, respectively “in” and “unus.” English has “in” and “one.” We will forget the hesitation between article and numeral, in English “a” and “one.” What remains is the preposition “em” which, in English is, uncontroversially, “in.” Follows that the translation of the line would become

An epic poet of yore ascends, in a pillar!

Now unlike Portuguese, the prepositional system of English allows for a marked semantic difference between “in” and “on.” A common mistake foreigners make, certainly a mistake I often make, is to confuse the two. As translated above, there seems to be something semantically incongruous about ascending “in a pillar”: not *from*, not even *on*. To make it sound more natural and idiomatic I should have rendered it as, if not “from a pillar” at least “on a pillar.”<sup>4</sup>

My translation instead attempts to capture a tension that exists in Portuguese and, I suppose, in real life between going elsewhere and staying put, and does so at the cost of semantic plausibility, punctuation, and grammatical correctness. It is significant that my Google translator has got the preposition right (if little else: the poem is announced there as “The Feeling of an Occidental Person,” by Green Cesário). And still it was that, or at any rate what the preposition “in” expresses, that Cesário Verde wrote. He wrote that the statue never moves, leaving us, instead of an ascensional triumph, with an aborted take-off. His Camões never quite takes off, and this, I submit, is how Cesário settles his score with Camões. Where we had expected a triumph, the statue of Camões and so Camões himself remain very much a part of the furniture of this world, discrepant but essentially contiguous with what Cesário also calls “a nondescript public square.”

There are a few other instances of this animus in the poem, which we won't need to discuss. My purpose, you will remember, was to suggest not that translation or paraphrase are impossible (the silliest of suggestions) but that they often are neither necessary nor sufficient. And to demonstrate my claim I used every weapon I could muster, including non-grammatical constructions, partial successive translations, loose and strict paraphrases, and all sorts of analogies. In doing so I also suggested that there is no meaning independent from our attempts to get our various points across, that is, that meaning, just like truth, is a property of statements, not of poems.

## 4.

We react in various ways to such accumulations of mishaps and indeed to the idea that the search for exact descriptions is tied to a number of imperfect and awkward processes, certainly as imperfect and awkward as the kind of animal we all are. We tend indeed to act like people without absolute pitch trying to tune a stringed instrument, that is, we go about these things by trial and error. Trial-and-error as a way of life, however, doesn't seem to have many followers in the humanities. In the case of small-article literature, people much rather prefer apologizing for mistakes made by someone else, and some would even enjoy the humbling. Quite a few people, indeed, earn a comfortable living out of the unfortunate fact that a number of articles are simply not there, and that *they* are among the very few who can have direct access to those articles or can capture their ethereal vibrations. They often shed the odd crocodile tear, usually expressing the wish that all their interlocutors would know the relevant languages ("one can't read Milton without knowing Latin"; "philosophy speaks German"; "oh that untranslatable concept of *mana!*"). As it turns out, when we consider those who do know the relevant languages and can do nothing with the unavailable articles (either because they are busy listening to what no one else can hear, or promoting their language among the gentiles, or, more frequently even, because they know nothing of the language they know so well), we see it again confirmed how non-necessary linguistic instruction is to the teaching of literature. By "non-necessary" I don't mean unnecessary, that is, useless: I mean that knowing the original language is not a necessary condition (let alone a sufficient one) for our being able to make something with the relevant literature. And of course the sense of our misfortunes is always relative to a particular argument, description, situation, or person. I do not regret that *in general* there are unavailable literary articles, but nor would I recommend compulsory instruction in the relevant languages. If you need them, you will learn them. It is enough that already so often they are learned without any need.

Will there be any less cumbersome and more elegant ways of getting our points across in literary matters? An alternative model of literary instruction was once suggested by novelist Evelyn Waugh in a short story entitled "The Man Who Liked Dickens." A white man is saved in extremis in a remote jungle by an older white man who lives among what were then called the natives. When he recovers, his host politely asks him if he would mind reading *Bleak House* to him (a black man educated in Guyana used to read things

to him but he had died). He obliges. "At the end of the first day the old man said 'You read beautifully, with a far better accent than the black man. And you explain better. It is almost as if my father were here again'" (*The Complete Stories* 138). They go on reading and eventually finish the book. Follows *Dombey and Son*, and then *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The reader now has a "gloomy foreboding of permanent exile" (141). He eventually confronts his rescuer and demands to be released. "But my friend, what is keeping you? You are under no restraint. Go when you like.' 'You know very well that I can't get away without your help.' 'In that case you must humour an old man. Read me another chapter'" (141). The reader had of course become prisoner of the man who liked Dickens and who, as he tells us (136), couldn't himself read. The story ends when they are getting ready to "read *Little Dorrit* again" since, the host says, "There are passages in that book that I can never hear without the temptation to weep" (145).

I would stop short of making my own modest proposal coincide fully with such somber activities. And still, whenever required to tell someone all sorts of wonderful things about unavailable articles (and articles can be unavailable for many reasons, not all of them linguistic), I feel tempted to compare the teacher of a minor literature, and perhaps every literature teacher, to someone in the position of the man who liked Dickens. Students are hostages for a semester, as lecture audiences are hostages for an hour, and some measure of intellection is believed to stem from their gloomy forebodings of exile.

The teachers in the audience (and indeed the audience) need not worry. In fact, the problem of teaching and talking about minor literatures is no different from the problem of teaching or talking about literature, which in turn is no different from teaching and talking about everything else. I mean that there are many small differences but no one big difference. As we go along, we say things that make sense relative to what we believe our audiences already know or can understand. And of course we may always be wrong, namely about what we believe they already know or understand. This is why translation, analogy, and comparison play such an important role. Comparison is not a methodological peculiarity of literature teaching, let alone the trade secret of that discipline unnecessarily named Comparative Literature, but rather is a basic condition of understanding. From then on, a number of other factors intervene. In fact, due to several reasons including sheer luck, there is always the possibility that the other person will want to know more, and will want to know what he or she does not understand. "Knowing more" is a wish

that can be satisfied in many different ways. Sometimes, though not always, it may include the learning of a new language. Usually, though, it includes more common activities, beliefs, and other wishes: buying something, taking off, staying put, wanting to meet someone, changing one's mind.

At this point we must part ways with some of the metaphors I used earlier, namely the blunt description of the literary critic, or the literature teacher, as a traveling-salesman or a mystery-monger. There is nothing cynical, let alone secretive, about talking about things that you believe are important, and you should never have to apologize for believing that certain things are good for other people, at least not in advance. And, albeit rarer in my own trade, there is no evil to arguing for your claims and in doing so from your beliefs, and in using many sorts of procedures to achieve that purpose. In order to do all of the above we need not, let alone should we, rely on the comfort afforded, to use a metaphor from economics, by exception clauses, most-favored-nation trade status, as it were, applying to our own position as members of a special tribe that specializes only in bona fide truths about themselves.

You may have recognized in this a version of what I said at the beginning about baseball caps and local costumes. There is something terribly ironic about such outfits: we assume they will protect us from undesirable questions and unwarranted comparisons, we assume they will promote automatic identification with some remote substance and secure full employment for its pastors, and yet we often end up preaching to audiences where everyone seems to be wearing a similar cap. Think of the endless international conferences about local articles—and think of the endless local conferences about local articles. All this is a grim caricature of a marketplace of ideas, of one where either there are only producers, or where every producer is his or her own sole customer. Imagine if you happen to specialize in broccoli. Granted, not always will our examples, analogies, and arguments work, and there are no pre-set criteria for us to know in advance whether any given explanation will work. Time will tell and, crucially, what other people will do will be the only evidence we can ever rely upon. In matters of meaning, by which I mean in matters of “getting” something, nothing can ever be taken for granted, though much has to be assumed. But just because we may occasionally fail at it, it doesn't mean that what we have to say is by definition useless or irrelevant.

Elizabeth Anscombe, the British philosopher, used to complain that modern education had become “a permanent concession to the idiot.” It is indeed often so, but not by necessity. Like most people in the trade I start every



semester, and every talk, with a kind of silent propitiatory ritual addressed to my audiences: “these are the articles I have for you; I find some of them really important—and I will offer reasons, too. The rest will be up to you.” A hopeful version of this prayer, and one which seems fitter as a conclusion, is the remark that Saul Bellow used to address his students: “I do the lather, *you* do the shaving.”

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay was often delivered as a talk. Its original shape was thus openly retained. Some of the arguments and examples (although not the main argument) have been taken from *Artigos portugueses* (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2002). Among my many hosts, from whose remarks the text now published has benefited, a special place must be given to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and António M. Feijó. Among non-hosts that place belongs to Brett Bourbon and to the late M. S. Lourenço.

<sup>2</sup> My translation.

<sup>3</sup> By Richard Zenith, as “The Sentiment of a Westerner.” I am grateful to Rosa Maria Martelo for having called my attention to this translation.

<sup>4</sup> Zenith translates the line as “A war-sized monument [...] / Stands, on a pillar, for an epic that was;” using the more idiomatic preposition and eliminating the reference to ascension.

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