

Figura Naturae: Religion, Nature, and the Self in Miguel Torga's *Diário*

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Abstract. In Torga's *Diário*, the discourse of theology sometimes curiously intersects with the record of apparently personal experience. This is particularly evident in the references to nature. Operating as a hermeneutic device, these instances of discourse interference provide a model of reading that seems to question, or even to suspend, the supposed referentiality of the genre. The provocation of the *Diário*, moreover, lies not only in the notorious reinvestment of Christian beliefs, which turn into an idiosyncratic worship of nature, but in the implied configuring of the diaristic "I" by means of a perversion of christological and exegetical patterns. This unprecedented and rather outré self-fashioning of a 20th century author's persona, however, is ingeniously camouflaged with the pervasive topoi of identity crisis inherent in the genre and, therefore, has often passed unnoticed so far.

Tomado à letra, é nauseabundo!

Mas será que poderá tomar-se à letra?¹

I.

If Torga's *Diário* has primarily been considered to refer rather unequivocally to actual events, ranging from the most intimate feelings to the events of greatest significance in 20th century history, the rhetorical craft and figurative features of the diaristic discourse have not been investigated thus far.² The question, then, that I would like to raise in this paper is not what specific *tranche de vie* Torga refers to, but rather: how is this reference configured, and what is thereby involved beyond simple referentiality?³

In fact, rather than presenting life in the raw,⁴ some entries, though somehow apparently grounded in factual experience, are deliberately structured around theological notions, or even superimposed upon by biblical plots and deeply informed by hermeneutical patterns of meaning. Thus removed, to a certain extent, from their embeddedness in "real life," or their immediate referentiality, these passages, although of minor occurrence to be sure, nevertheless yield a semantic surplus that allows the *Diário* to develop all the more fully.

Focusing on the entries referring to nature, especially those with regard to the sea, I propose a close reading of a crucial passage where the sheer record of facts and the discourse of biblical hermeneutics clearly intersect. Beyond simple referentiality, here the diaristic "I" tries to make sense of nature as well as of its relationship to it, and, last but not least, of its own self. Before attempting to explore further this interplay of religion, nature, and the self, however, it would seem beneficial to examine in brief the general pattern of the references to nature in the *Diário*.

II.

Far from being faithful depictions of the Portuguese countryside—and a lot of critics, indeed, have been satisfied to read them as if their only truth lay in objective mimesis—these descriptive inserts, despite their apparent referentiality and regardless of the differences between them, objectify Torga's regressive desire for an emotional and even physical identification with nature. Given the number and variety of thematizations of nature in the *Diário* (such as panoramic views, contemplation of individual objects, or descriptions serving as a background for apparently major themes), the following is a rather condensed overview, seeking primarily to lay stress upon some basic traits these passages have in common.

Torga's "empathizing" with nature develops, roughly speaking, in three stages: in the first stage, the natural sphere—as, for instance, a snow-covered slope, a precipice, or a quivering leaf—is linked with the viewer's emotional state, so that he finally identifies himself metaphorically with nature⁵ to such an extent, in fact, that the "I," feeling a kind of "centrifugação do espírito" (3VIII: 41), completely loses his identity and passively becomes a mere surface, or a transparent screen, onto which the phenomenal world is projected:

Deixo-me levar passivamente pelas rodas do carro, que percorre a serra em todas as direcções. Dou aos olhos plena liberdade sensorial, sem lhes pedir conta da qua-

lidade das sensações recebidas. Abandono-me à volúpia dum encontro meramente físico com a realidade. Fragas, matas, rios e ribeiros, tudo entra em mim como a luz pelas vidraças. Entra e cabe. Não há imagens no mundo que saciem a pura transparência. (1X: 34)

The immediately following sentence, “Nada entendo, e nada quero entender,” enacts the second stage of Torga’s identification with nature by dis-closing its utterly irrational or regressive impulse. The “empathizing” with nature obviously aims at losing the intellectual, emotional, and sensory faculties of the individual: “Não ler, nem escrever, nem pensar, nem amar, nem sofrer, nem sentir sequer. Estar assim deitado como estou em cima duma fraga, estúpido como ela e amorfo como ela” (3VII: 178-9). By physically imitating and imaginatively projecting himself into an object of nature (e.g. a rock), Torga seems to extinguish gradually the awareness of embodiment and individuality in order to regress to the natural sphere.⁶ This is particularly evident in a poem emblematically entitled “Mimetismo,” where the “I” empathizes with a “trunk” “lost” in a “dense forest,” relapsing thereby into an “inert,” “mute” and “anonymous,” or “vegetable,” form of existence:

Sou mais um caule na floresta densa.
Um tronco de preguiça vertical.
Inerte, muda e anónima presença,
Perdido no silêncio vegetal. (3VII: 31)

The third stage of identification, then, is precisely this state of fulfillment—called, e.g., “paz” (1X: 34), “Nirvana” (3VII: 25), or “plenitude” (4II: 72)—in which individuality becomes totally extinct by being wholly absorbed into nature. Paradoxically, losing one’s identity and (self-)awareness by “empathizing” with nature involves, according to Torga, an acute form of (self-)consciousness: “Atingir na identificação inconsciente com a natureza a única consciência profunda que dela e de si pode ter” (1X: 34). The boundary between this kind of “profound consciousness” and the dullness of death, however, is blurred.⁷

III.

Thus far, I have traced the basic pattern of identification with and regression to the phenomenal world recurrently unfolded in Torga’s descriptions of natural

settings. Let us now turn to the theological-hermeneutical development of this pattern. In this regard, the entries referring to journeys to the Portuguese sea-coast provide compelling examples pointing simultaneously to a different, revised understanding of Torga's often discussed notion of "telurismo."⁸

Perhaps even more than the inland scenes that have been adduced so far, the sea is, in Torga's understanding, an ideal *point de départ* for an "empathic" identification with nature, since its water corresponds materially, or isotonically, and by the way of its tidal "pulsating", to man's biochemical composition and physiological organization respectively: "Talvez por estar ainda dentro de nós, salgado, a pulsar nas artérias, com vagas e marés" (2XII: 156). Again, this "empathic" stance here is linked with an utterly regressive move, for the sea-water is referred to as "líquido amniótico" and hence metaphorically identified with the fetal fluid: The immersing into the sea is thus to relapse into an intrauterine existence; by plunging into the water, the bather becomes an embryo in the womb.⁹ Just as the emotional identification experienced *vis-à-vis* the inland scenery of the Gerês Mountains culminated in a phylogenically remote state of mind ("E sinto paz. [...] Paz que o homem primitivo certamente já experimentou" [3VII: 178-9]), so the sea, here, ontogenically, "[...] proporciona ao homem o regresso à sua primitiva decência" (2XII: 156). As significant as his emphasis on identification and regression is Torga's use of such terms as "litúrgico," "limpo," "purificação," and "baptizado," describing the transformational power that affects him in plainly religious terms, most of which we tend to associate unanimously with baptism.¹⁰

IV.

The link between Torga's experience on the seashore and notions of religion, especially baptism, can be seen even more clearly in an entry from the first volume of the *Diário* written in Nazaré on July 2, 1940. Here Torga explicitly draws on the body simile of Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, thereby inviting the reader to make a most promising structural comparison of his text with its biblical source:

Chegou a hora do banho. Entrei no seio do formigueiro de gente que fervilhava dentro de água, *humanidade até pouco hostil e individual, e agora milagrosamente fraterna e solidária. [...] Como se uma benção os tivesse irmanado, eram todos um corpo só diante da mesma onda.* E eu pus-me a pensar na força gregária que tem o mar. Na força gregária que provoca, afinal, qualquer poder adverso. (71: 157; my italics)

As mentioned above, this bathing scene is clearly set against the background of baptism: The crowd of “hostile individuals” bathing in the sea and thereby “miraculously” becoming “one body” (“*um corpo*”) unmistakably recall the equally heterogeneous and even conflicting Corinthian community that, too, was joined “into one body” (“*in unum corpus*,” I Cor. 12:13) precisely through baptism.

The principle governing the transition from Saint Paul’s letter to Torga’s diary entry is, predictably, that of secularization, or, in rhetorical terms, literalization: “baptizare” is perceived etymologically as “to immerse” or “to bathe”; the water associated figuratively with the Holy Spirit “we have been all made to drink” (“*et omnes unum Spiritum potati sumus*,” I Cor 12:13) is changed into the real water of the sea; the spiritual “Body” in the Pauline allegory, i.e. the *Corpus Christi mysticum*, is replaced by the worldly conception of “humanity,” which, however, is not joined “in the one, i.e. Holy Spirit,” (“*in uno Spiritu*,”), but instead by “fraternity” and “solidarity.” On the other hand, the only gesture that is explicitly reminiscent of the underlying sacramental subtext, namely “*benção*,” is significantly shifted to the level of comparison and hence neutralized: “*Como se uma benção os tivesse irmanado [...]*” (my italics). In contrast to the covenant founded in communion, wherein the flesh and blood of Christ are consumed together, Torga here seems to form a kind of “New Covenant,” likewise founded in communion, or “*comunhão*”—as Torga repeatedly calls the contact with nature¹¹—, i.e., in the common sensual experience of the same natural phenomenon: “*diante da mesma onda*.”

This all, I think, is exceedingly obvious. I would draw, however, the attention to the shift from the figurative, but yet “potable,” water associated with the Holy Spirit in I Cor. 12:13 to the definitely undrinkable and literal sea-water in Torga’s account. The source of this particular detail, I will argue, is the phrase “*baptizati sunt [...] in mari*” (“they were baptized in the sea,” I Cor. 10:2) used by Saint Paul earlier in the same letter referring to the Old Testament event of the Israelite’s crossing of the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses.

It may be objected that Torga (and let us suppose he was telling the truth) actually was on the beach that day, the sea being thus, to be sure, a more suitable theme presenting itself. Nevertheless, I believe that the fact that the sweet and spiritual water of I Cor. 12:13 is replaced by the literal and salty sea-water cannot be dismissed so easily as merely mimetic, for this would mean to undercut the rhetorical or figurative feature of this thoroughly inter-

textual passage, however “realistic” or even downright “autobiographic” it might appear. Therefore, it may not be purely coincidental that in a passage apparently referring as a whole to the baptismal narrative of I Cor. 12:13 is found an element pointing to the narrative of the Israelite’s crossing of the Red Sea; much less, if we take into account the fact that precisely this narrative, namely Exod. 14, is generally considered the “type” of baptism, that is to say that the Israelite’s crossing of the Red Sea, seen from the viewpoint of biblical hermeneutics, precedes and foreshadows Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan which in turn supersedes and surpasses the Old Testament event. This has already and for the first time been suggested by Saint Paul by saying twice that the Israelite’s experience happened to them “typologically” or, as the Vulgate puts it, “in figura” (I Cor. 10:6 and 11, for the Greek “*typoi*,” or “*typikos*”). The question, however, remains, why should Torga mingle two biblical passages from the Old and the New Testaments, respectively, traditionally juxtaposed by typological exegesis, and, what is more, why should he superimpose these passages of the Sacred Scripture upon his own quite profane bathing experience?

The basis for conjoining these two biblical passages as well as for blending them with Torga’s own experience, appears, I believe, to be hermeneutic, rather than mimetic. In fact, there can be no doubt that some kind of typological relationship is intended.¹² In order to do so, Torga, on the one hand, aligns himself with the biblical history that progresses hierarchically towards redemption according to the promise/fulfillment model provided by typological exegesis, while, on the other hand, extending this hermeneutical pattern beyond the narrow relationship between the Old and the New Testaments to which it was originally confined. In other words, Torga establishes a kind of three-stage typological relationship connecting (1) the Israelite’s crossing of the Red Sea, (2) Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan, or baptism “in the one Spirit,” and (3) his own bathing experience in the Atlantic Ocean on July 2, 1940. But instead of merely repeating and imitating what has—seen from a typological viewpoint—already been fulfilled in Christ, Torga, on the contrary, deliberately thwarts the slightest idea of an *imitatio Christi*; first, by crudely literalizing the baptismal narrative of I Cor. 12:13; second, by turning the sweet water into sea-water. A minor incident, to be sure, apparently grounded in objective mimesis, but one that carefully coincides with baptism’s Old Testament type, the Israelite’s “baptism in the sea.” Torga thus seems to put the literal or Old Testament element, i.e. the

salty water of the Red Sea, above the spiritual or New Testament element, i.e. the sweet and potable water of the River Jordan, thereby operating a reversal of the clear-cut typological hierarchy established by Saint Paul. And, third, the power that reactualizes the biblical event(s) in the present time is no more the Holy Spirit, as in the conception of typological exegesis; the “hermeneutical bridge” connecting the three events is none other than the sensual contact with water, or nature *tout court*.

In summary, the incident on the beach at Nazaré—whose very place name, quite apart from its reference to the Portuguese seaside town, is clearly a kind of Christological pun¹³—is, for all of its apparent banality or supposed mimetic referentiality, a careful dramatization of baptism, blatantly reducing it to its literal level. Moreover, the bathing—or shall I say baptismal?—scene is not only a thoroughly literal reenactment of baptism, but it is also the site of an utterly unorthodox, revisionist reading of Saint Paul’s *Ad Corinthios I* and its implied hermeneutical model. It seems tempting, now, to conclude that Torga here, in the fullest typological sense of the word, aims at superseding and surpassing, i.e. “fulfilling,” the New Testament baptism by tracing it back, paradoxically, to its Old Testament type: the “baptism in the sea.” It remains difficult, however, to decide on the basis of the *Diário* alone whether this audacious reversing of a prominent Christian theme is a mere mocking mimicry, i.e. a negativizing process,¹⁴ or whether it is a tremendously aggressive appropriation that subverts and collapses *Heilsgeschichte* in order to establish a new religion that, in contrast to Christianity (while deeply informed by it), “não nega nem degrada a natureza” (3III: 77), thereby bearing witness to a “divinidade fundamentada na verdade feiticeira das coisas.”¹⁵

V.

Before concluding this brief note, I would like to revert to the regressive identification with natural phenomena in order to show how Torga links his relationship to nature with theological-hermeneutical patterns. Indeed, the “empathizing” with nature embodies the belief that man and nature have some necessary organic relationship; the underlying logic of this emotional and physical identification is an allegory, which, typologically speaking, aims at establishing a “perfect harmony,” thereby revealing Torga to be a “figure” of nature: “[...] uma sintonia total com a natureza natural de que me sempre senti figuração humana” (1XVI: 10). Just as the sea-water, for instance, is made up of water and minerals and is constantly moved by the regular rise

and fall of the tide, the human body, representing nature on a small scale, is equally composed primarily of water and minerals and is constantly pulsating with the rhythmic circulation of the blood (cf. ²XII: 156, quoted above; cf. also ⁷I: 159, quoted in note 9). Conversely, the beating heart is extended to the macrocosmic scale and used as a metaphor for the tidal sea repeatedly referred to as “coração do mundo” (see, e.g., ⁷I: 143, 155, 159, and ¹X: 98). Likewise, Torga undergoes a kind of “petrificação emotiva” (¹XI: 137), for example, when he intentionally becomes obtuse like the rock he is lying on (“estúpido como ela [i.e. *a fraga*],” [³VII: 179]); he even becomes similar to it in shape: “e amorfo como ela.”¹⁶

Thus, Torga's emotional and physical identification with nature which makes him both lose the awareness of embodiment and individuality while, paradoxically, effecting or bearing out his true identity as *figura Naturae*, is point by point drawn not only on Christian notions implying a kind of change (namely of identity, or of man's relationship to God), such as baptism, communion, or transfiguration, but also on the theological-hermeneutical pattern of typology or allegory. It is surely in this deliberate misreading of religious patterns that the key to Torga's concept of nature and the individual's relationship to it lies. In addition, the intersecting of religious patterns and personal experiences forming Torga's diaristic discourse offers an opportunity, though not in this paper, to elicit further Torga's method of configuring and presenting the self and, hence, to take a new approach to the *Diário*.

Notes

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¹ Freire (1990: 68), with reference to *Diário* ³VI: 23 (“Na mesquita de Córdoba”). All references to the *Diário* are to the edition in XVI volumes published by the author (Coimbra: 1^o 1941-93); the superscript number indicates the respective print or edition used.

² For a survey on critical studies directed to the *Diário*, see the relevant papers published in *Aqui, neste lugar e nesta hora* (1994) as well as in Fagundes, ed. (1997). See also Rocha (1990; 1992: 225-34) and, more recently, Monteiro (2000). For earlier criticism, see the judicious remarks by Mourão-Ferreira (1978: 7-9).

³ Cf. Lepecki (1988) who seems to suggest a compatible approach to that taken here.

⁴ See, for instance, ³VII: 10 and ²IX: 101, where Torga pretends to absolute sincerity and authenticity, while other statements clearly undermine this claim (see, e.g., ⁷I: 28 and 76, ³III:

172, ³V: 85, ²XII: 107). On this question, see especially Monteiro (1994). For the problem raised by the publishing as well as the revising, i.e. rewriting, of the *Diário* in subsequent editions, see the remarks by Rocha (1977: 105, note 1), Reis (1997: 319, note 7), and Sapega (1997: 415).

⁵ See ⁴II: 72: "Falar duma encosta coberta de neve sem ter a alma branca também, retratar uma folha sem tremer como ela, olhar um abismo sem fundura nos olhos, é para mim o mesmo que gostar sem língua, ou cantar sem voz. Vivo a natureza integrado nela. De tal modo que chego a sentir-me, em certas ocasiões, pedra, orvalho, flor ou nevoeiro."

⁶ Cf. also the poem "Repouso" in ²IX: 82: "Paz das alturas, evasão furtiva / Da inquietação rasteira. [...] *Um pequeno descanso refratário / De ser homem.*" (my italics).

⁷ The integration of oneself into nature, psychically as well as physically, leads to a higher form of life (see, e.g., ²IX: 156-7), but it is also equated to death (³IV: 45; ³VI: 61). Such is the case especially in the entries referring to the sea, which is presented as "cemitério ideal," "grande túmulo" (³V: 16), or as "Sepultura sonora" (³V: 21) wherein the "I" is passively "floating," but also as "líquida ternura," which "transfigures" the "I" into a "floating" "imagem perfeita da vida" (²XII: 132; cf. *ibid.* 158).

⁸ "Telurismo," i.e., Torga's closeness to the earth or, more exactly, his worship of the Mother Earth, is touched upon almost everywhere in the *estudos torquianos*. Most obsessively, Lopes (1975: 47; 1978: 55-61; 1984: 138, 142-3; 1993: 7 and *passim*; 1997: 373) has argued that, for Torga, *terra* is strictly opposed to *mar*, but I do not see how this conclusion can result from what is said in the texts; nor does Stegagno Picchio (see her critical remarks in 1994: 418). Cf. also Clemente (1997: 108-16) quoting Torga: "Os que falam do meu telurismo, nem de longe imaginam o fascínio que sinto pelas ondas. Nasci, de facto, em terra firme. Mas sou anfíbio [...]" (¹XV: 52). Indeed, Torga's "telurismo" embraces both the land and the sea: "Quando pela primeira vez na meninice o vi [viz. o mar] em Leça, se não preteri o Marão nativo, ancoriei-o em água salgada. E fiquei com duas referências cósmicas na vida. [...] O meu telurismo é oceânico" (¹XIV: 200-1; cf. also "Visita," ⁷I: 143). Hence, Torga puts *Mãe-Terra* (cf. ⁴II: 73) and the "Deus líquido e azul" (⁴II: 182), i.e. the sea, side by side; the difference between them, however, is slight: "Transita-se bem da montanha para o mar. Não há quebras na respiração. Enche-se a alma da mesma amplitude e da mesma pureza. Todas as coisas grandes são, na verdade, irmãs" (³VIII: 153). Finally, *terra*, *mar*, and mankind are linked together in a "santíssima trindade, quase tão poderosa como a da doutrina" (⁴II: 180).

⁹ Cf. Lopes (1997: 373), who conjectures that for Torga "a terra, essa, é o útero onde a vida nasce" (cf. 375). This argument, however, seems to depend on Mircea Eliade's concept of *regressus ad uterum*, namely into that of *Terre Mère* (developed in his *Aspects du mythe* and quoted by Lopes 1993: 27), rather than on a thorough examination of Torga's texts. In contrast to Lopes, one can argue with Torga that "embora a terra seja ainda capaz de manter a vida, a parte do mundo onde ela nasce, e onde a ciência terá de ir procurá-la, se quiser surpreendê-la no seu primeiro alento, é nele [i.e. *no mar*]. Que o mar é em última análise o coração do mundo. Que pulsa, que geme, só por ser como o nosso: fonte e consciência biológica de tudo" (⁷I: 158-9).

¹⁰ This change of identity is also called "transfiguração" (see, for instance, ³VIII: 86, ²IX: 157, ²XII: 132, 152 and 158).

¹¹ See, for instance, ⁷I: 24, ²XII: 134, ¹XVI: 10, or ²IX: 156-7: "E sempre que, à custa de esforço e porfia, consigo, como há pouco na serra, unir, digamos, *o meu corpo e o meu sangue ao corpo e ao sangue da natureza*, a perfeita *comunhão* que se realiza e a estranha metamorfose que daí resulta exigem o nome sagrado de transfiguração" (my italics).

¹² David-Peyre (1976: 306) points to a similar "fusion étonnante de l'Ancien et du Nouveau Testament" in Torga's *O outro livro de Job*. Likewise, Martinho (1997: 40) remarks that in *Abismo*, too, "se combinam o Velho e o Novo Testamento." Neither David-Peyre, nor Martinho, however, raise any explanation of this phenomenon. Whether the underlying logic in these texts is also typology is a question that is beyond the scope of the present study. Cf. in addition the

conto "Jesus" in Torga's *Bichos*: Here Torga establishes a typological relationship between Joseph of Egypt (explicitly referred to by the narrator), Jesus (the New Testament figure of Joseph alluded to by the *conto's* title, which is presumed to be also the name of the protagonist, i.e. a boy who, like Joseph, takes care of sheep), and Torga's self (by drawing on a crucial episode of his "autobiographic romance," *A criação do mundo*, in which the father urges the son to leave home in order to go either to Brazil or to the seminary). The literal level of the *conto*, i.e. Jesus's discovery of a nest and the naïve relation of this event to his parents, is thus harshly opposed to its allegorical level, i.e., the implicit threat of Jesus being "sold" or expelled from his family and home, or his "nest," in Nazaré. The analysis of this *conto* would be the subject of another article.

¹³ Cf. also the pun on Nazaré/Nazareth in "Jesus" (see note 12).

¹⁴ Such is the general tenor of the Catholic critiques. See the reviews of the *Diário* in the Jesuitical journal *Brotéria*: Maia (1949; 1956; 1960; 1965; 1977; 1984), Garcia (1970), and da Silva (1973). Also see the studies of the Franciscan Augusto (²1997: 18-31, 79-129) as well as of the Jesuit Freire (1990: 52-71, 105-20, and 171-2). Cf. also the diatribes against the Catholic criticism in ³III: 160-3, ³VII: 12-3, and ³VIII: 137-8. The image of Torga in the Catholic criticism (and vice versa) has not been investigated so far.

¹⁵ On the reversing and subverting of Christian themes, see also Lopes (1984: 141-2; 1993: 36, 88-92).

¹⁶ Cf. also ¹X: 65. An additional meaning of this emotional and even physical "petrification" can be derived, if we consider the fact that Torga's "religion" is written and engraved in stones, viz. in a "catecismo pagão nas fragas" (¹XI: 176). This echoes clearly II Cor. 3:7, "ministratio [...] deformata in lapidibus," while significantly leaving out the crucial word "mortis" (ibid.). Torga's petrification, then, appears to be a reification of the Israelites "blinding" when reading the Old Testament (cf. II Cor. 3:14: "sed obtusi sunt sensus eorum [...] in lectione veteris testamenti"). It is interesting now to note that the Latin phrase "obtusi sunt" ("they blinded, became dull or blunt") corresponds to the Greek "eporothe," which means precisely "they hardened, or petrified." Thus, Torga's "telurismo" and the pertinent stone imagery seem to be deeply informed by the "petrifying" law covenant that leads to death (as opposed to the grace covenant of the New Testament, which gives life), rather than by the rocks of his "transmontane" native place.

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