

The Demise of Paternal Meaning in *Explicação dos pássaros*

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Abstract: This article traces the loss of paternal meaning manifest in António Lobo Antunes's *Explicação dos pássaros*. It equates that loss to the sudden fall of the Salazar/Caetano regime and a rapid disavowal of Marxism. The protagonist's suicide is read not only as his only viable option when faced with a catastrophic collapse in meaning, but also as part of a spectacle in which the Portuguese axis of desire shifts away from the patriarchal Law of the Father towards a meaningless and, by necessity, unproductive law of consumption.

António Lobo Antunes's 1981 novel, *Explicação dos pássaros* [*An Explanation of the Birds*], is a profound and innovative portrait of what happens when one loses one's symbolic father. The novel was published less than a decade after Lisbon's Carnation Revolution, which overthrew over four decades of what we might term symbolic stasis in the figure of a national father and his successor, who aimed to control meaning in Portugal through a textbook fusion of an ideal ego with which the nation could identify and a ferocious super-ego that prohibited dissent. The image of Salazar combined that of a paternalistic protector who authorized what it meant to be Portuguese with that of an inflexible arbiter of the nation's moral code. Caetano sought to continue the role of national father through, among other things, the establishment of a patronizing series of media addresses, his so-called "conversa em família" ["family chat"], the first of which took place on 8 January 1969. Through these, he sought to make the

nation feel protected and well served in trying times, while always reminding “o comum dos portugueses” [“the Portuguese general public”] that he was the one with the “responsabilidade do Poder” [“responsibility of Power”] (Caetano 71). His removal from the role of national father was concomitant in Portugal with a search by some for an alternative figure of symbolic paternal authority, before the ideology of Marx was replaced by the inexorable rise of liberal democracy and the trend to consumerism that this has come to imply.

Lobo Antunes’s novel captures precisely that moment of rupture in which symbolic fatherhood shifts and changes before sliding away into an orgy designed to trigger consumer desire. A powerful message to arise from Lobo Antunes’s text is that the symbolic relevance of fatherhood, as the granter of meaning and the figure whom we confusedly aspire to emulate, has outlived its relevance and is being written out of the picture in a new economy of desire structured around brutal and meaningless consumption. Given the history of twentieth-century Portugal, which renders the figure of the symbolic father highly suspect, it is hardly surprising that he should come under attack in the immediate aftermath of Portugal’s transition. What is more interesting in Lobo Antunes’s narrative is that the son pays the price for the father’s loss of meaning.

The tale is told over a period of four days that, due to the way that the narrative is structured, condense a lifetime of experiences of a certain Rui S. The novel’s title points to the recurrent image of a time in his distant childhood when Rui S. happily asked his then-caring father for an explanation of birds. This search for meaning from a father is juxtaposed with the fragmented exposition of a gradually deteriorating relationship, in which his father’s infidelity to his mother combines with an adolescent’s need to rebel against the figure of paternity, and spirals into an increasing loss of all meaning in Rui’s life. Two failed marriages later, and leaving behind an unfinished dissertation on Sidónio Pais, Rui S., in the only meaningful act of his life, commits suicide, an act that signals a spectacular loss of meaning. His body is discovered half-devoured by birds, in an echo of Hitchcock’s classic film, as Maria Alzira Seixo has pointed out (Seixo 106-7). The significance of his flesh’s satisfaction of a chilling avian appetite goes beyond the resonance of total abandonment that the film *The Birds* intertextually conveys. There is, of course, a palpable sense of abandonment on the part of Rui, given the breach in his relationships with all the other characters in the narrative. However, the birds’ consumption of his body is described by one of the witnesses at the inquest of his death as both protective and destructive. The witness had never seen such peculiar behavior

by birds; their role echoes that of the symbolic father who functions to protect and repress, to nurture and destroy. Furthermore, in the novel, birds always represent a meaning that is sought from a father but never ceded. Their ingestion of Rui's flesh is a metaphoric gesture representing Rui's unfulfilled search for meaning. It is a search that destroys him. Literally, the failure to satisfy his need for meaning consumes his flesh.

Throughout the narrative, the more Rui yearns for a father figure, be it his biological ancestor who was compromised by Salazar's corporatist universe and who never quite explained the meaning of the birds, or the ideological embodiment of paternity in the specter of a Marx whom he never manages to please, the more impossible paternity becomes for him. Rui's death is as much a final recognition of the end of paternity as an act of self-obliteration. He fails as a son because society no longer needs or wants a father. It no longer operates on the basis of a yielded heritage that implies both progress and tradition; it is now dependent on an infinitely inflected but never definitive commercial transaction. Rui is the incarnation of the moment of transition, when teleology still hovered in the territory brutal commercialism was about to consume. His hankering after a father cannot be realized, and he cannot himself pass through that oedipal phase to assume the mantle of paternity: his first divorce results in the loss of his children; the progeny of his second marriage are more explicitly rendered unviable by an abortion he facilitates. The question that the text raises is what exactly does it mean to be a father and, more pressingly, does it mean anything any more?

Both psychologically and theologically, one of the primary functions of fatherhood is the bestowal of meaning. Whether it be the Lacanian prohibitions associated with the acquisition of the grammar of a language or the Word that is the beginning until it becomes the flesh of the son in the Judeo- and more concretely the Christian tradition, paternity means to mean. Fatherhood is the traditional repose of the Word, which makes Rui S.'s inability to complete his thesis on Sidónio Pais all the more painful and significant. Rui has adopted a profession that makes him a producer of words. His definition, his identity, rotates around writing about history. His writing reclaims a past and attempts to substitute a silence that divides him from his father. Yet his most important piece of writing remains unfinished, another unfulfilled longing to imbue his life with a meaningful paternal figure, in this instance, another one of Portugal's many wistful reincarnations of Dom Sebastião, the father who wasn't, Sidónio Pais. Sidónio, who used the incipient twentieth-century sci-

ence of propaganda to great effect, sought to dominate the nation at a time of instability and loss of meaning by propagating the image of a strong man in military uniform who knew what was best for his children, the nation. In some ways, he was the precursor to Salazar and projected an intrinsic quality in the rhetoric of paternity: he, in his rather ridiculous military attire, would protect and provide order and meaning. But his protection, like that of Rui's biological father, and like that fostered by Salazar-Caetano after him, implied a certain degree of destruction through the suppression of opposition and was an example of the appropriation of symbolic fatherhood in order to produce what was deemed to be meaning and order in Portuguese society. But, as the text will show, this type of meaning will be sacrificed—in fact in a gesture towards Christ's passion signposted by the four days over which the text is structured—for the birds appear crucified at the hands of the father. Yet this father who is able to horrify his son with the image of a crucified meaning will become an impotent figure, unable to satisfy his new trophy wife sexually, an impotence that captures his own demise as a reproductive father able to perpetuate his worldview through his son. So, what dies on the cross of crucified birds is, in a subversion of the Christian paradigm, paternal authority.

Throughout the text, dysfunctional paternal metaphors accompany waning ideology. His father's frequent business trips as Rui grew up, ostensibly to shore up the family business so that he could pass it down to his son in a traditional succession, in fact point to affairs and infidelity that rupture the farce of family stability. Despite her own depression and unhappiness, Rui's mother will later advise her daughter to repeat her self-sacrificial example and tolerate her husband's dalliances, for appearance is more important than what her husband's actions mean. The ultimate rupture of their family's paternity occurs as Rui cedes his place as the inheritor of the family business to his brothers-in-law. The survival of the business is of greater significance than the survival of the bloodline. The capitalism of appearances and of false flows—of the external—consumes the principle of the father passing an inheritance, something meaningful, onto his son. Pseudo-sons, who are themselves of questionable repute, are more valid for a system that ranks appearance over meaning, because they give the impression of a succession while representing a rupture. They preserve the image of family progression and unity while encapsulating the defeat of the image they project. Rui's father's renouncing of his son, provoked by Rui's failed attempt at rebellion against the corporatist regime, heralds the death of two paternities in the text: the biological and the ideologi-

cal, his father and Marx. The most poignant aspect of these related collapses is that the latter is not able to offer succor to Rui for the loss of the former. His exclusion from the Communist party cell, in part for the suspected bourgeois tendencies that he supposedly inherited from his father, combines with his subsequent preemptive rejection at the hands of Marília to deny him the paternity of Marx. His abject failure—his admission that amid the Carnation Revolutionaries he was no hero—compounds his unfulfilled and unfulfillable need to grasp meaning.

Rui's two failed conjugal relationships represent his blocked interactions with ideology—through Marília and her unashamed struggle for the proletariat—and with psychology—through Tucha, whose therapist points to the grave flaws scarring Rui's psyche. Neither of these trends is able to offer meaning to Rui. They just tease him, holding out the specter of paternity for him but never ceding him any meaning—never allowing him to occupy the role of father he sought as he lay at his mother's side to console her on the nights her husband failed to come home. His desire to mimic his father, to learn how to shout and tell everyone to shut up, to be able to explain things to his own sons, is blocked by the overriding burden of his father's disowning of him. Most significantly, it is an act of disowning that excludes Rui from a cross-generational transfer of capital. The loss of inheritance and the disavowal of fatherhood do not, however, prevent the flow of capital, which merely seeks an alternative root. Rather, they strip both father and son of their power and meaning, manifested in Rui's father's impotence as the husband to a trophy wife, and Rui's self-obliteration and loss of contact with his own sons. The net effect is a total loss of paternity and the prohibition of any future paternity, for neither of them is capable of siring future sons, or providing any meaning for their sons to inherit.

Amid this loss of meaning, the role of the writing process becomes crucial. The text of the novel is itself a fragmentary fusion of constantly shifting parallel plot lines that challenges the reader to try and locate meaning. Mid-sentence, time zones are shifted and characters switched in a manner that initially confuses but then enhances the sense that Rui S.'s entire life has been the timid, repetitive search for meaning first promised but never delivered by an inadequate father. The writing process, in both the Platonic and Hegelian arguments, is to a certain extent an assurance of immortality, while paradoxically being associated, in Plato at least, with death itself. The author dies, and his dead words live on, even if they are tainted by falsehood or lack of presence. In the case of Rui, writings are left behind, including his undergraduate

thesis “D. António I, relato de um suicídio colectivo” (153) [“Dom António I, Story of a Collective Suicide”], and his later work, “Democracia e socialismo: uma confusão a evitar” (154) [“Democracy and Socialism: A Confusion to be Avoided”], which questioned his own fervent dialectical materialism and earned a citation by the Bishop of Braga in an Easter Homily, an ironic gesture whereby the errant and faithless son, Rui, whose demise is related during his own version of an Easter weekend, is appropriated by a spiritual father in order to establish meaning for a congregation. But Rui’s meaning is, as signposted by his undergraduate thesis, intricately linked to suicide, and here is where Lobo Antunes’s comments on the subject in an interview with Mário Ventura in the run-up to the book’s launching (but published in 1986) become pertinent:

Até certo ponto, um livro é um suicídio. Quer dizer: é uma possibilidade de um gajo alcançar a sensação de imortalidade. Não se encontra nenhum suicida que não tenha a sensação de imortalidade, quer dizer, o suicídio é o assassinio de outra pessoa. (Qtd. in Seixo 511)

[Up to a certain point, a book is a suicide. That is, it gives a guy the chance to reach the sensation of immortality. And there is no such thing as a suicide which lacks the sense of immortality, that is, suicide is the murder of another person.]

Lobo Antunes establishes a series of connections that rotate around the age-old linkage between writing, death and immortality. The novelty in his argument explains one of the reasons why Rui must die and, more importantly, why he must commit suicide. Associating suicide with a positive sensation of immortality counters its association with ultimate desperation and attenuates its proscription in religious traditions that mandate eternal damnation for those who carry it out. Lobo Antunes describes it as a creative rather than destructive act of self-expression, and one that lives on eternally. Additionally, he casts it as a way of expunging the undesired other from the self. In Rui’s case, suicide eliminates Rui’s father from his son. It is an act that cleanses the compromises of the past, both the symbolic and real father who propagated the symbolic father.

As Rui S. expunges the paternal in a self-destructive and, if we are to accept Lobo Antunes’s reasoning, self-perpetuating feat, what will replace the space traditionally occupied by the symbolic father in Portuguese society? Here

Lobo Antunes offers a stark portrait of how society could be restructured to configure a new axis of desire, no longer dependent on a figure of authority.

In Lobo Antunes's world, as Rui's end nears and his stream-of-consciousness becomes an increasingly literal circus, the spectacle of his demise is accompanied by a string of brutal commercials, associated with sex as a pleasurable commodity that demands capitalist consumption and often restricts reproduction. From the "inimigo número um do crescimento demográfico" (211) ["number-one enemy of population growth" (213)], Donald's condoms and Ejaculac Cream "que aumentará facilmente o comprimento do seu pénis em três centímetros e meio" (215) ["guaranteed to increase penis size by one full inch" (218)], to Mrs. Penelope's stockings that are certain to stimulate a difference in your husband's "olhar terno" (211) ["fond look" (213)] and the "Ginásio Mão de Ferro" ["Iron Hand Gymnasium"] that will improve your epigamic appeal and, more importantly in the competitive and meaningless world order with which we are left at the end of the narrative, will render you "na praia, a inveja dos homens" (211) ["the envy of every man on the beach" (213)], the shocking commercial interventions in the spectacle of Rui's suicide designate the slide into a consumerism that dispenses with or, rather, replaces the father.¹ In this new order that rapidly fills the space left vacant by the symbolic father, you are only allowed to seduce and desire, but never to realize or produce. The new system, harshly portrayed by Lobo Antunes as his protagonist stakes a claim to perpetuity through suicide, functions through a sociological mandate to constant, repetitive and meaningless desire, a consumption that gives birth to nothing. Figures of authority—symbolic and biological fatherhood—no longer have a place in a society that bore the weight of authoritarian leaders whose primary justification was a misconceived and abusive metaphorization of what it means to be a family. However, the message that emerges from Lobo Antunes's text is far from reassuring: the perpetuity that his protagonist Rui S. asserts through suicide is in reality a fleeting, interstitial moment of relief, after the fall of the father and before the rise of brutal consumerism. Figures of consumption and paternal authority—society's future and its past—both look on in the circus of Rui's death. The immortalizing moment of suicide becomes a spectacular obliteration marking the end of one era—the paternal that policed through an over-inflated, omnipresent single image of authority—and the inception of another—that of consumption that will police through the dissipation of fragmented and distractive images that conceal where authority truly resides.

Note

¹ Richard Zenith's translations of quotes are given in brackets.

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