

## Politics and the Novel in *South of Nowhere* and *The Inquisitors' Manual*

William Deresiewicz

Coming to António Lobo Antunes as someone attuned to a very different literary tradition, modern English fiction, I am struck by the Portuguese writer's kinship with so much of that tradition, and in particular, with the novelist who is, I believe, notwithstanding the overwhelming prestige of James Joyce, the most representative as well as the most influential of all modern novelists, Joseph Conrad. Among Conrad's incalculable contributions to fiction in the twentieth century and beyond was his recognition that politics in the modern age presents the novelist—indeed, presents the novel itself—with a special, one might say, an existential challenge. For the hallmark of modern politics is its impersonal quality. History, in the modern experience, is a force that has escaped human control. It is thus a characteristically modern attitude to regard politics—which is, of course, nothing other than the history of the present—as a vast and terrible spectacle beyond the reach of human agency, even human comprehension. It is in this sense that we speak of the logic of war, the logic of material interests, the ineluctability of class struggle, and so forth. In a famous letter to Cunningham Graham, Conrad writes, with terrifying lucidity:

There is a—let us say,—a machine. It evolved itself [...] out of a chaos of scraps and iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled [...]. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself: made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can't even smash

it [...]

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters. (Jean-Aubry 1 216)

Conrad is referring to the entirety of the cosmos itself, but he might equally have been elaborating his attitude towards history, and in particular, towards modern history. In the decade preceding World War I, that most terribly machine-like of conflicts, Conrad composed three great political novels, *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Under Western Eyes*, and yet the tendency of each is finally to question whether there can any longer be such a thing as a political novel—and if not, whether the novel as such has any future. Each intertwines a large-scale political narrative with a typically novelistic story of individual motives and actions. Yet in each, the political and the personal are finally forced apart—each novel, as is the nature of the novel, following out its story of private experience, but only at the cost of dropping the larger public narrative that has given that story context and point. If history is a machine governed by impersonal forces, Conrad is asking, what can the recounting of personal stories really tell us about the world? If the individual is no longer a factor in political life, what purchase can narratives about individuals—novels, in other words—have on political reality?

Antunes grapples with these same questions, and while his responses are reminiscent of other writers who have followed in Conrad's footsteps, they are also very much his own. I propose to examine these issues in just two of his many novels, one very early, and another more recent. First, the novel published in English as *South of Nowhere*, but to which I will refer to by its infinitely more pungent Portuguese title, *Judas's Asshole*. Coming near the start of his career and constituting a highly autobiographical account of his 27 months in Angola, the novel may be understood as Antunes's attempt to write his way out of an entrapment by history. In a simple but brilliant conceit, the text presents itself as the nightlong monologue of a veteran of the Angolan conflict to a woman he has picked up in a Lisbon bar. For all its gruesome imagery, the most disturbing feature of the narrator-protagonist's performance may be its sheer compulsiveness. Nothing, apparently, will get this man to stop talking—not even the sex he presumably has during the course of the night. His need to retell his experiences—and, as with Marlow in Conrad's *Lord Jim*, we have every reason to believe that this is neither the first nor the last time he has retold them—overwhelms and, from the reader's perspective,

conceals the experience he is actually having in the narrative present. As in so many of Conrad's greatest works, including *Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*, and *Under Western Eyes*, memory plays the dominant role in mental life. But whereas most of Conrad's narrators deliberately summon memory as a way of ordering experience and making sense of their place in history, Antunes's protagonist has become memory's captive and thus history's victim. He cannot keep himself from remembering. In this, he most closely resembles the Marlow of *Heart of Darkness*, whose own monologue of a traumatic journey into the horror of colonial Africa seems equally involuntary and compelled.

Here, though, history pervades and structures the narrator's present life in another way, as well. Because the novel's two temporal levels are so closely interleaved, we read an account of how Angola crippled the narrator psychologically even as we witness first-hand the effects of that crippling on the way he responds—or rather, does not respond—to the woman he is with. The present thus becomes little more than the past's psychic scar. And because the Angolan story is told more or less chronologically, the narrator gradually becomes, in the story he is telling, the person who tells it, the person who is compelled to tell it, and thus the novel narrates—in a particularly chilling version of that modernist genre *par excellence*, the portrait of the artist—the story of its own emergence. The protagonist does not author his history; his history authors him.

We can amplify these observations by considering the novel's title. "Judas's Asshole": it is the final verdict the novel delivers, in its final pages, on Angola (Antunes, *South* 153). And while I am told that the phrase is proverbial for, as one would say in English, "the middle of nowhere," given the stygian imagery so thick in the narrator's descriptions of that nightmare country, and given also Antunes's persistent interest—to judge by the titles of several of his other novels—in things infernal, we would do well to consider the phrase more carefully, and in particular, to regard it as an allusion to Dante. In the *Inferno*, Judas, entombed within Lucifer's middle mouth, suffers in Hell's deepest center. To be stuck inside his asshole is thus to be in the deepest center of that deepest center, immobilized at the innermost point of Dante's vast mechanism of divine retribution, the poet's version of the Conradian machine of history. The title has other ramifications, as well. For one thing, it reminds us that the narrator is the victim of betrayal—chewed up, digested, and excreted by the empire of whose body Angola is the asshole: the dark, dirty, secret place kept strictly out of sight but implicit in the organism's every function. We might

also consider that the asshole is the inverse, the negative complement, of the mouth, and that the narrator's mouth, through which the entire text of the novel issues, has been commandeered, as we said, by history itself, perverted into a kind of asshole, an organ of compulsive excretion. Indeed, since the narrator, in turn, betrays the empire with his truth telling, we can regard the title as naming the novel's own mouthpiece, the orifice that is addressing us.

To return to Dante, one of the salient features of his epic journey is the act of prophecy, which as the reverse of memory can be defined as the attempt to master history by laying claim to it in advance. So too, Antunes's novel features an act of prophecy at its very outset, one that is meant to govern the protagonist's entire Angolan experience, his aunts' smug prediction that "[f]ortunately the army will make a man of him" (9). Of course, the prophecy proves hideously false, as these women themselves acknowledge on the novel's final page (154). But how could it not? Securely ensconced at the privileged end of colonialism's long and winding tract—much like those fateful knitters Marlow encounters in Brussels on his way to the Congo—the aunts are peering into history through the wrong opening; no wonder they end up talking shit. In history as in digestion, things look a lot different at the beginning than at the end. Beginnings and endings: it is more than authorial whimsy that names the novel's chapters for the letters of the alphabet. Just as the protagonist is trapped, so too is the narrative itself as it moves from beginning to end, A to Z, its end implicit in its beginning, its course strictly delimited and determined. This may strike us as strange given that the text seems to narrate a round trip from Portugal to Angola and back to Portugal, only it does not. "In a certain way," to paraphrase the narrator, he has "remain[ed] in Angola" (138), even his lovemaking merely reenacting his erotic encounters with Tia Theresa, the black prostitute whom we can regard as the infernal, African counterpart of those nattering aunts. "You never know," says the novel's final line, "Tia Theresa might come by and pay me a visit" (154). There is, in fact, no round trip, no possibility of return: not in digestion, not in the alphabet, not in history.

Like many twentieth-century writers, Antunes here addresses the problem of making the novel politically relevant, making its personal stories commensurate with history, by presenting a narrative of the interpenetration of the personal by politics, by history. The Conradian machine can at least be known by its effects. But unlike, for example, in Kafka, we can also see here the glimmerings of hope, and precisely because the novel is so autobiographical. For



while history may author our protagonist, Antunes's own act of authorship can be understood as a way of trying to lift himself out of that entrapment, using memory itself, history's instrument of subjugation here, as the means of leveraging his liberation. When one's enslavement is purely mental, to say that one is enslaved is already to become less so. As in the case of many Latin American writers, such as García Márquez, memory becomes politically significant precisely because it provides a private rather than an official record of experience. That which is subjugating in the mind of the protagonist is subversive in the hands of the author.

By the time of *The Inquisitors' Manual*, seventeen years and ten volumes later, Antunes's scope has become immeasurably greater, his depiction of memory's workings immensely richer, his response to the challenge of history incomparably bolder. To begin with, he locates his fiction much closer to the heart of the Portuguese regime. By centering his story on the figure of Senhor Francisco, the Minister, he gives power a human, if repulsive, face. Still, for the novel's first 370 pages, that center remains absent. Instead—and again, the effect is Conradian, a heart of darkness occupied by a dark heart, a story whose meaning is not “inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which br[ings] it out as a glow brings out a haze”—the narrative circles around and around it (Conrad 18). We begin with the viewpoint of the Minister's son, shell-shocked to the point of inanition, in the midst of a divorce that will strip him of the family farm. (His father, like Salazar himself, has long since been felled by a stroke.) From there, the novel spreads out into ever further reaches of the world misshapen by the Minister's lust for power as well as by the power of his lusts: his son's wife; his housekeeper, abandoned in a nursing home; his illegitimate daughter, deposited in a forlorn provincial town under the care of a childless widow; the corporal who once chauffeured him around Lisbon's poorer districts as he trawled the streets for new conquests. Everywhere in this bleak, seedy world the imagery is of decay, confinement, and material and spiritual impoverishment: beggars and cripples, gimcracks and trash, cramped rooms, dirty sunlight, dead-end lives. As in the earlier novel but on a much grander scale, we know of power through the world it has wrecked. And it is a world. While each monologue traps us in the mind of a character who is himself trapped within a narrow round of resentments, the overall effect is the reverse of claustrophobic—rather, the portrait of an entire ruined society. The novel becomes, not an allegory of fascism, but an anatomy of the way it penetrates societies—families, psyches, bodies—and of the scars it leaves.

Again, as in *Judas's Asshole*, the primary stuff of which those scars are made—and of which the novel is made—is memory. Each monologue interweaves a character's consciousness of their present predicament, years after the collapse of the dictatorship, with their memories of what the Minister did to them during his days of power. In other words, while the great man may be reduced to an incontinent husk, his memory still possesses those he once controlled. Antunes orchestrates these temporal shifts with marvelous deftness and power. Paragraph by paragraph and even line by line, the planes of past and present slide over each other or crash together like tectonic plates. Key phrases—those emblematic moments we never forget—repeat over and over, bursting through the surface of consciousness like volcanic eruptions. As in the earlier novel, Antunes's ultimate subject here is the way the past haunts the present: the way it *is* the present, always with us, always controlling us.

But because the novel assembles itself out of the recollections of some dozen and a half widely disparate characters, memory itself is put up for grabs. Key events are told again and again, often from wildly contradictory perspectives, every telling skewed by a different cocktail of bitterness, ignorance, folly, or simple mendacity. Nothing is ever settled: motives that seemed clear mutate into their opposite; villains and victims change places, then change places again; ironies mount, and with them the force of the blows they deliver. The story takes shape like a painting, its pattern gradually emerging as the artist traverses and re-traverses its surface. The novel, in fact, breaks off in mid-sentence, as if its picture were not and never could be complete. Finally, time itself is abolished. The novel has no end because there is no end: the Minister dies and does not die, democracy comes and does not come, the dictatorship falls and remains in power.

Antunes's methods abolish something else, as well: the very distinction between private and political. This is the real purpose of setting his story so close to heart of the regime, where not only power's dynamics but even its psychodynamics become visible. As an anatomist of tyranny's intimacies, Antunes recalls, not Conrad, but William Faulkner. It comes as no surprise to learn that the Portuguese novelist wrote the introduction to a recently published translation of *The Sound and the Fury*. Like Jason Compson and so many other of Faulkner's most memorable figures, the Minister is a figure of arrogance, brutality, and moral squalor, a crude, swaggering patriarch who presides over his estate—his state-in-miniature—like a feudal lord. And as so often in Faulkner, tyranny here is above all sexual tyranny, rule by the penis. Senhor Francisco

must subjugate everyone to his lust: his cook (on the altar in the family chapel), his steward's teenage daughter (in the barn), assorted maids and gypsies, the pharmacist's widow, the sergeant's wife, the switchboard operator. He's not even above ogling his prospective daughter-in-law with the same proprietary leer he directs at his dependents. No wonder his son has turned out to be such a frightened little mama's boy. As the Minister obligingly explains to him while bending the steward's daughter over the manger: "I do everything a woman wants except take my hat off, so that she won't forget who's boss (*Inquisitor's* 6).

But what is most Faulknerian about this novel is its atmosphere. With the Minister and Salazar and their regime growing increasingly senescent, we breathe an air rank with illusion, cowardice, futility, and neglect, one in which time and nature take their revenge on those who thought they could possess both. Time now means not tradition, but tradition's underside, decay. Nature means not vigor, but excess and exhaustion. The farm runs riot with vegetation, is overrun by the cackling of birds. The windmill rusts, the garden angels crumble, the German shepherds sicken and die. Humans descend to the level of beasts; the boss who fornicates in the barn calls the vet to deliver his illegitimate child. Like the fall of the American South, the collapse of the regime comes as only another, but by no means the last, in a long series of capitulations.

And again as in Faulkner, the tyrant's greatest victim is finally himself, if only because he eventually discovers the limits of his tyranny. For the one thing that can't be coerced is love, and the one person the Minister could not control was his own wife, who walked out on him one day and into an adulterous affair. Apparently, women don't always remember who's boss. Scratch a bully, Antunes knows, and you find a coward. The Minister's priapism, we come to suspect, is by way of compensation—his present, too, is hostage to his past. What is more, his very power permits him humiliations from which the less fortunate are spared. While everyone in this novel endlessly chews over the past, only he tries to reenact it. But the shop girl he stalks in his chauffeured car and plucks from behind her mother's counter and installs in a Lisbon high-rise, whom he dresses in his wife's moth-eaten finery and hangs with her jewels and calls by her name, proves no more amenable to his sniveling entreaties than had the original. This, indeed, is memory with a vengeance.

Finally, as the novel's spiraling round of declarations uncovers secret after secret, degradation after degradation, it arrives at the testimony of the great man himself, that dark heart at the center of its grand design. As the Minister lies impotent in his hospital bed, his memories reach deep into the recesses of

the old regime, from prison torture rooms to the burning streets of Angola. It is at the novel's end, then—or end that is no end—that we come to its beginning, for what the Minister discovered about himself in those dark, long-ago places turns out to have impelled his whole career of brutality and evasion. He, too, is history's victim, crippled and trapped by colonialism and its imperatives. Just as the novel comes full circle, then, so do we: back to Angola, empire's asshole, still the secret place of shame, still both end and beginning. Indeed, like the distinction between the private and the political, that between beginning and end has been abolished. Personal nightmares become national tragedies, in turn breeding new and ever more fierce nightmares.

There is one enormous difference, however, between the late novel and the early one. Here the author enters his fiction not as a weakened figure helplessly telling his own story, but as the title's unseen but all-powerful “inquisitors.” While the word suggests the state at its most reactionary and diabolical, these inquisitors are the instruments not of political but of authorial power. It is a stunning conceit: the tables have been turned, the regime itself has been put in the interrogation room, with our author as master of the proceedings. Still, while the novel lords it over the Minister's broken, impotent figure, it can't help but acknowledge the new, bourgeois power that, as in Faulkner's New South, has arisen in the land, with all its crassness and cold-blooded ruthlessness. Fiction's relationship to politics remains as vexed as in Conrad's own day.

### Works Cited

- Antunes, António Lobo. *The Inquisitors' Manual*. Trans. Richard Zenith. New York: Grove, 2003. Print.
- . *South of Nowhere*. Trans. Elisabeth Lowe. New York: Random House, 1983. Print.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Ed. Robert Hampson. London: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Jean-Aubry, Gerard. *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1927. Print.

William Deresiewicz, formerly an associate professor of English at Yale University until 2008, is a widely published literary critic for *The Nation*, *The American Scholar*, the *London Review of Books*, and *The New York Times*. His most recent book, *A Jane Austen Education. How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and the Things That Really Matter*, was published by Penguin in 2011.