

Time displaced: post-colonial experience in António Lobo Antunes

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Leaving and returning are two basic themes that permeate the Portuguese symbolic imagination. I will try to follow this movement in one of António Lobo Antunes' novels, *The Return of the Caravels*, published in 1988. If there is a contemporary Portuguese novelist for whom the unrest and anxiety of identity and belonging are at the very core of their literary project, this novelist is certainly Lobo Antunes, in all 17 novels he has published since 1979. In each, 'Portugal' is much more than just the name of the place where characters live: it is a name for an anxiety about place; of course, this is not exclusive to Portugal, but it is given a distinctively Portuguese tinge through a deep reflection on the meaning of belonging. This can sometimes be quite meaningless, which is just another way of thinking about how man experiences his relationship to the earth and land. This is done, in *The Return of the Caravels*, by way of questioning the past and present connections of the Discoveries. How the present may endure and live up to the glorious experiences of history is at the heart of the story unfolded here, and will also be at the centre of this paper.

There are two main types of relationships that link man to the earth and the land he lives in: we know them under the names of nomadic or sedentary dwellings. According to our sedentary culture, the earth would seem to invite us to settle and create symbolic attachments to the place where we were born or grew up, or even where we have chosen to live. We know, however, that this has not always been the case, and that the deepest, most ancient roots of our culture are profoundly immersed in nomadic movements whose traces may be found in many literary, mythical and religious texts. What interests me here is basically a relation to the earth that may be ambiguously located 'between' these two vital anthropological movements, in the sense that it implies, as we shall see, both the recognition of a geographical axis that grounds all our values, and the urge to reach *outside* that

symbolic place, an impulse that often brings grief and pain. We could even say that, in these ambiguous cases, place exists so that it may be left and escaped from, and to open up the possibility of coming back.

Leaving and returning may thus be seen as belonging in this ambiguous way, through which space is questioned not as a site of permanence but as an axis whose existence makes it possible to measure the distance that separates it from any other place. It is this movement that I will try to follow in one of António Lobo Antunes' novels, *The Return of the Caravels*, published in 1988 and translated into English in 2002 by Gregory Rabassa.¹ If there is a contemporary Portuguese novelist for whom the unrest and anxiety of identity and belonging are at the very core of his or her literary project, this novelist is certainly Lobo Antunes. In all 17 novels that he has published since 1979, 'Portugal' is much more than just a name for the place where the characters live, it is a name for an anxiety about place; of course, this is not exclusive to Portugal, but it is given a distinctively Portuguese tinge through a deep reflection on the meaning of belonging. As we shall see, this meaning can sometimes, in fact, be quite meaningless, which is just another way of thinking about how man experiences his relationship to the earth and land.

Leaving and returning are two basic movements that permeate the Portuguese symbolic imagination. They are present in the history of Portugal as a country and political entity, and also in the way Portuguese people convey their notion of what the past, present and future may be. The project of leaving almost coincided with the foundation of Portugal as an independent country. Barely a century after the country gained its independence in the mid-12th century (1143), King Dom Dinis ordered the plantation of a vast pinewood (which still exists today, in the region of Leiria), without which no maritime undertaking would ever have been possible at all. The act of planting the soil, which is a sedentary occupation by nature, in retrospect is revealed to be a vital condition for leaving that very soil, for embarking upon a certain kind of nomadic venture. This tension is paradoxical only at first sight. Since the 14th century, leaving has turned out to be the central motto of Portuguese history – and there are more than a few examples, both historical and literary, where the meaning of this territory is investigated through an immediate and deep reflection. This is a land that seems to think about, and imagine, itself only from other lands, at a distance. It was this collective tension between a European territory, geographically stable and politically fixed from very early on, and the immense, constantly expanding territory out there, that gave rise to Luís de Camões' epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusiads*) at the end of the 16th century. The story of those who leave their country and go into the unknown world also becomes the story of those who stay behind, who have always stayed behind. A strange condition, in which a territory only seems possible if viewed from *another* territory, which is also the territory of the other.

It is because everyone leaves, then, that the writing of the epic poem coincides, historically but also symbolically, with the loss of independence in 1580 (a temporary loss, but one that has left deep scars and wounds in the Portuguese collective memory and imagination), when a young king, Dom Sebastião, left never to return – and therefore always able to return, today as 400 years ago. This is why *The Return of the Caravels* ends with a whole assembly of ‘retornados’, those who have come back from the colonies after those countries gained independence, who all look fixedly out to the ocean, waiting for the king to return from his long voyage:

We waited, shivering in the morning breeze, for the glass sky of the first moments of light, the serge-coloured mist of the equinox, the frieze of foam that would take us, mixed in with the marketplace flotsam of the waves and the lamb bleats of the water on the rocks’ siphon, for a blond adolescent with a crown on his head and sulky lips, coming from Alcácer-Quibir with copper bracelets forged by the Gypsies of Carcavelos and cheap necklaces from Tangier around his neck, and all we could see as we squeezed the thermometers under our armpits and obediently spat our blood into the test tubes was the empty ocean, all the way to the horizon covered at intervals by a row of vinegar cruets, families of late summer people camping on the beach and fishing captains, pants rolled up, who looked uncomprehendingly at our band of gulls in bathrobes, perched on rudders and propellers, coughing, waiting, to the sound of a flute muted by the bowels of the sea, for the whinny of an impossible horse. (pp. 209–210)

Others too have had to leave their country, for economic and political reasons, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries. Leaving has taken different forms in Portuguese, for there have also been the emigrants and exiles that the land could not hold, those forced into a departure that might lead to a new arrival – or might not. In this context, it is not surprising that the inheritance of departures weighs heavily upon Portuguese self-awareness and that it has been of such importance in literary texts, such as the novel by Lobo Antunes under consideration here.

To all these journeys away from the homeland, the latter part of the 20th century has added some returns: the reduction of the territory to its European and terrestrial borders upon colonial independence, and the sudden return of hundreds of thousands of Portuguese from these ex-colonies (those for whom the very term ‘retornados’ was created). If anything, therefore, the end of the 20th century confronted Portugal with a land that history had led it to shun and sometimes even to reject, and escape. This is precisely the core of a tension that we can easily recognize in a number of literary texts, but very few texts address this counter-epic of the return of the disinherited as this novel does. For it places at its very centre those that the homeland has rejected and expelled before, and whose return has never been truly wanted. These ‘retornados’ will have to live in a land that is theirs

and that, at the same time, they no longer recognize as their own, and this means that they will have to dwell in grief. In an interview published at the time he was writing *The Return of the Caravels*, the novelist declared:

I am writing that which Camões forgot to write, or didn't have time to write himself ... It is an exaltation of national values ... The basic idea is as follows: people return to their homeland and it is only at that moment that they are going to live their life ...²

This is undoubtedly true about the novel, but the way lives develop in the narrative suggests that the characters are having to confront the difficulties, or even impossibilities, of living their lives in a foreign country that is, at the same time, their own homeland.

Lobo Antunes wanted to write a book about the inglorious return of these 'retornados', the repatriate refugees who came back to Portugal from the former colonies, immediately after the 1975 process of decolonization. This means that one of the main questions from the very beginning of the novel is the issue of *territoriality* and *de-territorialization*: the relation people have to the land where they had lived and from where they were expelled, as well as their relation to the land in which they have never lived before and which receives them back in a significantly ambiguous way. This is why the novel unfolds in both the 16th and the 20th centuries, retrieving from the past the names of glorious characters who are forced to come back and pursue, in the present, their quest for an identity they seem to have lost and can never recover. From this perspective, of all those characters that pass through this novel (and there are a great many, as befits a counter-epic), those that are most poignantly rendered are the two elderly people who form the anonymous couple returning to Lixbon after 53 years in Guinea (as the action takes place in both the 16th and the 20th centuries, the city's name is written in its ancient form). We will never know their names, and they will finish their lives apart, recognizing they have not a thing to share – no memories, no language, and no life in common. But it is also precisely because they are nameless that they reach the threshold of allegory, which is not incompatible with the experience of the concrete. It is through these two characters, therefore, that we experience the most heart-breaking loss of all, the loss that wipes out the possibility of differentiation, through language and through memory.

The overall logic that structures this novel is therefore a spatial logic, because places have the power to make those characters, with their historically and symbolically significant names, appear and re-appear like parodies of ghosts. They are parodies in the sense that they are affected in their own memory, and that the small pieces of their previously glorious lives that they still recognize seem to be there just to emphasize their almost pathetic inadequacy in the present. We might even add that space offers, in this context, a possibility of historical as well as

of personal recognition-by-difference, not through a stable scenery with no changes, but instead through a land that appears as an axis to measure difference and on which characters may distance themselves.

The temporal porosity of this novel weaves a reality that connects two distinct periods of time, thereby producing contiguity between different temporal realities existing in parallel worlds. But there are also some remarkable consequences of this movement on the level of the novel's very structure, as well as in the existential meaning it proposes. In fact, it is clear that there is a process of 'anonymity' going on, a paradoxical process in a text that swarms with so many important names (including great names from the Discoveries, such as king D. Manuel, Vasco da Gama, Diogo Cão etc, and also figures like Cervantes, Buñuel, García Lorca, Gomes Leal, just to mention a few), whose historical and symbolic weight is absolutely essential. This anonymity seems to be anchored in the novel's structure itself. There are 18 chapters with absolutely no title or hierarchical structure, whose logic comes from the parataxis that holds them together, privileging the linearity and juxtaposition of discursive materials over their mutual subordination. Still, as I have already pointed out, the only characters that are not parodied, because they have no prior textual reality, are the anonymous old couple; all other characters are basically torn out of their times and violently included in another, and only keep from their past a very few things, such as their 'glorious' name. Ultimately, this structure seems to emphasize a sort of cellular closure that affects the characters and their small stories, there is a total absence of interaction between the characters and between their respective stories.

We have therefore access to a world that has, in a certain sense, been pulverised, where the common denominator seems to be the return to the homeland, the act of 'coming back' that would in principle close a circle opened, many centuries before, by the departure. And yet, this pulverised world to which the characters return, this land that receives them after having forced them to leave, is more a space of probing than of welcoming. The same names that have left come back, but their land and their stories have in the meantime changed: what is necessary is to ponder to what extent and in what way the past has construed the land where they have to live in the present. It is also in this sense that Maria Alzira Seixo remarks, in an enlightening observation, that this return to the fatherland is accomplished by a visit to present time.³ Through such a device, time is also captured under a spatial dimension (if obliquely), and the return to the homeland becomes a re-visitation of common history.

The Return of the Caravels therefore refuses to organize itself under a globalizing logic, as if there were no place to describe a reality whose main plot might easily be recognized as such by everyone. This is precisely the reason why all plots are, in a certain sense, secondary ones, proceeding side by side, as in parallel universes. Only the reader, coordinating them all through the logic of

parataxis is in fact able to recognize the tragic character of a world built on the absence of recognition and contact.

This pulverization of stories, as well as the anonymity and the secret dumbness that pulls them together without really making them interact, is highlighted by the choice of the narrating voice. For in this novel, unlike in previous works by Lobo Antunes (with the exception of *Fado Alexandrino*, 1983), there is not a single voice that assumes the role of a central narrator. All the stories are thus assigned to the fragmentary voices that topically (and in such a volatile way!) recount them. This is all the more significant if one takes into account that Lobo Antunes had initially planned to cast Luís de Camões as the narrator of this novel: '[...] it was supposed that those things were written by Camões. As the whole of the book itself'.⁴ So in a sense the novel enacts the loss of this immense voice that could once have brought everything together (though of course it is necessary to lose this kind of voice to be able to inherit from it).

In this context, space is considered as the sum of the various life stories that take place there, and it presents, in reverse, the history of departure, that search for other places to the detriment of that which was already there and has been refused. But space is here questioned through the mode of belonging, and it remains clear that if there is something to unite that plurality, that something is precisely the loss of the sense of belonging. One must therefore dwell, in grief, in a world where one does not have a place anymore. We are thus able to recognize the major narrative and symbolic meaning of the motto obsessively repeated by the woman of the anonymous couple: 'I don't belong here anymore,' to which her husband responds: 'We don't even belong to ourselves' (p. 37). Spaces, land, mean in fact the quest for a precarious identity that also is quite unmistakably a way of disappearing.

We should also underline that, of all the categories structuring the traditional novel, space seems to be the only one here able to examine the related questions of belonging and identity. The omniscient narrator, axis of an interconnected story, has disappeared, giving way to a plurality of narrative voices which, as we have seen, do not really intercommunicate. The story has renounced the project of a central plot, by which all others would be subsumed, and it therefore unfolds in several stories in miniature, with a single feature in common: they all include 'retornados' (homecoming repatriates barely different from phantoms), staging parodies built on the great names of the Age of Discoveries: Vasco da Gama, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Francisco Xavier, Diogo Cão. Time itself is doubled in different moments distributed between the 15th and 16th centuries and the end of the 20th century, which implies that characters can no longer fully belong to just one of them, but that they are devoured by a temporal logic that *dis-places* them and at the same moment does not assign them to a single specific moment in time. In all this, space presents itself as the only category able to propose the recognition

of an ambiguous and precarious territory but which, nevertheless, is subject to enquiry, Lisbon (Lixboa, written in the old style, Lixbon, in the English translation), Portugal – from where they all left, and to where they all return, four centuries later.

From this perspective, space becomes the last hold of territoriality and identity, in a contemporary world where the loss of identity is so often equated with the absence of territorial anchors (hence the menaces felt in the process of globalization). Considered in this light, ‘the man named Luís’, who begins writing heroic octaves seated at an esplanade table (Chapter 8), as Fernando Pessoa did in the 20th century, and whose statue is in a square in the historical centre of Lisbon (as Chapter 14 reminds us), is precisely the most pregnant symbol of a common identity that has turned sour. Luís, whose last name, Camões, has been erased, comes back from Africa with the corpse of his father that he will be forced to bury in secret. It is he who sings his country’s glorious epic at the very moment independence is lost, and whose symbolic founding name, Camões, will never be pronounced in the novel. This man is therefore also affected by the loss of his name, just as the allegorical old couple have been. Being unrecognizable by the fragility of one’s name comes to represent, in *The Return of the Caravels*, a central procedure that distresses the anonymous people who cross our path in the cities and lands where we live, and which also affects the poets who will no longer be able to represent the symbolic identity of their cultural homeland.

The return to what was supposed to be the motherland is therefore fundamentally deceptive, for this motherland turns out to be a stepmother. The displacements inherent in this return may be located at two different levels in this novel: on the one hand, there are the return trips from the ex-colonies in Africa, a true parody of the mythic return voyages that Western heritage has categorized under the name of *nostoi*, and which proposed the return to the homeland as the accomplishment of the circular and thus perfect voyage. On the other hand, we have the displacements/wanderings, often of an erratic and deceptive nature, of many characters in the city of Lisbon and its surroundings, the quays, the sordid boarding houses, the streets, the coffee shops, the railway stations.

The first type of voyage corresponds to the reverse of the epic poem written by Camões, as well as to the rewriting that this epic makes of the classic prototype, particularly *The Aeneid* by Virgil; the second one encompasses a post-Baudelaire experience, although it also eliminates its exhilarating quality to only keep the pathetic shadows of a ruined past.

The first type of voyage may be said to be a response to a departure from the homeland which took place a long time ago only to set the conditions for a perfect return: Ulysses who, as Du Bellay knew, ‘avait fait un beau voyage’; the Lusiads who, in Camões’ epic, arrived, in Canto IX, at the mythic island of fecundity and

of pleasures that were not, as in the Baudelaire poem, ‘furtifs’. To this first kind of voyage, *The Return of the Caravels* opposes the multiple and inglorious comebacks of all those who had left previously.

As to the second type of voyage, the urban wandering that Baudelaire inaugurated as topos for our modernity, Lobo Antunes re-uses it under the mode of an exploration of the grounds. This means that if the first voyage had made possible the exterior ‘discoveries’, it is only the second type that can open up the possibility for the hypothetical ‘discoveries’ to be achieved inside the country to which one returns.

The passage from the epic in verse form to the novel in prose therefore underscores the analogous passage from the mythic enchantment of the surpassing of boundaries, in the epic, to the miniaturized and enclosed wanderings located in the urban scenery. In this sense, Lobo Antunes responds to Camões (as Camões responded to Virgil, who in turn had responded to Homer) under a form analogous to that Joyce had used to respond to Homer – with the difference that, in Joyce, the city of Dublin contains within itself all the seeds used in the epic by Homer. Instead, Antunes’ novel de-centres the structure of the epic poem, imagines the long voyages of discovery as miniaturized voyages *intra muros* within the city of Lixbon, and keeps the names of the historical characters only to indicate better the impossibility of their true return, at the very moment when they are forced to.

This also means that *The Return of the Caravels* may be read in two main modes: the historical/political mode, and the symbolic/literary one. Under the first, the novel becomes a contemplation on the several departures, returns and dwellings that have construed Portuguese history and its world vision and, ultimately, the European world vision – for we should not forget that this experience, and this history, have been shared by several other countries, much more than many of us like to recall. History, then, was made from these departures from the homeland: how is one able to come back and under what conditions? What might one expect to find upon one’s return? How may the past shape the space of the present homeland? These are questions whose validity does not obviously exhaust itself in the Portuguese experience. But I also mentioned a second mode of reading, which I described as symbolical and literary, because *The Return of the Caravels* represents a re-visitation of our inherited literary memory and, especially, its transformation (true inheritors do have to transform and modify, if they want to be real inheritors). This last question is not alien to the reflection on land as belonging, indeed quite the reverse, it indicates that the geographical land to which we belong (or might want to belong) is geographic as well as cultural, a landscape made out of memories inscribed in a nature that we have made our own. The city we return to, the country where we have to dwell, are also places built upon literary and symbolic memories that literature (this novel) may activate. The sense of

belonging is therefore inscribed in the mode of contemplation, which is also the mode of writing itself.

References

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