

Ana Luísa Amaral and the Portuguese Canon

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E ainda tenho escondidas neste bolso
as jardas que sobraram do meu fio.

O que farei com elas? Uma corda?
Enforco-me com ela e invento novo mito?

(And I still have hidden in this bag
some leftover yarn from my thread.

What shall I make with it? A rope?
To hang myself with and invent a new myth?)

The writing of myths is a violent process in the poetry of Ana Luísa Amaral. In her 2011 meta-poem *Próspero Morreu* (Prospero Died), the invention of a new myth is configured as violence against the body of a woman: Ariadne's bitterly ironic declaration of self-sacrifice, as she threatens to hang herself with her legendary thread. In *Próspero Morreu*, Amaral engages with multiple narratives: the myth of Theseus, Ariadne and the Minotaur; Shakespeare's *The Tempest*; the lyric poetry of sixteenth-century Portuguese writer Luís Vaz de Camões. This multiple engagement with different literary traditions is typical of her poetic works. One of Amaral's literary heroes, the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), was also obsessed by myths. The line 'O mito é o nada que é tudo' ('Myth is the nothing that is everything'), underlines a fundamental tension in Pessoa's 1934 collection, *Mensagem* ('Message'):¹ although myths are potentially powerful and enticing narratives, they are also fragile constructs that have been foisted onto a perceived reality. Writers after Pessoa have scrutinised the myth, as enigmatic and self-consciously precarious as it may be, elaborated in *Mensagem*. Amaral's *Escuro* (Dark, 2014) is one such critical intervention that tackles Pessoa's mythic construction of Portuguese history. *Escuro* throws light on, or rather exposes the darkness of, the hidden sides of Portuguese history: 'the others', in the forms of women and colonised subjects, that have been relegated to peripheral zones — silence and submission. At the same time, Amaral questions a quasi-mythical narrative that has lionized the 'heroic' deeds of Portugal's empty — celibate or childless — fathers and destructive patriarchs: D. João, D. Henrique de Avis, and D. Sebastião.²

Pessoa is one of several poets with whom Amaral dialogues in her poems. Amaral's intertextualities include, but are not limited to, William Shakespeare, William Blake, and Emily Dickinson from the Anglophone sphere; from the Portuguese canon, Camões,

¹ My translation. Words spoken by Ariadne in Amaral (2011).

² 'Ulysses', in Pessoa (2012, p. 48); 'Ulysses', in Pessoa, trans. Zentih (2006, p. 373). All English translations of poems by Pessoa are taken from Zenith's anthology. English renderings of quotations in French and Portuguese taken from published translations follow the original text in brackets, in single quotation marks. Where I have translated the original text myself, the English follows in brackets without quotation marks.

³ I use here Phillip Rothwell's term to describe the series of celibate or childless patriarchs that have been enshrined in Portugal's historical narrative. Rothwell (2007, pp. 15-21).

Fernando Pessoa, and Maria Teresa Horta, one of the 'Three Marias' who co-authored the international feminist bestseller *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* ('New Portuguese Letters', 1972). Not all of these intertextual dialogues have survived the translation of Amaral's poems from the lusophone sphere to the anglophone world. In this article, I focus on the intertextual links between Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem* and the poems from *Escuro* translated by Margaret Jull Costa in an English-language anthology of Amaral's poems, called *The Art of Being a Tiger*.⁴ I understand translation in two principal senses:

- (i) What Jakoson terms 'translation proper', or 'interlingual translation'. That is to say, the replacement of verbal signs in one language with verbal signs from another language.⁵
- (ii) The physical sense of 'carrying across', or transplantation, from the latin *transferre*.⁶

With regard to the intertextual dialogues in Amaral's poetry, three interrelated processes have occurred in the translation of her poems into English.

- (1) Some intertextual dialogues with Portuguese writers have not made their way into English because certain of Amaral's poems have not been selected for translation into English.
- (2) Even within the poems that have been selected for Costa's anthology, some of the dialogues that are present in the original Portuguese versions have been lost through translation.
- (3) Amaral's intertextualities with English-speaking poets threaten to quash or overwrite those that her poems entertain with her Portuguese predecessors.

The first process has taken place because *The Art of Being a Tiger* is an anthology of selected poems by Amaral, and not a collection of her complete works. It is important to remember that the production of anthologies involves processes of both selection and omission on the part of the anthologist.⁷ The second process has happened because the appreciation of intertextual dialogues on the part of the reader relies on prior knowledge of the literary or cultural traditions with which the poet engages. Whereas there is a chance that the anglophone reader of *The Art of Being a Tiger* may be familiar with the works of Amaral's English-speaking poetic heroes, they are less likely to have read the works of Portuguese poets like Camões and Pessoa. In order for an intertextual dialogue to survive translation — in the two senses outlined above — all parties in the dialogue must exist in some sense in the target language, and in the reader's mind. Thus, the only intertextual

⁴ All quotations from this collection are followed by the abbreviation *ABT* and a page reference.

⁵ Jakoson (2000, p. 114). This sense corresponds to the first definition of 'translation' given by Oxford Dictionaries: 'The process of translating words or text from one language into another'. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/translation> [accessed 5 July 2017].

⁶ Reynolds (2011, pp. 3-4). This sense coincides with the second definition of 'translation' given by Oxford Dictionaries: 'The process of moving something from one place to another'. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/translation> [accessed 5 July 2017].

⁷ Baubeta (2007, p. 13).

dialogues that are vulnerable to translational loss are those with the Portuguese literary tradition. Related to the second process, the survival of intertextualities with English-speaking writers and the simultaneous loss of lusophone dialogues, has resulted in the overwriting of the latter by the former.

In this essay, I contextualize Amaral's engagement with the Portuguese poetic tradition, in particular her revision of the imperially-inflected, mythic conception of Portuguese history inscribed by Fernando Pessoa in *Mensagem*. I argue that such critical interventions in Portuguese culture and history are at the very least downplayed, and at worst totally lost, in the translation of Amaral's work into English. I draw on the theories of Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos to argue that Amaral profits, in the Portuguese language, from her simultaneous contact with the cultural centres of England and North America, and the semiperiphery of Portugal. Amaral participates in a triple cultural engagement: with the English-speaking world, with a collective notion of Europe, and with Portuguese culture. Amaral's triple engagement in Portuguese is reduced to a double intervention in English, as her revision of canonical writings by Portuguese poets is mostly lost in the passage from Portugal to the Anglophone sphere.

Ana Luísa Amaral's Centrifugal and Centripetal Manoeuvres

Nobel-prize-winning novelist José Saramago said that only a Portuguese reader would fully understand his 1984 novel *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis* ('The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis', trans. Giovanni Pontiero, 1992).⁸ Like Amaral in her poetry, Saramago's prose works frequently represent engagements with Portuguese historiography and the Portuguese national literary tradition. The Ricardo Reis of the title of Saramago's novel is one of the literary alter-egos, or heteronyms, under which Fernando Pessoa published his work. In the novel, Saramago imagines a situation in which Pessoa's fictional alter ego Reis had existed in a literal and corporal sense. Literary allusions to Pessoa's life and works abound, but so do references to a host of other Portuguese canonical writers, including Camões. I would modify Saramago's claim that only Portuguese readers will understand his novel: only those readers well-read in Portuguese letters are best-placed to fully appreciate *O Ano da Morte de Ricardo Reis*.⁹ Nevertheless, Saramago's comment highlights a key concern for the Portuguese writer whose works have been translated. How will a readership that is not familiar with Portuguese culture and literature be able to comprehend a Portuguese writer's engagement with a Portuguese national cultural tradition, when the necessary frame of reference is not readily available in the target language?

⁸ Pontiero (1992, p. vii).

⁹ Herbert Mitgang gives the following advice to American readers of Saramago's novel in his review of *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* for *The New York Times*: 'The conversations between the Ricardo Reis of the novel and Pessoa will have more meaning to students of Portuguese literature than to American readers. It can save time and research not to ponder too deeply about whether Ricardo Reis is Pessoa, or a figment of Jose Saramago's imagination: better to stick with the human instead of the literary puzzle in the story'. Mitgang's guidance to non-specialist readers that they do not engage with Saramago's interpretation of Fernando Pessoa's heteronymic scheme entails a great loss of the novel's richness, and its specificity. I argue later in this essay that the greatest loss in the translation of Amaral's poetry from Portuguese into English is that the non-specialist anglophone reader is unable to engage in the creative and challenging dialogues that Amaral holds with Pessoa, Camões and others. Mitgang (1991), <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/10/04/specials/saramago-reis.html> [accessed 18 July 2017].

That Ana Luísa Amaral engages with non-lusophone writers as well as her Portuguese poetic heroes ensures that her work has some relevance (marketability) to a readership unfamiliar with Portuguese literature. Amaral's participates in a triple cultural engagement: (i) she tackles a Portuguese national tradition; (ii) she aligns herself to a collective notion of Europe, that itself represents a rewriting of the vision of Europe in *Mensagem*; (iii) she dialogues with English-speaking canonical poets. Thus, Amaral takes advantage of the semiperipheral status of Portuguese culture to align herself simultaneously with cultural centres (a collective notion of Europe and selected writers from the Anglophone sphere) and her native culture; that of Portugal, a nation that lies at the periphery of Europe.¹⁰

Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has defined Portugal's status in the world capitalist system as semiperipheral. Santos establishes a dichotomy between the 'Super-Prosperos' of European colonialism, of which Britain is the epitome, and inferior colonial powers such as Portugal, an incompetent colonizer: a Calibanized Prospero.¹¹ Santos argues that Portugal has been both colonized and colonizer at different points in its history, citing Portugal's 'informal' colonization by Britain during and immediately following the Napoleonic wars.¹² Linked to Portugal's semiperipheral status is the country's historic inability to forge its own distinctive national identity:

[...] Portuguese culture is a borderland culture. It has no content. It does have form and that form is the borderland zone. [...] My working hypothesis is that [...] the Portuguese culture always had trouble distinguishing itself from other national cultures, or always had a great capacity not to distinguish itself from other national cultures [...].¹³

Lacking in distinctive national content, Portuguese culture is eminently adaptable. Portuguese culture sits on a continuum between the centre and the periphery, on what Santos calls a 'correia de transmissão' (transmission belt).¹⁴ The position of Portuguese culture along that continuum is not determined by its contributors (Portuguese artists, writers, or critics), but rather by external agents, who determine the relative centrality or peripherality of a given Portuguese writer or artist. This situation has led to the development of strategies by authors and publishers to position the Portuguese writer as a hybrid individual, whose specificity or singularity resides in their simultaneous contact with the centre and periphery.

In the marketing of Amaral's work, much has been made of her ties to the literatures of the England and North America. Amaral is a professor of Anglo-American literature, and she wrote her doctorate on Dickinson, whose poetry Amaral has translated, along with Shakespeare's sonnets. Amaral herself has emphasized her connection to the literatures of England and North America, whilst underlining her allegiance to Portugal. Amaral declared in an interview with newspaper *Público*: 'Não quero mudar de país. Portugal

¹⁰ The idea that Portugal sits at the periphery of Western Europe is a leitmotif in Portuguese literature.

¹¹ Santos, like other postcolonial theorists before him, draws on the power relations between the characters Prospero and Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611).

¹² See Birmingham (2003, pp. 99-102).

¹³ Santos (2006, p. 145).

¹⁴ Santos (1994, p. 59).

precisa das pessoas aqui, para tentarmos resistir' (I don't want to leave my country. Portugal needs people here, so that we can resist').¹⁵ However, in positioning herself as an anglophile, Amaral's sustained engagement with Portuguese canonical writers, such as Camões and Pessoa, is severely downplayed. Her cultural specificity threatens to be lost through a process of cultural overwriting, whereby the dominant target culture (English) suppresses the semi-peripheral source culture (Portuguese) — as Shakespeare quashes Camões, and Dickinson effaces Pessoa. In the final section of this article, I analyse Amaral's revision of the mythic conception of Europe in Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*. Through no fault on the part of the translator, the subtleties of Amaral's re-vision are lost in the translation of selected poems from her collection *Escuro* into English.

An Overwritten Genealogy, or an Obscured Revision of a Portuguese National Tradition

Escuro has been described as Amaral's most modernist poem to date, as she makes use of the form utilized in *Mensagem*. Whereas Pessoa's collection is a 'long poems-made-of-poems', *Escuro* is a 'poem-made-of-poets',¹⁶ because in it Amaral reinvents the poetic visions of the multiple masculine authors who have been allowed to hold a monopoly over the construction of Portuguese history through literature. *Poets* in the plural, because Amaral engages with *Mensagem*, a text in which Pessoa obliquely rewrites Camões's national epic *Os Lusíadas* ('The Lusiads', 1578). In *Escuro*, Amaral re-vises Portuguese history by imagining alternative historical narratives in which figures who have been relegated to the margins or peripheries of the dominant narrative assume central roles. Adrienne Rich defines 're-vision' thus in the seminal essay 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision':

Re-vision — the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction — is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us.¹⁷

The poems that make up Amaral's collection frequently take place in an alternative or subjunctive mode, where the poet suggests a version of events that questions the problematic foundations on which prevailing dominant historical narratives are founded. Canonical poets like Camões and Pessoa have been instrumental in the writing of these dominant narratives. By working within the same skeletal structure as Pessoa, Amaral interrogates the premises of *Mensagem* by pointing to what is absent or out of sight in Pessoa's text.

In *Escuro*, Amaral evades two genres that are typically associated with intertextual rewriting: pastiche and parody. Both modes exist in that liminal zone between faithful imitation and playful recreation, in which the rewriting is in danger of becoming, reinforcing, or simply not adding anything to, the genre, culture, or work that serves as the

¹⁵ Ribeiro (2011), <https://www.publico.pt/tema/jornal/ana-luisa-amaral-nao-sabe-ser-cautelosa-23546482> [accessed 26 May 2017].

¹⁶ Ramalho (2014, p. 161).

¹⁷ Rich (1980, p. 35).

impulse for the pastiche or the parodic text. Amaral's reimaginings seem to represent a different mode altogether, as she evokes alternative worlds where colonialism and the narratives that legitimised it are reimagined. One such moment occurs in the poem 'Outras Vozes' (Other Voices), where the alternative mode is announced by the idea of backwards time, heralded by the Portuguese word 'avesso', a word much favoured by Amaral.¹⁸ Like several poems from *Escuro* that engage directly with Portuguese colonial narratives, 'Outras Vozes' does not appear in Costa's English anthology. At the end of the text, the poet dismantles and then reconstructs the colonial emblem of the ship. The ship's banner is 'dismembered', its mainsail adorned with brightly coloured feathers. The sunken boat is not a symbol of imperial failure in Amaral's poem. Rather, the ship's vacant hull is a space in which new, creative possibilities are imagined: 'um barco novo habitado de peixes/ brilhantes como estrelas' (a new boat, inhabited by fish/ shimmering like stars).¹⁹ The new ship is not searching, unlike the royal 'we' in 'Prece' ('Prayer', from *Mensagem*), for that universal sea frequently invoked in Pessoa's *Mensagem*: 'E outra vez conquistaremos a Distância —/ Do mar ou outra, mas que seja nossa!' ('And once again we will conquer the Distance —/ Of this sea or another — what matters is that it be ours!').²⁰ Amaral creates her own formula, reworking the colonial discourses that Pessoa appropriated to conjure his mythic, poetic empire.

Amaral's scope is not limited to Portugal, even if Pessoa is the point of entry for one of *Escuro*'s most excoriating critiques of mythical conceptions of Western Europe. In the second 'Europe' poem, Amaral takes *Mensagem*'s opening poem as her point of departure. In Pessoa's text, Europe appears as a reclining woman who

Fita, com olhar sphyngico e fatal.
O Ocidente, futuro do passado.

O rosto com que fita é Portugal.

([...] stares with a fatal, sphinxian gaze
At the West, the future of the past.

The staring face is Portugal.)²¹

These lines are scathingly reworked in the first stanza of Amaral's 'Europa (poema 2)':

Pouco fita a Europa, a não ser mortos
por múltiplos disfarces: química luz,
os lumes tão reais, os nomes amputados
pelos números, mesas de número fartas (ABT, p. 192)

('Does not have much to gaze at, only people murdered

¹⁸ The Portuguese word 'avesso' is not easily rendered into English. It can mean 'reverse', 'backwards', and 'inside out'.

¹⁹ Amaral (2014, p. 27).

²⁰ 'Prece', in Pessoa (2012, p. 84).

²¹ 'O dos Castellos', in Pessoa (2012, p. 44); 'Coat of Arms: The Castles', in Pessoa, trans. Zenith (2006, p. 371).

By multiple disguises: chemical light,
blazing fires, names amputated
by numbers, tables crammed with numbers.' *ABT*, p. 193)

In these lines, Amaral exposes the underlying mechanisms of Pessoa's myth: its reliance on language to seduce the reader and to cover over the violence of Western Europe's present and past. Pessoa's Europe-made-Grecian-sculpture is undone one body part at a time, until the poet declares:

[...] Não tem olhos, nem mãos,

nem fita nada, a Europa. Nem cotovelos tem
que possam suportar justiça e bondade.

([...] She has no eyes, no hands,

Europe sees nothing. She does not even have elbows
to hold up justices or goodness.

The mystery that lies behind Pessoa's sphinx-like Europe is revealed to be an artificially constructed illusion. Were Europe to look to its peripheries, 'nada veria/ a não ser outros gritos' ('she would see nothing,/ Only more screams'). The only aspect of Amaral's Europe that is linked to that riddle-telling figure from ancient mythology relates to that other meaning of 'sphyngico': the murderous callousness with which the Sphinx is said to have devoured any traveller to Thebes who could not answer her riddle. At the poem's end, Europe-the-myth is left a voiceless and dismembered construct: 'Sem voz. Sem sul. / Sem esfinge que deslumbre' ('No voice. No south. / No dazzling sphinx').

In the poem 'Intertextualidades' ('Intertextualities'), Amaral describes the anagnorisis (moment of recognition) of an intertextual echo as the discovery of a breadcrumb in a book. An intertextual mode of writing is framed as the layering of mute readings across time, connected by the breadcrumbs left by each reader:

Fiquei com a migalha,
Desconhecida oferta do leitor,
mas por jogo ou consumo
deixei-lhe uma migalha minha,
não marca de água, mas de pão também:
uma tema posterior a decifrar mais tarde
em posterior leitura
alheia (*ABT*, p. 16)

I was left with the crumb,
an unexpected gift from the reader,
but as a joke or as a possible snack,
I left a crumb of my own,
not a water mark, but a bread mark:

an alternative theme to be deciphered later
at a later reading
by someone else (*ABT*, p. 17)

For Amaral, intertextuality is added value; a modest gift that does not fundamentally change the texture of the original work. The quandary for the English-language translator is that this conception of the translational process cannot be replicated by the translator herself. A contextualising translation would require the translation of the entire national tradition that Amaral interrogates in her poetry. Most non-Portuguese-speaking readers will not be able to appreciate the creative relationships that Amaral's poems entertain with Portuguese texts. There can be no dialogue if one speaker is muted.

Paulo de Medeiros suggests that Margaret Jull Costa's anthology offers the opportunity for a new kind of interaction — the dynamic relationship between the Portuguese original and the English rendering: 'It is one of the privileges of a facing bilingual edition to allow the reader to enjoy all of the permutations the poem undergoes as one reads it first in one language, then in the other, then again in the first one and so on'.²² The benefits of a bilingual edition are lost on the Anglophone reader who does not read Portuguese; Paulo Medeiros's imagined reader is a speaker of both the English and Portuguese languages. Although Medeiros underlines the subversive quality of Amaral's poetry in his introduction,²³ it is not enough to be *told* that Amaral is a subversive poet. As Medeiros notes, subversion alone does not make for challenging poetry. The brilliance of 'Europa: Poema 2' resides in the ways in which the text undermines a Portuguese poetic tradition from within. The overwriting of Camões and Pessoa is not the great loss of Amaral's translation into English: the tragedy lies, rather, in the irretrievable loss of her creative dialogue with her illustrious compatriots.

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²² Medeiros (2016, p. 8).

²³ Medeiros (2016, p. 7).

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