

# VOICES IN SEARCH OF A READER: THE POLYPHONIC WRITING OF ANTÓNIO LOBO ANTUNES<sup>1</sup>

Carla Ferreira de Castro  
Universidade de Évora  
Portugal  
cfcastro@sapo.pt

## Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the writing of the Portuguese author António Lobo Antunes, considered one of the major writers in European Literature with 26 books published, by focusing on the strategies deployed in his texts of creating micro-narratives within the main frame, and conveying the elements of individual and collective memory, past and present, the self and the others, using various voices and silences. Lobo Antunes incorporates in his writing his background as a psychiatrist at a Mental Hospital in Lisbon, until 1985 (when he decided to commit exclusively to writing), his experience as a doctor in the Portuguese Colonial War battlefield, but also the daily routines of the pre and post 25th of April 1974 (Portuguese Revolution) with subtle and ironic details of the life of the middle and upper class of Lisbon's society: from the traumas of the war to the simple story of the janitor, or the couple who struggles to keep their marriage functional, everything serves as material to develop and interweave a complex plot, that a lot of readers find too enwrapped and difficult to follow through. Some excerpts taken from his first three novels and books of Chronicles and his later novel – *Ontem não te Vi em Babilónia* (2006) – will be put forward to exemplify the complexity of the

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<sup>1</sup> The following text was presented at the University of Aberdeen, in July 2008, as part of a panel concerning 'Memory, History, Narrative Time: War traumas'. For the sake of the audience, at the time, the quotations by Lobo Antunes were translated in English (my translation), although I have used the Portuguese versions which are cited in the Bibliography.

writing and the main difficulties of the reader, lost in a multitude of narrators' voices. Recently, Lobo Antunes has commented on his work stating: What I write can be read in the darkness. This paper aims at throwing some light by unfolding some of the strategies employed to defy new borders in the process of reading.

### **Sinopse**

O presente artigo visa analisar a escrita do autor português António Lobo Antunes, considerado um dos maiores escritores da literatura europeia com 26 livros publicados, focando as estratégias empregues nos seus textos para a criação de micro-narrativas dentro do enquadramento principal, através de elementos retirados da memória individual e colectiva, passada e presente, o eu e o outro, servindo-se simultaneamente de várias vozes e silêncios. Lobo Antunes integra na sua escrita a sua formação enquanto psiquiatra no Hospital Júlio de Matos em Lisboa, até 1985 (altura em que decidiu dedicar-se em exclusividade à escrita), a sua experiência enquanto médico na Guerra Colonial Portuguesa, mas também as rotinas diárias do pré e pós 25 de Abril de 1974 com detalhes irónicos e subtis do quotidiano da classe média alta da sociedade lisboeta: dos traumas da Guerra, da história simples do porteiro, ou do casal que luta para manter intacto e funcional o seu casamento, tudo serve de material para desenvolver e tecer um enredo complexo, que muitos leitores consideram labiríntico e difícil de acompanhar. Alguns excertos retirados dos primeiros três romances e livros de crónicas e da obra *Ontem não te Vi em Babilónia* (2006) serão apresentados para exemplificar a complexidade da sua escrita e as dificuldades que esta coloca ao leitor, perdido numa multiplicidade de vozes de narradores.

**Keywords:** Voices, silence, colonial war, detachment, displacement, memory, history, narrative time, war traumas

**Palavras-chave:** Vozes; Silêncio, Guerra Colonial, Indiferença, Deslocação; Memória; História; Tempo da Narrativa, Traumas de Guerra

*“The only way to approach the novels I write is to  
catch them, as you catch a disease”*

Lobo Antunes, in *Segundo Livro de Crónicas*

Lobo Antunes was born in Lisbon in 1942. He studied Medicine in Lisbon and became a psychiatrist at a mental hospital in the capital until 1985 (when he decided to commit exclusively to writing). In 1970 he got drafted to the army; the following year, on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1971 he was sent to Angola, where the colonial war was taking place. He stayed there until 1973. In 2005, with the author’s permission, according to their mother’s wishes, his daughters published *Cartas de Guerra*, a compilation of aerograms written by Lobo Antunes to his first wife, as a man of 28 years old, while he was writing *Memória de Elefante* (his first novel). The book is a compilation of love letters but, in most of them, there is a progress report concerning *Memória de Elefante* and brief descriptions of the plot and the characters. It reinforces the biographical aspect of the novel.

Six years after his return from Angola, in 1979, Lobo Antunes published *Memória de Elefante* and *Os Cus de Judas*, followed by the *O Conhecimento do Inferno* in 1980. These three books, deeply enrooted in the context of the war and, as referred previously, strongly biographical, helped him to become one of the most read and also one of the most controversial contemporary Portuguese authors.

In *Memória de Elefante* the reader gains access to a day in the life of a psychiatrist that has been in the war in Angola, from the hospital, to the street and, finally, to a bar. The novel is divided in titleless chapters and most of the times there is a third person narration, though we can also find a first person narration – For example the psychiatrist monologue, at night, in the car – that is summoned

when the memory flux is so intense that the character feels the urge to interfere and tell his own tale. In *Memória de Elefante* the biographical details are striking (the profession, the daughters and the separation from the wife...) and Lobo Antunes, the author, is easily mistaken for the character fighting the battle of daily life once his commission in the War is completed.

The main element, which is going to have a constant presence in all Lobo Antunes' other novels is the feeling of detachment; the displacement of the character that leaves to fight a war he did not fully understand, to conclude, at the end of his commission, that he still was not enlightened on the true motives of the war and what is more, due to it, he could no longer fill in his place in society, and in life in general, because the experience left, apart from the trauma, a void, an immense disconnection with the world he prior knew. The narrator says:

*Between the Angola he had lost and the Lisbon he did not regain the doctor felt twice orphan, and that condition of being 'countryless' continued to prolong itself painfully because a lot had changed during his absence.*

The tone also mirrors the duality of being out of place since it changes between pure poetry and an elevated, cultured tone, to a slang mode, full of curse words.

Looking back at *Os Cus de Judas*, Lobo Antunes also creates a narrator that having returned from the war, no longer finds his place in the midst of his bourgeois family; the novel is divided in 23 chapters - each corresponding to the letters of the alphabet, from A to Z – is set at night, and consists of a dialogue between a nameless man and a nameless woman, who exchange voices, first in a Lisbon bar, later in the man's apartment and finally in the man's bed. It is as if this novel starts where *Memória de Elefante* had finished and the three different spatial axis deepen the notion of sadness, solitude and regrets that time cannot repair. From the enclosed but public area of the bar, to the most intimate space of the

bed, the image of being removed from the world gains dramatic proportions. The strategy deployed to emphasise the narrator's solitude consists in the fact that the reader is only aware of the voice of the woman, through the man, when he asks direct questions or requests her to do something. In fact, the reader can be driven to conclude that this is a monologue between the officer who has arrived from Africa and the reader left behind, unaware of the full extent of his misery, his coming to terms with his own private demons in the presence of the woman/reader. There is a point in the novel, where the narrator says:

*I am beginning to think that the million and a half Portuguese who passed through Africa never existed and I am narrating for you, a cheap implausible novel (...)* (OCJ p.51)

Lobo Antunes through the voice of the man talks about the war, bluntly and violently to better exemplify the pointlessness of it all, and the side effects that the narrator carries for life. Mostly, it questions the human nature in terms of individual and collective identity, the unseen scars that are left in one's soul: to murder to avoid death, in the name of your country, without fully grasping the extent of the conflict in political terms, and then, when the commission is over, to be told that the job is finished, that this person is one of the fortunate ones who can go home, while others will now proceed doing the killing. *South of Nowhere*, in Portuguese, *Os Cúis de Judas*, describes not only the war scars that are left in the character and the irreparable damages to the mind, but it shows a bloody wide open wound; it is a novel about Angola, but at the same time, it is about any war anywhere, and the effects it produces on the individual, on the ones that are regarded as the lucky ones who have survived.

In terms of writing and finding the author's distinct voice, *South of Nowhere* presents Lobo Antunes first attempt, though timid and yet experimental, in the dense language that is going to be a mark of the later novels: long paragraphs,

where the full stops take pages to appear, already tantalizing the boundaries of the Portuguese grammar.

His third novel that completes a series of books dedicated to his experience in the Portuguese colonial war was *O Conhecimento do Inferno* (1980): the plot describes a journey by car from the south of Portugal – the Algarve – towards the capital. It starts in the afternoon and finishes at night. Every place the narrator drives through corresponds approximately to a chapter of the book until the return to the parental home. As it has happened in the two previous novels, every image, every random word can trigger off memories of Lobo Antunes' favourite themes: the colonial war, the narrator's childhood and the family, sometimes in a brutal way. As in the first novels and in the ones to come, the memories which are unfolded come stained with strange episodes, terrifying images and details that contribute to expose the cruel mordacity of the narrator. In the beginning of the novel this bitter anger, tempered with humour and sarcasm, can be seen in the passage where he describes the Algarve, in the beginning of the 80s:

*The sea at the Algarve is made of cardboard as in the theatre settings and the English don't get it (...)*

It is also a novel where the author's experience as a psychiatrist at Miguel Bombarda's Mental Hospital in Lisbon is evoked, through the narrator who is himself a psychiatrist but could easily be a patient at his hospital as well, and at one point is, in fact, mistaken for one. The idea the narrator has of those who share his profession is not flattering and few of his colleagues would be in favour of his statements.

Lobo Antunes is not especially fond of these three books since they mark the dawns of his writing, the first sketches into what was to become the Lobo Antunes distinctive voice. However, it is undeniable that from the first books, his writing has always been a challenge to the reader who is set adrift in a multitude of

voices and of different narrators that interweave their scattered memories without going to the trouble of making sense to the reader. The logic of Lobo Antunes' writing, its major dynamic, is the fragmentary nature of his discourse.

*A Ordem Natural das Coisas* and *O Esplendor de Portugal* go a step further and manage to use multiple voices of different narrators, creating the polyphonic voice of Lobo Antunes. In *A Ordem Natural das Coisas* the reader is introduced to a tale of two families and the secrets that they share. Again, the novel defies the everyday logic and moves at a nightmare like pace, from character to character, as the recent story of the country in the oppressive regime established by António Oliveira Salazar unfolds the misery of the people and most of all the protagonists. Oliveira Salazar's regime was overthrown by the Portuguese Revolution on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1974, and the book, published in 1992, mixes fiction and fact which serves as the perfect metaphor for the distortions inflicted upon the history of a country and its people when repression and concealment are in charge and manipulate the course of events. But most of all, this novel, like the ones that will follow, is a true challenge to the reader since it requires all the effort and attention as one is driven to the labyrinths of the narrators' minds, trying to put sense in nonsensical things.

In *O Esplendor de Portugal* (1997) the reader has to come to terms with the reports of four different narrators who retell the incidents and secrets of a family of Portuguese origin that moves to Angola. The narrators are, Isilda, and her three children Carlos, Rui and Clarisse. Each narration completes the other, by presenting four different points of view and exposing the lack of morals and the consequences of their mistakes. As in the previous novels, the characters are trapped in their own labyrinths and, though the war is over, the traumas left disrupt family life. It is a novel which is difficult to read due to its crudeness. The four narrators talk more or less about the same events but in a fragmented and personal way, without being preoccupied with full stops or other discursive markers that could help the reader. Without a language pattern the reader is left on his own in the difficult task of conveying meaning. It is as if while writing, Lobo Antunes

constructs the novel through the deconstruction of the meaning, the acquired notion that all that takes to understand a story is to read it through.

The use of irony and sarcasm is present, from the out start, in the antiphrastic title, *O Esplendor de Portugal*, which comes from a verse in the Portuguese national anthem that talks about the past glories and how the Portuguese people must raise that splendour again. The four narrators, in different ways, come to terms with the frailty of their condition: once the colonialists in a country that they 'ruled', suddenly the outcast, both in Portugal and in Angola, when the process of independence in Portugal's former colonies began. The double rejection is the common element of the four narrators. The daughter says:

*My father used to explain that what we came after in Africa was not money, nor power, but blacks without money and power that would give us the illusion of money and power. (p. 255)*

The lucid insights into the lives of the arrogant colonisers that are suddenly submitted to the frail condition of tenants in a country that is no longer theirs and the return to the continent at the mercy of the superiority of the ones who did not leave crosses all the narrative. In *OEP* the emphasis is no longer on the ex-combatent who was sent from the continent, but on the coloniser who was colonised in turn, and all the consequences of that in the following generations.

In Lobo Antunes' recent novels the problem is no longer that of the war and the revolution; however the traumas and the demons, the disintegration of the self that defies the borders of the novel due to the strong impact they have in the reading process, are more present than ever. The final words from the novel *Ontem não te vi em Babilónia* (2006) are: ***because what I write can be read in the darkness*** (p.479) and that is the best metaphor for the readers who attempt at understanding his later novels. Most readers of Lobo Antunes feel like they are entering the realm of a non ending therapy session, where the narrators collapse



words at the speed of their thoughts. In *Ontem não te vi em Babilónia*, a multitude of voices and a lot of extremely difficult words are put together. The author has come across this title on a wall in Jerusalem and immediately adopted it probably because, as the novel demonstrates, all the voices in the text live in the private Babylon of the author's mind: in this specific novel, eight narrators, each having his point of view and few names to identify them, simultaneously 'share' a night of insomnia, from midnight to 5:00 am; they reinvent their lives, and their illusions become part of a forged reality told on a sleepless night. In these stories of lives near the edge - sometimes complex, other times embarrassingly simple - the chapters are divided according to the time of night and the most important thing the reader can devise through the words and the silences spoken is the eternal silence of the night and the loneliness that ultimately surrounds us all. In *Ontem não te vi em Babilónia* all the estrangement the Narrator and the reader suffer is present in the very format of the pages that is diffuse: the paragraphs change at the narrator's pace, without capital letter or full stops and are left indented at the narrator's will. There is a tendency to use repetitions (within brackets) of key sentences that describe each character and create an atmosphere of echoes, like phantoms loose in the night. None of the narrators relates an event in a chronological order, they freely get lost inside the strings of their memories and in the recurrent sentences that inhabit their tumultuous minds, which explains the constant repetition of a number of refrains until the breaking point.

It is not an enjoyable reading in the sense that one cannot find the beginning, the middle, and the end of the novel, but that is precisely the root of the challenge Lobo Antunes writing portrays. There is a Beckettian, Joycean and even Pessoaan quality in Lobo Antunes' novels: the alienation was always there from the first book, but the ageing and the maturity of his writing awarded the author the capacity of dealing with obsessions, solitude and silence in another level of reasoning. He seems to write no longer to tell a story, with a certain plot, but to orchestrate polyphonic voices made out of meticulously selected words. The

sarcasm has given room to subtle irony, the profuse and poetic tone is still there interrupted by marks of spoken discourse, but most of all the way to construct simple bare truths is to deconstruct all the demons that inhabit the minds of author, narrators and readers. As Professor Alzira Seixo has put it, referring to *Exortação aos Crocodilos* (written in 1999), *Lobo Antunes narrates precisely that, which one cannot narrate*<sup>2</sup>: He does not describe the facts concerning the colonial war, or the pre and post revolution period, he defies the memories of those nameless men and women who watched impotently the destruction of their marriages, their homes, their jobs, and ultimately their childhood dreams, as a consequence of the war and the dictatorship. From the traumas of the war to the simple story of the janitor, or the couple who struggles to keep their marriage functional, everything serves as material to develop and interweave a complex plot that a lot of readers find too enwrapped and difficult to follow through, since it appears to lead to a dead end in terms of solving a problem by finding a satisfactory solution for the ending.

One of his later novels, *O Meu Nome é Legião* (2007), starts as a police report, describing the activity of a gang in the suburbs of any big city, and was written throughout Lobo Antunes' disease (He was diagnosed with cancer and underwent severe surgery and treatments). If there is a message the novel tries to put forward is a vision that only the fearless escape; the fastest way to salvation is to forget and not being afraid of anything.

In an interview given to a Portuguese newspaper in 2003 Lobo Antunes has admitted:

*Many things I do now were already in blossom in O Conhecimento do Inferno.* In fact, though the topic is no longer that of ex-soldiers fighting a war in Africa and their daily routines after their return, there is a revision of the topic of evil and the modern crimes which are perpetrated in our society. If in 1980 the topic was the immense pain and violence suffered both at war and at a Mental hospital, 27 years later, in *O Meu Nome é Legião*, the major atrocity is directly connected with our

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<sup>2</sup> SEIXO, Maria Alzira (2001): *Outros Erros: Ensaios de Literatura*, Asa, Lisboa, p. 342

times, with the urban violence that contemporary societies face, from carjacking, to paedophile and other sexual abuses, to multiple hate crimes. The name of the title is taken from the *New Testament* (Mark 5:9), when a man possessed by demons answers Jesus saying 'My name is Legion, for we are many' referring to all the forces that evil impersonates. The novel once again, in Lobo Antunes' universe, exposes the sores of people that live in permanent conflict shut inside themselves, fighting their personal anxieties and the excruciating ache of being unable to find their own happy ending. Lobo Antunes begins at the end, subverts the process of telling a plot, adverts from the very start that there is no such thing as the end. His novels reveal a post modern characteristic that is defined at its core by the subversion of the classical patterns of time, space and characters into hyperbolic, fragmented but massively human narratives.

Every Thursday, Lobo Antunes writes a column in the Portuguese magazine *Visão*. The Three Books of Chronicles that were published reproduce these weekly reports on different events of the author's daily life. On 19<sup>th</sup> June 2008, the story was about his meeting with his fellow soldiers. Referring to his *brothers in arms*, Lobo Antunes says:

*None of them is a banker, of course. Nor a director. None of them plays golf. They played golf in a field with only one hole where it is not the ball that falls. It is a twenty years old boy.*

(In: *Visão* 19/06/2008)

The war is over, but the fight for the unfairness, the subtle humour, the poetic metaphors and the neglecting of the Portuguese grammar are still present and defiant in his writings, inviting new readers to cross new borders of understanding. In the same article, he starts by saying:

*If only we could live with the simplest things instead of recalling the complicated ones. Return to the elementary*

*poverty: light, water, stone.*

But Lobo Antunes knows better than most the true meaning of an “If” clause that is why his writings keep tempting the limits of literature, writing simple silences and voices in an unique manner.

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