

OF EXCESS (READING THE *NEW PORTUGUESE* *LETTERS*)¹

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ABSTRACT:

The *New Portuguese Letters* is a book of excess. As one of the fundamental texts in Portuguese literature of the twentieth-century, the book must be re-read anew for its significance nowadays amidst a roll-back of many of the gains in human rights. The double preface by Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo remains a crucial key for any reading of the text but it should be somewhat revised as the emphasis on the body is not the only form of excess that characterizes the text. Just as new readings of Antigone show her to question the very premises of sovereignty, so the *New Portuguese Letters* can be said to question the excesses of the state that have made the notion of excess appear aberrant, whilst creating and enforcing unjust laws.

RESUMO:

As *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* são um livro de excesso. Sendo um dos textos fundamentais da literatura portuguesa do século XX, o texto deve ser lido de novo, tendo em conta a sua significância actual no contexto de uma regressão dos ganhos em direitos humanos. O duplo prefácio de Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo é essencial para qualquer leitura do livro, mas deve ser também revisitado, já que a ênfase dada ao corpo não pode ser vista como a única forma de excesso nas *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*. Com base em interpretações recentes de Antigona que enfatizam o seu processo de questionamento dos fundamentos da soberania, este ensaio propõe uma leitura de *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* como questionando os excessos abusivos do Estado na promulgação e administração de leis injustas, que tornaram o conceito de excesso uma aberração.

KEYWORDS:

Excess, *New Portuguese Letters*, politics and literature, Antigone

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PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Excesso, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, literatura e política, Antigona

*Nada garantem os fantasmas, sem dúvida;
e por isso aqui estamos, e de novo*

Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta,
Maria Velho da Costa, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*

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Could it be that the mere thought of excess already constitutes itself as a form of excess? As if by thinking, speaking, and writing about excess one would be contaminated by the very disruptive force thought to inhere in the concept of excess and, as such, open oneself to its consequences. Perhaps that would be one way to explain the general timidity seemingly affecting intellectuals when it comes to excess. For, surprising as it may be, historically, or in our present age, so given to excesses of all sorts, excess is one of the neglected concepts in either philosophical, political or cultural theory. And yet, excess could be seen as being at the root of all that we cherish as our intellectual, political or even religious inheritance. But then, such founding excesses are usually forgotten, transformed, excused, even denounced, sublimated and made into a norm so that we no longer regard them as excessive. One only has to think about the dogmas of Christianity, from transubstantiation to the crucifixion and resurrection, or the tripartite form of the divinity, down to the preaching of universal brotherhood, to see how Christianity is founded on excess. Or one could think of Western culture, from Greek tragedy down to postmodern questionings as also always enmeshed with excess. More significantly, it is at the political level, whether one thinks of the Greek polis and its strict system of exclusion of most people, of the tyranny of empires, or even of our cherished principles of democratic representation and free speech based on enlightenment principles of reason, that one finds the very notion of sovereignty as a form of excess. Yet we insist on ignoring excess, forgetting about it, or denouncing it as if it always marked a dangerous and deviant force ready to threaten

social cohesion. The *New Portuguese Letters* is a book of excess. And, above all, it is a book that forces us to think about excess. It not only marked a moment of decisive rupture in Portuguese literature, it inaugurated a new form of thinking and writing about our polity, be it in strict national terms – Portugal on the verge of collapse under the weight of its decrepit, phantasmatic, regime and just before its moment of possible recovery – or in more general terms, Europe and beyond. But the task that the *New Portuguese Letters* put to us has been for the most part still ignored. Not only was it too quickly shelved after its initial moment of scandal died out, and more readily so in Portugal than elsewhere, not only did many of the problems affecting our polity remain untouched all these years, in spite of some real gains, but its injunction for us to reflect on excess has not been heeded. What I would like to do at present, rather modestly, is to start a series of small reflections on excess, based on the example given to us already forty years ago by the *New Portuguese Letters*. I will not attempt any proper definition of excess for there is none, unless one would like to think that excess is also always a form of resisting definition, of not only jumping borders and limits, but questioning and dissolving them as well. That too, can be seen as one of the primary ways in which the *New Portuguese Letters* enjoin us to resist the habitual and to reconsider anew our very own habits of thought.

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Could it be that the exemplary reading of the *New Portuguese Letters* by Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, itself an excessive reading, as she herself noted, was blind to the exact form of excess that the book brought about? As if in her initial response she had been able to isolate some of the crucial aspects of the book but had failed – could not but fail – to see its most important charge, directed not only at a feminist conscientization but at a radical questioning of the presuppositions we enjoy in the safety and comfort of our liberal education? Because the *New Portuguese Letters* are a violent and viral attack on the constitutive order of our polity, our society, our forms of knowing and being in the world.

Where we depend on the order of law, the *New Portuguese Letters* would have us recognize, if not elect, the order of desire; constituting desire as power and refusing to imagine power solely as a negative force; exposing the excesses and excessive lacks of our rules, proclaiming the possibility of imagining a different order based on freedom and respect but also on intelligence in its refusal to uphold the dichotomy between mind and body. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not rejecting that initial and so important reading of the *New Portuguese Letters* that in many ways serves as a mapping of the text and as a guide in our, certainly mine, own readings. Rather, what I am asking for is going beyond that reading in its spirit even if that means going against its letter. For one cannot forget that as an initial reaction it is time bound and certainly, like any critical act, mine included, more time bound than the text that it proposes to decode, since the keys it must use are necessarily cut in time, whereas the original text, although also clearly bound to its time, in many ways is beyond its time as any great text always is.

One exemplary way that informs Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo's reading is its form, its unfolding into two readings, the pre-preface, "leitura breve por excesso de cuidado" [brief reading due to an excess of care] and the preface proper, "leitura longa e descuidada" [long and careless reading]. By asserting from the very beginning the necessity for a multiple unfolding of meaning, for different ways of reading the text and for reading the differences of the text, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo's own text already approaches excess itself. And yet, it is perhaps in the second, "careless" reading, that she most succeeds, even though, or perhaps because, the first reading was marked by excess yes, but an excess of carefulness. What I find most problematic in that excess of carefulness is the limitation that it imposes on the *New Portuguese Letters*, even as it purports to recognize excess and transgression. For Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo chose to read the excess of the text as being an excess of the body, of sexuality, of a break up of limits between

eroticism and pornography, of claiming the body as the theater for the conflicts analyzed in the text:

Nesse excesso, o caminho percorrido é necessariamente egocêntrico. Nas Novas Cartas Portuguesas, as mulheres comprazem-se em si próprias, a sua paixão alimenta-se de si. Daí a reivindicação obsessiva do corpo como primeiro campo de batalha onde a revolta se manifesta. (...) Ao concentrarem-se sobre o corpo, correm as autoras um risco: o de o absolutizarem como os homens o fizeram. De tratarem o corpo como uma 'coisa', objecto da paixão ou seu exercício. E de uma «coisa» tudo pode ser dito – daí o excesso. (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: xxviii, xxix)

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[In that excess, the path followed is necessarily egocentric. In the New Portuguese Letters the women rejoice in themselves, their passion feeds on itself. Thus, the obsessive reclaiming of the body as the first battle field where revolt manifests itself. (...) Focusing on the body the authors run a risk: of totalizing it as men have done; of treating the body as a "thing", object of passion or its praxis. And of a "thing" everything can be said – leading to excess. (my translation)]

Allow me to reject such a reading, conscious of the fact that it was perhaps a necessary reading thirty years ago. That indeed, it might still be a necessary reading today, as in many ways, all advances notwithstanding, it seems we also have reached a moment in which our societies, orchestrated by the idiocy so characteristic of the current holders of political power across Europe, are rapidly turning back our collective clocks. Seeking refuge and solace from the ills we have created, by a nostalgic and dangerous romance with a supposedly more innocent, but in reality even more cruel, more crudely cruel, past, it seems there is no more sought after paradise than the hell the previous generation had thought to have escaped, because at least it promised certainties, even if they were the certainties of tyranny.

There is no essentialization of the body in the *New Portuguese Letters*. The intense focus on the body and on pleasure,

on sexuality and eroticism, is not a reductive, totalizing one. Indeed, in contrast with other feminist currents that did verge dangerously close to a reification of the female body that was not much more than the other side of patriarchal biologism, the *New Portuguese Letters* appeal as much to the mind as to the body. Their engagement with canonical tradition, with medieval lyric for instance, is as erudite as it is playful, and as mordant. Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo seems to note a certain lack on the part of the *New Portuguese Letters* in addressing concrete economic issues of female subordination that would be the counterpart to the supposed excessive obsession with the body. Perhaps there is indeed a certain bourgeois complacency about the plight of working class women. One can read a certain – well intentioned perhaps but nonetheless simplistic and reductive – reference to such women in the few texts where they are given a voice and their supposedly different, because uneducated speech would be mimicked. Fair enough. However, I do think that even though the *New Portuguese Letters* do not choose to focus on economic inequality they still bring it to the fore in more than one way: in the attempt to also give some voice, however distorted, to the working class, and above all in the focus on the general condition of women as a form of chattel, of male property to be passed on and exchanged, to be used and discarded. In that vein, I fully agree with Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo's first question on whether it might not have been the radical, indeed excessive, questioning of societal grounds effected by the *New Portuguese Letters* that incited the state to prosecute the authors, rather than just the notions of obscenity and immorality. Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo cites a key passage from the text:

Quando o burguês se revolta contra o rei, ou quando o colono se revolta contra o império, é apenas um chefe ou um guerreiro que eles atacam, tudo o resto fica intacto, os seus negócios, as suas propriedades, as suas famílias, os seus lugares entre amigos e conhecidos, os seus prazeres. Se a mulher se revolta contra o homem nada fica intacto. (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 143)

[When a bourgeois rebels against the King, or when a colonial rebels against the empire, it is merely a leader or a government that they attack. All the rest remains unchanged: their business, their property, their families, their places among friends and acquaintances, their pleasures. If woman rebels against man, nothing remains unchanged. (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 198)]

As the authors knew, as Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo recognized, what was under question was not just morality or the distinction between art and pornography but rather the very conditions of the state itself. The *New Portuguese Letters* are excessive because of that, because they are a sovereign contestation of the way in which the state, in the particular case the Portuguese Republic taken hostage for fifty years, but even beyond that, the state as an institution, abrogates for itself the sovereign power in terms that render sovereignty equivalent to subjugation or even the imposition of death as argued by Achille (Mbembe 2003).

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Any reading today, mine certainly, of the *New Portuguese Letters* is indebted to all the previous studies such as the ones brought out, among others, by Darlene Sadlier, Hilary Owen, Cláudia Pazos Alonso, Anna Klobucka and Ana Luísa Amaral.² However, a search for readings on excess tends to be limited and it is certainly no coincidence that two of the studies that most advance the question of excess focus on women writers, namely, Ana Luísa Amaral's dissertation on Emily Dickinson (1995) and her recent essay on reading the *New Portuguese Letters* in the perspective of queer theory (2001); and a book on Emily Dickinson and other American poets, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*, by Karen Jackson Ford (1997). As if somehow, excess and women's writing would go hand in hand. Ford notes at the beginning of her study:

The poetics of excess must be understood in opposition to a poetics of decorum, which imposes an unformulated standard for correct poetry that writers must either conform to or transgress. The fact that the definition of "excess" as an

extravagant violation of law or decency is obsolete suggests how differently the concept would have to be understood in the late twentieth-century from how it was understood in earlier cultural situations. (Ford 1997: 24)

With the *New Portuguese Letters* the issue is never just one of transgressing the rules of decorum, decency, morality, poetic form or genre, even if it also is that. What the *New Portuguese Letters* demonstrate, and Ana Luísa Amaral has analyzed, is the way in which those seemingly excessive writings force a questioning of excess itself. As Ana Luísa Amaral notes:

É isto que se ensaia em *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* e que a teoria *queer* pode ajudar a problematizar: o reconhecimento de que a linguagem é o espaço do excesso do nosso discurso, sempre ameaçado pelo hegemónico, seja ele cultural, universal ou nacional. "Je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'aime, como é que se pode em português dizer tal coisa? (Barreno *et al.*, 1974: 245) – é assim o final da carta ao noivo de uma Mariana, universitária de Lisboa, e neste passo encontramos um dos muitos momentos de excesso, enquanto ruptura das normas (neste caso linguísticas), enquanto desmesura, e enquanto estratégia ligada aos conceitos de limite e transgressão, enquanto momentos não dicotómicos, mas tangentes tal como o entende Foucault (1977: 33). (Amaral 2001: 87)

A struggle with the dictionary definitions is at the beginning of both Ana Luísa Amaral's and Karen Jackson Ford's studies; the former noting that, given the difficulty of defining the concept, it might be better to start by naming what it is not (Amaral 1995: 50), the latter calling attention to the peculiarity that the *OED* notes one of the meanings as obsolete, that of excess as "an extravagant violation of law" (Ford 1997: 24). Both also stress that excess cannot be understood ahistorically, that its meaning is conditioned by different epochs and their varied norms. Granted, concepts are never transhistorical, and yet across time there is much that remains. If for the *OED*, an

extravagant violation of law might appear as an outmoded usage, it remains, however, much in force; and was indeed, perhaps one of the best characterizations of the *New Portuguese Letters* in 1971. Ana Luísa Amaral also alerts to the fact that inherent in the concept of excess there always is the notion of something that, by going over the limits, remains as too much, when she quotes Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo: “‘As *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* rompem, extravasam. Daí que se caracterizem pelo excesso’” (Amaral 2001: 86). That notion of something that goes beyond and remains, a supplement as Derrida understood it, is crucial to grasp the effect of the *New Portuguese Letters* because it is not only as a transgressive text, breaking down the barriers of the law that the book was important, but rather, it is in what remains of that act of transgression, in the call for us to remain alert to the systemic, even ontological violence and cruelty of our cherished norms, that the book matters the most. In other words, the force of the *New Portuguese Letters* derives not so much from its scandalous effect but rather from its unceasing probing of the limits: “É o lugar do avesso e me descoso de tudo nele” [“It is the space of the reverse and I unsew myself of all in it”, my translation] (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 264).

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Could it be that what scared the Portuguese state so much, as Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo rightly noted, was the fundamental threat the *New Portuguese Letters* posed not to morality, decency, and all those other pieties, but to the law, understood as the instrument of sovereign power? As if the authors by writing and publishing their collective text had in effect already decided on an answer to their question about whether they would step back when confronted with their own dissolution:

(Pergunto:

Se outra alternativa não nos derem que a guerra aberta contra todo um sistema social que recusamos de base em que tenhamos de destruir tudo, inclusive se necessário as nossas próprias casas, recuaremos?) (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 249)

[(I ask:

If we are offered no other alternative save outright war against an entire social system that we reject *in toto* and are forced to destroy everything, including our own homes if necessary, will we retreat?) (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 329-330)]

The figure usually invoked is that of Antigone. And indeed, Antigone's excess, not so much one of hubris but one of sovereignty, can be invoked for the parallels it has with that of the *New Portuguese Letters*.³ In both what is at stake is all and everything. However, one must see Antigone herself in a different light, as not so much opposing family to state as questioning the very principles upon which the law and the state rest, including that of the family. Recent interpretations of Antigone have indeed questioned the practice of either seeing in her figure a simple opposition between kinship and law, the family and the state as Hegel did, and have rather called for a view of a more excessive, more plural Antigone. Judith Butler in *Antigone's Claim* starts a discussion of Antigone's role in relation to the law that focuses on ambiguity, an ambiguity itself characteristic of excess, an excess that is as much that of the law in its dependency on kinship as of Antigone who would uphold kinship by going beyond it, taking the place of her brothers in their name and in the process also disrupting simple gender categories: "She assumes manhood through vanquishing manhood, but she vanquishes it only by idealizing it" (Butler 2002: 10). Tina Chanter, in her recent book, *Whose Antigone?* (2011), focuses even more on the questions elicited by Butler concerning the notions of citizenship and exclusion, sovereignty and excess, by calling attention to the implication of our culture in slavery and racial exclusion. She offers yet another view on Antigone's excess that I wish to draw on for our reconsideration of the *New Portuguese Letters*:

Perhaps Antigone's excess lies rather in her strategic reemergence in times of political crises (...). If so it is precisely the contingency of the lines demarcating Antigone's exclusion that marks out her story, a contingency that becomes all the more pronounced with each rebirth of the play. (Chanter 2011: 59)

I am not claiming that the *New Portuguese Letters* can just be subsumed under the guise of yet another Antigone reappearance, even if they are that as well: "Nada garantem os fantasmas, sem dúvida; e por isso aqui estamos, e de novo" (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 25). But I do suggest that we should rethink the *New Portuguese Letters*, their appearance at the historical moment marking the apogee of the colonial wars as Ana Luísa Amaral has noted, and inserting themselves in the last crisis that would bring about the final collapse of the state. For the *New Portuguese Letters* are also a forceful denunciation of the colonial war and of the colonization of women: "Colónia do homem, a mulher? Que ideia! Que exagero!..." (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 221) ["The woman the man's colony? What an idea! What an exaggeration ...!"], (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 298)]. The fine but mordant irony of this sentence needs to be related to the only time the term "sovereignty" is directly expressed, in the "Relatório Médico-Psiquiátrico sobre o estado mental de Mariana A." [Medical-Psychiatric Report on the Mental State of Mariana A.], where it is stated matter-of-fact that her husband was fighting in the colonial war: "A doente até há três anos (...) data do seu casamento com António C., hoje em serviço de soberania no Ultramar (...)" (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 147) ["The patient (...) until approximately three years ago (...) the date of her marriage to António C., who is at present doing his military service overseas (...)", (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 203)]. Sovereignty once again is represented as the power of inflicting death and colonial subjugation.

Could it be that one of the forms excess takes in the *New Portuguese Letters* is precisely its force of language, its precision

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in its seeming randomness, its scandalous beauty and its subversive, rebellious stand? As if the power of language indeed was the only possibility left over for redressing injustice and cruelty, for exposing the perversion of the norm, as when in the text with the heading “Pai” [“The Father”], the phrase “Era perversa” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 129) [“She was perverse” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 181)] is repeated in an incantatory way, to characterize the girl who, after being raped by her father, is expelled from the house with the mother’s connivance, for being a “whore”. Or when in the school text “As Palavras” [“Words”], assigned to a child Mariana, we read:

Há palavras boas e palavras más, palavras bonitas e palavras feias. A palavra Portugal é muito bonita, mas a palavra Trancos não é. (...) E agora vou inventar a palavra desinteligente que é o que eu acho que sou por causa da confusão que me fazem as palavras e de estar sempre calada. (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 229-230)

[There are good words and bad words, pretty words and ugly words. The word “Portugal” is a very pretty one, but the word “Trancos” isn’t. (...) And now I’m going to invent the word “disintelligent” seeing as how that’s what I feel I am because words confuse me and because I never say anything. (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 306-307)]

It is not only the perversion of discourse that is exposed and dismantled in these passages, but also the way in which subjects are rendered docile and yet go on refusing their characterization as deviant.

Let me still recall the “Terceira Carta V” [“Third Letter V”] dated from 1/6/71, in its entirety: “Minhas irmãs: Mas o que pode a literatura? Ou antes: o que podem as palavras?” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 197) [“My sisters: But what can literature do? Or rather: what can words do?”], (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 266)]. The answer, referring to Reynaldo Arenas, that is given in the “Segunda Carta VIII” [“Second Letter VII (*sic*)”] of 20/6/71 posits

not only a model for literature as a form of asylum or survival, but also directs the reader to the political function of literature: “‘Nesse tempo sentia-me só e refugiava-me na literatura’” ((Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 220) [“*At that time I felt all alone and took refuge in literature*” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 296)]. Speaking at about the same time, in December 1971, at the Modern Language Association’s Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, Adrienne Rich said:

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. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh. (Rich 2001a: 11)

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Were we to include this text among the myriad different texts that comprise the *New Portuguese Letters* – and that multiplicity, although it is a form of excess, does not follow baroque norms – we could add another voice, another pair of hands to those who authored the text, without anyone being able to separate it from the others. For, and that might also be a form of excess, the astonishing fact of the date of publication of the *New Portuguese Letters* should not be forgotten. Coming at a time in which, though cracks were surely visible, the regime was still strong, the Portuguese population had been held captive in the cave for four decades and any hope for political renewal seemed to have been dashed after 1945, the force and surprise of a text like the *New Portuguese Letters* is considerable. But we are now

forty years beyond that date and should ask ourselves in which way things might have changed, if the perversions denounced by the *New Portuguese Letters* have been abolished or at least recognized for what they are? Or whether instead much remains to be done. Speaking in 1997, at the University of Massachussetts, Adriene Rich had to note that “[n]ever has the silence of displacement been so deafening and so omnipresent. Poetic language lives, labors, amidst this displacement; and so does political wisdom” (Rich 2001b: 151). And yet a few years later, in our present situation, with the crumbling of gains achieved by decades of struggle for women rights, for human rights, threatened with a return to impossibly outdated forms of political organization and sovereignty, to a stress on national ideology that has led to the catastrophes we all know, with the dissimulation of politicians rampant and even devoid of any shame, with the ever greater exclusion of human beings from citizenship, of trafficking in human beings, is it not time of finally heeding the injunction of Joana in “Texto de honra ou de interrogar”: “Digo: Chega. É tempo de gritar: chega. E formarmos um bloco com os nossos corpos” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 2010: 250) [“I say: Enough. It is time to cry: Enough. And to form a barricade with our bodies” (Barreno/Horta/Costa 1975: 330)].

Much more will be needed to go on thinking through what excess means, but we need to separate excess from scandal, remove from it the notion of pathology, refuse to let the law systematically create ever growing pools of exclusion and rigid borders that allocate what is normal and what is deviant and excessive. In what turned out to be his last book Tony Judt also enjoined us to rethink our responsibilities and our rights when he commented on our excessive focus on material gain:

Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost but have no idea what they

are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: Is it fair? Is it just? Is it right? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world? Those used to be the *political* questions, even if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to pose them. (Judt 2010: 1-2)

The re-vision of old texts that Adrienne Rich talked about as being an absolute form of survival for women has become an equally imperative form of survival for everyone. Perhaps more even than a poetics of excess, what we need is a politics of excess. Not excess as it has been understood, as an aberrant deviation from a law supposedly just, but a form of excess as a denouncement of a law that is blatantly unjust. Excess then could be seen as the remainder that might allow for some hope in a more just world, a different kind of state, a sovereignty that is both individual and collective and not merely administered for the more efficient apportioning of death. Could it be that we start with a re-vision and a re-reading of that excess that goes by the name of the *New Portuguese Letters*? <<

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NOTES

[1] This essay was written during my stay as Keeley Fellow at Wadham College, Oxford, a rare opportunity to engage in research, and I would like to express my thanks to the Warden and other colleagues, especially Cláudia Pazos Alonso, for their hospitality and true conviviality, and above all for the stimulating exchange of ideas.

[2] Darlene Sadlier's seminal study, *The Question of How: Women Writers and New Portuguese Literature* (1988), rightly highlighted the importance of *New Portuguese Letters* for all subsequent Portuguese literature and in special for women authors, and it remains important. Anna Klobucka's study of Mariana Alcoforado, *The Portuguese Nun: Formation of a National Myth* (2000), remains the most extensive study of the "source text" and its numerous controversial aspects. Afterwards, various contributions have expanded and refined Sadlier's analysis, keeping the *New Portuguese Letters* as a fundamental marker for Portuguese contemporary literature. Of these I think special attention is due to the book published by Hilary Owen in 2000, *Portuguese Women's Writing, 1972 to 1986: Reincarnations of a Revolution*, and, more recently, the book co-authored by Hilary Owen and Cláudia Pazos Alonso: *Antigone's Daughters?: Gender, Genealogy and the Politics of Authorship in 20th-century Portuguese Women's Writing* (2011). In reference to the latter I would like to say that the way in which the authors revisit *New Portuguese Letters* is especially significant in itself, how it engages with what one can see as a canon of Portuguese literature by women, and how it dialogues with important theoretical developments, namely, the work of Judith Butler. Thus, even though this book takes *New Portuguese Letters* as a point of departure to read Portuguese literature before and after it, rather than developing a sustained analysis of *New Portuguese Letters*, what it manages to say in a brief space is still highly significant. For instance, commenting on tradition, blood lineage and the figure of Antigone, the authors note: "In their subversive approach to blood ties, death, and the sacrificial order of war, the Three Marias mark their most significant departure from the Antigonean model, as posed by Irigaray. (...) One alternative to patrilinearity that is outlined is not the mother-daughter line, but rather that of aunt and niece which the Three Marias term 'a spontaneous, philosophically minded offshoot of the female line'" (Owen/Alonso 2011: 29). In this and other passages Owen and Pazos Alonso raise some crucial questions that would need to be dealt with more extensively than is my purpose and ability in this brief essay.

[3] Hilary Owen and Cláudia Pazos Alonso treat this in their "Introduction" to *Antigone's Daughters?* and problematize the notion of ascribing to the authors of *New Portuguese Letters* the traditional reading of Antigone, reflecting rightly on the text's embodiment of "the paradox of being a founding text that is antifoundationalist" (Owen/Alonso 2010: 30-31). Although fully in agreement with such a view, I still think that the figure of Antigone, if read other than traditionally, as Tina Chanter does, for instance, remains of key importance to understand some of the political import of *New Portuguese Letters*.

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