

EXCESSES:

THE POETRY OF FLORBELA ESPANCA and Irene LISBOA

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“E Marx continuou:
— Assim, primeiramente, está o Homem face à Natureza...
Eu implorei:
— Não digas Homem, diz ser humano.
Mas ele não me ouviu. (...) As mulheres tratam dos homens
e os homens fazem ciência.”

Isabel Barreno, *A Morte da Mãe*

“A transgressão: é esse o meu limite”

Ivette K. Centeno

In a well-known letter to João Gaspar Simões, Fernando Pessoa wrote:

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A meu ver... a função do crítico deve concentrar-se em três pontos: (1) estudar o artista exclusivamente como artista, e não fazendo entrar no estudo mais do homem que o que seja rigorosamente preciso para explicar o artista; (2) buscar o que poderemos chamar a explicação *central* do artista... ; (3) compreendendo a essencial inexplicabilidade da alma humana, cercar estes estudos e estas buscas de uma leve aura poética de desentendimento. Este terceiro ponto tem talvez qualquer coisa de diplomático, mas até com a verdade, meu querido Gaspar Simões, há que haver diplomacia. (*apud* Simões, 1971:33)

Pessoa's letter dates from 1931, and the first advice that we find in it can be explained within the anti-biographical tendency that informed Modernism. With regard to the second advice, Pessoa develops a catalogue of types of poetic personality (the lyrical, the dramatic, the epic, etc.), which do not interest me for my present point. It is his third piece of advice that I appropriate here and which seems to me to be useful for all of us who, in one form or another, work with the always fluid material which is poetic writing, which, even though touched by that "light aura of incomprehension", continues to travel best, I believe, though that main road which is communication. After all, as Hélène Cixous says, to engage ourselves with a text

implies us also in its process of creation" (Cixous, 1988:148). If the truths of poetry are always oblique in their making, they are much more oblique in their reading. For to read and to interpret are, to quote Silvina Rodrigues Lopes, "uma aprendizagem do incerto" (Lopes, 1990:7). "Even with truth, my dear Gaspar Simões, diplomacy is needed", warned Pessoa in his letter. "Tell all the Truth / But tell it slant" (P. 1129), Dickinson wrote. The truths of poetry are told pretending to be truths which are really true, but which are to us, sometimes, inaccessible. Those truths are served, I believe, by different strategies, in case the poet is a woman.

In the symbolic order sexual difference is not accidental. "On ne naît pas femme, on le devient", Simone de Beauvoir has written, more than forty years ago (Beauvoir, 1949:246). Revising the traditional identification of "sex" with "man" or "woman", Beauvoir would open the path to the establishing by the feminists, mainly Anglo-american, of the category "gender", as the sexual difference social constructed. For culture is experienced in the body, as much as it is inscribed in what is, after all, part of it: the mind, or the reason, or artistic creativity. It was in this sense that, exploring, as neurologist, a topic that feminists always defended (the impossibility of the existence of "pure reason" and, therefore, the necessary reevaluation of the role of emotions in the intricate of the human mind), Damásio spoke about the "sentir da paisagem temporal" as "temporalmente justaposto à percepção ou recordação de algo que não faz parte do corpo", but which is, by that feeling, qualified (Damásio, 1995:16). Thus, what the body produces in its artistic dimension is necessarily informed by culture and society. From this perspective, the language called "neutral" is, in fact, like Luce Irigaray notices, "gendered" (Irigaray: 1985). Especially if we start from the notion that there is no neutral ground in the unequal system we live in.

I shall not detain myself very long about the problem of the existence of a female poetic Portuguese tradition. The

"Shakespearian sisters", of whom Virginia Woolf spoke in the beginning of the century in her famous *A Room of One's Own* (1929), are practically as absent as are the "Camões' sisters" from Portuguese literature (with some exceptions like Marquesa de Alorna, the nun-poets of the Baroque period, or very little known cases like Maria da Felicidade Browne, a Romantic poet). And yet, by way of the use of masks, it was always possible for the Portuguese male poets to create a female poetic voice, the very proof of this starting with the poetic subject of the "Cantigas de Amigo". Modernism, a movement that, from both sides of the Atlantic ocean, bore at the least no women (the exception, in the Anglo-american world being H.D., Hilda Doolittle, who hid behind those androgynous initials), when it was not characterized by misogyny ("Se ao menos tudo isto se passasse numa terra de mulheres bonitas! / Mas as mulheres portuguesas são a minha impotência!", wrote Almada Negreiros in "A Cena do Ódio" (Negreiros, 1971:29)), has in Mário de Sá-Carneiro the paradigm of the poet invested with a feminine sensibility, the one of "uma rapariga estrangeira" that Mário de Sá-Carneiro confesses wishing to have been (Sá-Carneiro, 1973:104), image of himself that the poet in "Inigualável", projects in a feminine "you" "toda de violetas / e flébil de cetim... / [com] dedos longos de marfim" (Sá-Carneiro, 1979:105).

That proliferation of selves in Modernism can be seen, in itself, as a kind of excess. And it would leave marks in women poets too. Before I return to this point and begin to speak about Florbela Espanca, let me briefly discuss the several meanings that the term *excess* will here bear.

Although it is easier to define excess by negation (that is, by what it is not), it seems to me that we can roughly see it as meaning 1) the distortion of the balanced; 2) what goes beyond the limits; 3) ostentation and extravagance; 4) surplus or superfluity. In this last definition excess might coincide with absence, excess by default, or, as I call it, excess of absence — a

concept that I will use in relation to the poetry of Irene Lisboa.¹ From this more than simple categorisation, we might induce that excess can be equated with transgression, thus being found in what disrespects the established boundaries. I do not think this to be exactly the case. As Julia Kristeva reminds us, "[t]he poetic word, polyvalent and multidetermined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognised culture" (Kristeva: 1980:65). In its double sense of maximisation of meanings and symbolic overcharge, isn't poetry always excess, for is it not always a state of transgression?

"[L]e langage même des transgressions du langage" - this is how Barthes defines poetic language (*apud* Pimenta, 1978:88). And yet, it is also Barthes, who, in his study on Sade, Fourier and Loyola, defends that excess is not only transgressive, but also constructive, because it implies a new language (Barthes, 1971). In that regard, it might be seen as a sub-version, another version of the symbolic artistic construction that is "poiesis". Thus seen, excess may be identified not only with the marginal, but also with what is unique, with the exception, the different, with what creates a code which continually resists normalisation. And which deals with "moments when structures are shaken, when language refuses to lie down meekly", when "the marginal is brought into sudden focus, or intelligibility itself refused"; in this regard, excess might "reveal not only the conditions of possibility within which women's writing exists, but what it would be like to revolutionize them" (Jacobus, 1986:34).

Transgression of transgression. "A transgressão: é esse o meu limite" — Yvette Centeno's poetic problematization of the tangent line between limit and transgression (to which Foucault refers in "Preface to Transgression" [Foucault, 1977]), opens possibilities for what is defined by the very absence of limits.² We shouldn't be surprised, then, that in this approach to excess, the concept of ambiguity is a central one, for it deals with the

paradox of silence as a form of language — of infinitely more relevance, I think, in poetry written by women. For women's writing, if connected with female experience, even metamorphosed by poetic pretence, often resists fitting within that universal neutral (which is, in fact, the male gender). In other words, "gender" is not only a question of sexual difference, but also a question of power. That is maybe why Margaret Homans, an American scholar, defends the existence of a constant in poetic identity in women writers: *ambivalence*, conscious or unconscious over the power of the woman's voice (Homans, 1980).

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Having made these preliminary statements, necessary, I believe, to contextualize my ideas, I shall now move to the first of the two Portuguese poets about whom I will write — Florbela Espanca.

Living in Portugal in the beginning of the century in a society strongly male-dominated, both from the social and the artistic point of view, Espanca expresses a sense of difference and of artistic and social maladjustment. When she writes, the sonnet as a form is already outdated as is the centering of the lyric self. Behind her, but after all in a tradition that was not hers, were António Nobre, Camilo Pessanha, Teixeira de Pascoaes, Antero de Quental, Eugénio de Castro (some, like Nobre, still connected to Romanticism, others, like Pessanha, to Symbolism), and the Modernists (Fernando Pessoa, Almada-Negreiros, Mário de Sá-Carneiro), the latter having fully expanded the timid incursions of the former on de-psychologization. José Régio had barely made his appearance (the first number of *Presença* would only be published in 1927) with his metaphysical worries and the open use of the first person — dramatization of the singular me or I, a different variation of the Modernism's *personae*. Espanca also writes before the social poets of the forties, and therefore she misses the elements of social realism present in their poetics.

Yet, the influence of some of these writers on her poetry was not an unimportant one. From Antero de Quental she inherited the form of the sonnet and certain stylistic effects; from António Nobre, the confessional tone, the insistence on "saudade", and the morbidity. And from Mário de Sá-Carneiro, a suicidal like her, as Urbano Tavares Rodrigues rightly reminds us, she inherited the egocentric preoccupations. However, she pushes the inherited traits to further limits, with special emphasis on the formal aspect. A polished form in its own right and highly chiselled by her, the sonnet becomes Espanca's privileged, if not obsessive, tool for expression in poetry.

A dislocated aesthete, Espanca remains ostensibly unaware of the social realities of her time — the Republican Revolution in 1910, all the revolutionary period of the following decade, Salazar's Estado Novo shortly before she died, the beginning of the establishment of the dictatorship. In her book on Florbela Espanca, Agustina Bessa-Luís writes: "O esteta é o resultado dessa angústia que o mundo provoca, o que é uma espécie de medo dos grandes espaços. A abstracção é, de certo modo, a redução do mundo exterior" (Bessa-Luís, 1984:19).

That fear of the big spaces is symbolically transposed, in Espanca's poetry, to the use of the sonnet, a self-contained form, which paradoxically allows for expansion in content. Thus what we see is a semantics of excess served by that delimited and contained form of fixed rules. Espanca speaks of that "mal", which is not Antó's, translated instead into the "dreadful ill of being alone", "o pavoroso mal de ser sozinha! /... pavoroso e atroz mal de trazer / Tantas almas a rir dentro da minha!" ("Loucura"). To compensate the lack, Espanca's female poetic subject is often adorned with ornaments, with jewels and rich accessories, which function as a sort of lost paradise, informed by innocence — an epigone of Childhood. It is a world that does not fit in the pragmatism of Adulthood, equivalent to the social space. To recreate that world, symbols of wealth are needed. These symbols, in Espanca's case, are the jewels or an opulent

language; for the jewels function as imitations of those moments of power and brilliance, a fantasised protection.

The tension established between true lack and that language is included in the wider tension that exists between parsimony and excess. Therefore, the most precious verses, the most rare, are those unsaid, those unexposed to verbal sharing, and those which, protected by the shield of opulence:

Deixa dizer-te os lindos versos raros
Que a minha boca tem pra te dizer!

...

Mas, meu amor, eu não tos digo ainda,
Que a boca da mulher é sempre linda
Se dentro guarda um verso que não diz!

["Os versos que te fiz"]

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While Eugénio de Andrade may write "O silêncio é a minha maior tentação", thus taking silence as a temptation and not as a requirement, Espanca displays a completely different view of silence in this poem where the image that connects the ideas of the text is one of implosion and excess — felt as something that must be controlled. Used by Espanca in a context when, as I said above, the poetic practice more characteristic of post-symbolist Modernism was distant from the confessional lyricism centred in the person of the poet, both the sonnet and the stylistic devices function ambiguously: while sharpening a sense of difference, they also attenuate the ill-being in a world inhabited by others: "Eu fui a que nas ruas esmolou // Fui descobrir a Índia e nunca mais / Voltei! Fui essa nau que não voltou..." ("Lembrança"). Excess often seems to mask a broadening of the desire by way of narrowing the real desire. In Espanca's poetry, at a primary level of analysis, we find the unleashed passion, charged with preciosities of meanings:

Tanta opala que eu tinha! Tanta, tanta!
Foi por lá que as achei e que as perdi!
Mostrem-me esse País onde nasci!
Mostrem-me o Reino de que sou Infanta!

...

["Nostalgia"]

16>17 "Multipliquei-me para me sentir", wrote Pessoa; "Eu quero amar, amar perdidamente" ("Amar"), Espanca says. In the absence of a true Muse, the poetic word becomes the Muse — it is through the word, taken to excessive moments, that desire is made extreme: in this way, the jewels truly assuage absence. Interestingly enough, the hands "magritas, afiladas / Tão brancas" of Espanca's sonnet "As minhas mãos", resemble the hands "esguias", metaphorized into "fusos brancos de arminho", from Violante de Cysneiros, that female *persona* created by Armando Cortes-Rodrigues, under the poetic auspices of Pessoa himself. In that regard, they replicate a padronized image of woman.³

Sometimes, the poetic subject of Espanca's sonnets exhausts herself in the search for what may be seen as an anti-ideal:

Ser a moça mais linda do povoado,
Pisar sempre contente o mesmo trilho,

...

Meu Deus, dai-me esta calma, esta pobreza!
Dou por elas meu Trono de Princesa
E todos os meus Reinos de Ansiedade!

["Rústica"]

To be "a moça mais linda do povoado / pisa[ndo] sempre contente o mesmo trilho" is not a status equivalent to that of being a poet. The poet is, in Espanca's words, "mais alto", "maior do que os homens", has "de mil desejos o esplendor", possesses "as manhãs de oiro e de cetim" ("Ser Poeta"). Poetry, condens[ing] the world in a sole cry ["condensando o mundo

num só grito”], means here a distillation of experience — and in that sense it is excess.

Anti-Faustian is the intention of the request, since what is offered in exchange is what is mostly reclaimed in the Faustian myth: Thrones and Kingdoms, the true symbols of Power. In this transaction deviated from its traditional symbolism, an offer is also made: a “kingdom of Anxiety”. Implicit is the awareness of the impossibility of the exchange, the awareness of the fraud, either because the nature of the kingdom and of the throne are worth nothing in the market of canonical values, or because what is wanted is not subject to the exchange.

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In 1936, Irene Lisboa published *Um Dia e Outro Dia*, under the male pseudonym João Falco. Before her, in our century, the only well known Portuguese woman poet had been Florbela Espanca. The decade had begun with Espanca’s suicide, in 1930, and would be marked by the poetry of the authors of *Presença* (José Régio, Alberto de Serpa, Casais Monteiro, José Gomes Ferreira, at a certain time). The forties would be marked by the social realist poets (Sidónio Muralha, Mário Dionísio, João José Cochofel, Joaquim Namorado). Irene Lisboa (who was born in 1892 and who died in 1958, and whose poetry would go from the thirties and fifties) would inaugurate a new kind of writing, borrowed from the “banality of the common existence” (o “comum existir”, of which she speaks).

Neither fitting in the social realist perspective, although she shared with some social realist writers political preoccupations, nor in the subjectivity of the writers of *Presença*, Irene Lisboa would develop a kind of writing of “zero degree”, making use of the unfinished sentence, the long line, renouncing the recurrence of complex figures of speech — “prosa aos bocadinhos”, as some critics called it; poems like this one, about a piece of string, from her second book of poetry, published in 1937, *Outono Havias de Vir*:

Sobre o tapete de ponto de cruz que bordei há
oito anos e tanto me tem acompanhado com as
suas flores de cinco cores...
Tão belas e abertas como se fossem estampadas...
Caiu, ficou de ontem para hoje um fiapo de guita
dobrado.
(...)

Maravilhoso acaso, maravilhosas lições do acaso.
Valor do muito pouco.
Do parco e do inexcedido (...)

Dançar assim!
Desenhar assim!
Tanta elegância num gesto parado!
Aqueles braços que se adiantam...
A frouxíssima ondulação de uma única linha, corpo
e pernas...

E para ali ficou.
Até quando?
Até sempre.
O sempre da humana memória.
Fugacíssimo, mas pedagógico, influente.

[*Outono Havia de Vir, Latente Triste*, 308-9]

"[U]ma voz livre de mulher que, embora socialmente presa à sua classe, ultrapass[ou] os limites até então permitidos às mulheres, algemadas durante séculos ao império feminino", José Gomes Ferreira had written about Irene Lisboa. And José Régio would consider her lines as "gritos ou pedradas; ou reticências; ou onomatopeias; ou repetições; ou como frases inacabadas..."; Irene Lisboa, whose work, in 1959, Carlos de Oliveira, in *O Aprendiz de Feiticeiro*, was to consider "uma obra singular à espera de leitores". Irene Lisboa writing:

...
Não são versos o que faço,
embora assim o julgue,
às vezes.
Digo coisas soltas...

...
Deve ser isso.
Não faço versos,
sou muito explicativa...
Escrevo como penso,
tudo pontuando
e limitando...

[*Um Dia e Outro Dia*, 92]

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or

Uma estética,
ou arte de retalhos,
de insignificâncias...

[*Um Dia e Outro Dia*, 182]

and thus defining her poetics:

Escrever deselegantemente,
sem alinho
nem compostura,
sem aquela graça
e aquela medida,
aquele fio, que
da ampulheta do senso estético
corre...
é negar a arte de escrever!
Negá-la-ei!
(...)

[*Um Dia e Outro Dia*, 147]

Irene Lisboa and her revolt against the institutionalized discipline, both of the received aesthetics and of the régime of Salazar:

As crianças cantavam.
Gritavam:
Os laranjais em flor!
A terra portuguesa!

Reles coisa a música, a língua.
Exclamar.

E o que bole dentro das cabeças?
Está parado.
A boca é que trejeita, que se desfigura entre as
faces muito sérias.

Os laranjais em flor...
E porque não antes os batatais ou os favais?
Os favais!
Tão cheirosos e tão bonitos.
Não está consagrada a palavra.
(...)

[*Outono Havia de Vir, Latente Triste*, 297]

Irene Lisboa subverts the admonition of António Nobre in *Só*, that claimed to be the authoritative voice of the national anguish. "Mas tende cuidado / Não vos faça mal / Que é o livro mais triste / Que há em Portugal" - thus opens António Nobre's *Só*. As if in reply to that voice, Irene Lisboa would inscribe, in the title page of *Outono Havia de Vir, Latente Triste*, another admonition, this one fully unauthorized: "Ao que vos parecer verso chamai verso / e ao resto chamai prosa." (283). This is consonant with the fact that Irene Lisboa's poetry privileges the form of diary, a diary "trabalhado e desmontado", as Paula Morão, the major responsible for the re-discovery in our days of the poetry of Irene Lisboa, notices (*Um Dia e Outro Dia* and *Outono Havia de Vir* were published together in 1991). This form, because it privileges the discursive, the length of the sentences and of the lines, the verbal explosion, seems

antagonical to the sonnet, the form that Espanca used to express herself in poetry. Yet, it is also a form of excess.

Contention of form and explosion of meaning, in Espanca's case, correspond, in Lisboa's case, to contention of meaning and explosion in form: from a language of opulence, made of "realms beyond", we are taken to a "poor aesthetics, an "art of insignificancies":

Não era a minha alma que eu queria ter.

Esta alma já feita, com seu toque de sofrimento
e de resignação, sem pureza nem afoiteza.

Queria ter uma alma nova.

Decidida, capaz de tudo ousar.

Nunca esta que tanto conheço, compassiva, torturada, de trazer por casa.

>>

[*Um Dia e Outro Dia*, 296]

Thus, Lisboa's poetry evolves like a canvas made of fragments and apparently disconnected pieces, that flows at the pace of memory and time. No wonder that her poetry privileges the form of diary, where "the designation of the poems by days neither dates them nor places them in a real temporality, but in a false time, without calendar" (Morão, *apud* Lisboa, 1991: 10). Unlike Penelope, because not weaving, but sewing (a patchwork, as she says), Lisboa would be nearer to Ariadne in the way she unwinds her thread. Lisboa's poetry operates from an ambiguous time, which is both spiral and circular — thus near to what Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, in her study *O Tempo das Mulheres*, would identify with "a woman's time" (Magalhães, 1987), characterized by the indifference towards the irreversibility of its flowing, a time of resisting linear time by the insistence to a point of excess in the repetition of the originary gestures, where "to write and think form the essential core of conscience which (...) endlessly searches itself, finding each time a single answer, that of the enigma of being, to whom nothing more is left but, like Sisyphus, to begin again" (Morão, 1988: 12). <<

NOTES

[1] I believe that this same concept can be applied to the poetry of Luiza Neto Jorge, in its characteristics of compression and latent violence. There is no space here to explore this question, but what Geoffrey Hartman writes about some Anglo-American poets could also be appropriate in the case of Luiza Neto Jorge: "Whereas, with many poets, criticism has to confront their overt, figurative excess, with some purifiers of language criticism has to confront an elliptical and chaste mode of expression. The danger is not fatty degeneration but lean degeneration: a powerful, appealing anorexia" (Hartman, 1980:130). No wonder then that Fernando Cabral Martins says about Neto Jorge's poetry: "Esta poesia é partes sem um todo. É o fruto do trabalho de fazer a linguagem mudar de sítio. É a volta e a revolta dos sentidos, a invenção e a revelação das palavras. Múltiplas, como uma fogueira de que se vissem só as centelhas (o sentido)" (Martins, 1988:39).

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[2] "... the limit opens violently onto the limitless, finds itself suddenly carried away by the content it had rejected and fulfilled by this alien plenitude which invades it to the core of its being. Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being ..." (Foucault, 1977:34).

[3] Cf. the last text, significantly called "A mim propria - De ha dois anos", which closes the collection of poems with which Violante de Cysneiros contributes to n° 2 of *Orpheu*:

As minhas mãos são esguias,
São fusos branco d'arminho,
Onde fiaste e não fias
O Sonho do teu carinho.

As minhas mãos são esguias,
Côr de rosa são as unhas.
(...)

Quando Eu as fico polindo
Perpassa nellas em ancia
A tua boca sorrindo...

Mas os meus dedos em i
Dizem a longa distância
Que vai de Mim para Ti.

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