

**PATHS OF DELIRIUM:  
POSTCOLONIAL *RETORNO* IN *AS NAUS***

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**Resumo:** Este ensaio analisa o potencial crítico do romance *As Naus*, de António Lobo Antunes, através da reflexão sobre o delírio como estratégia divergente de construção narrativa. Partindo do fim trágico do colonialismo português em África, a narração inverte a polaridade da viagem de exploração descrevendo a trajectória dos ex-colónos como momento anti-épico. As imagens oníricas condensam a natureza esquizofrénica do *retornado*, citação paradoxal dos heróis da aventura colonial e sujeito castrado na impossibilidade de assumir o papel testemunhal sobre a memória da perda. A palavra “delira” e denuncia um presente onde os fantasmas imperiais continuam a atormentar a consciência nacional, pois Portugal ainda parece incapaz de reconhecer os traços daquele passado colonial no seu próprio rosto desfigurado.

**Palavras-chave:** *As Naus*, retornados, colonialismo, memória, delírio.

**Abstract:** This essay analyses the critical potential of António Lobo Antunes’s *As Naus* by focusing on delirium as a divergent strategy of writing construction. Starting from the tragic end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, the narration reverses the polarity of the former colonizers’ exploratory journey, turning it into an anti-epic trajectory. The hallucinatory images summarise the schizophrenic nature of the *retornado* as a paradoxical quotation of the heroes of the colonial venture, but also as a castrated subject unable to testify to the memory of the loss. Words “rave” and denounce a present reality where imperial ghosts keep haunting the national conscience, given that Portugal still seems incapable of recognising the scars of that colonial past on its own disfigured face.

**Keywords:** *As Naus*, retornados, colonialism, memory, delirium.

Um dia  
a lagartixa  
quis ser dinossauro  
Convencida  
saltou pra rua  
montada em blindados  
pra disfarçar a sua insignificância  
[...]  
"Ó pobre e reles lagartixa  
condenada  
à fria solidão  
das paredes enormes e nuas  
tu não sabes que os dinossauros  
são fósseis  
pre-históricos?  
João Melo, *A Lagartixa frustrada*, 1986

E contudo perdendo-te encontrei.  
[...]  
Maior do que qualquer império  
foi a aventura de partir e de chegar.  
Manuel Alegre, *Regresso*, 1995

In the late 1980s, little over a decade after the *Revolução* that had brought hope to the streets of Lisbon in the form of carnation flowers, Portugal was re-emerging from the depths of the Atlantic as a derelict nation, marred by a disastrous economic situation, as well as by the wars experienced in Africa. Nonetheless, there was a certain “*allegria di naufragio*”<sup>1</sup> at having survived, though not without consequences, over five decades of Salazarist dictatorship. The emancipation of the *províncias ultramarinas*, which paradoxically coincided with the nation’s own liberation from the same oppressive regime, brought about a phase of redefining a Portuguese national identity that long last revolved around Europe, though was quite problematically unable to address the scars of a past that felt far too recent. The arrival of thousands of displaced individuals following the independence of its former colonies was particularly influential not only due to the manner in which this *retorno* of the Euro-African population occurred but, more importantly, due to the stigmatization that *retornados*, or “pedras vivas” (Lourenço 1992: p. 38) from the recently-lost empire, were forced to endure. As unequivocal

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to *Allegria di Naufragi*, name given by Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti to one of his collections of poems, published in 1919. The oxymoron translates the ambivalent sentiment felt by soldiers returning from the war front following World War I, grateful at having survived such a deadly conflict, but carrying all of the emotional and mental wounds associated with their veteran status.

proof of denial related to the Portuguese' self-image, the *retorno* symbolized an undertow movement of trauma related to the material loss of Africa, followed by a lack of a public discourse able to embrace the emotional wounds left behind. The disappearance of this universe of reference rendered not only the *retornados* and ex-soldiers, but also Portugal and its inquisitive youth desperate to find answers regarding the past, “sobreviventes de um império de lembranças”<sup>2</sup>. In light of the multitude of experiences that arose from the end of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, the trajectory described by the return of the nation “to itself” acquires a different direction and meaning in that it is the configuration of a pluralistic traumatic memory that is capable of generating ghosts, and which requires reflection on “esse outro tempo do império” which, intersecting with the present and its permanence, “continua a mover-se” (Domingos, p. 143). The figure of the *retornado*, crucial to the comprehension of the contradictions intrinsic to Lusitanian colonialism, is a direct testimony of an overseas reality through which the country believed it could mirror itself, but of which it ultimately remained ignorant. The empire, until recently an essential element of that *ser português* so stubbornly defended in a war lasting thirteen years, constitutes the object of a metaphorical amputation which, as suggested by the pioneering interpretation of Eduardo Lourenço (1992), was experienced without apparent trauma, by virtue of that problematically dreamlike and idealized experience that defines the nation's relationship with its overseas experience. Portugal's postponement of the nation's confrontation with its responsibilities on a historical level has inevitably exacerbated the sense of alienation experienced by the Euro-African population and by former soldiers who took part in the war, diminishing the scope of an event that, both materialistically and symbolically, represents a significant opportunity to rethink how the country views itself.

It was, above all, the literary dimension that gave an embodiment to the trauma, making writing, both in its poetic forms and in prose, an instrument able to make up for historiographic gaps. In a political climate almost completely indifferent to the African past, which defined Portuguese democracy in its earlier stages, authors such as João de Melo (*Autópsia de um Mar de Ruínas*, 1984), Manuel Alegre (*Jornada de África*, 1989), António Lobo Antunes (*Memória de Elefante* 1979, *Os Cus de Judas* 1979, *Fado Alexandrino* 1983), Lúcia Jorge (*A costa dos murmúrios*, 1988) not only denounced, mainly through works of fiction, the enormous void left by the absence of real debate on issues such as

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<sup>2</sup> Expression used by Edoardo Lourenço in his encounter with author António Lobo Antunes during the third annual *Festival Internacional de Cultura*, held in Cascais in 2017.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW4b26pumxI>

colonial violence and decolonization, but they also contributed to shifting the perspective axis through which Portugal, the embodiment of peripheral Europe, long defined itself as the center of a secular imperial project<sup>3</sup>. Texts “*de lado de cá do mar*” (Ribeiro 2004: p. 179) which allow us to define Portugal as a “semiperiferia que imagina o centro” (Ribeiro 2004: p. 13) and in which the production of alternative images reveals the fallacious nature of the discourse which would indissolubly link the nation's greatness and survival to an existence that goes beyond its borders, to the fragile but stubborn “crença de que na recuperação e sustentação do império estaria o segredo de Portugal voltar a ser” (Ribeiro 2004: p. 424). The symbolic de-construction and re-semanticization of the relationship that Portugal's national identity retains with its imagination in these works is based above all on a process of desubjectivization, necessary for the change of direction, for the traumatic awareness of the need to rebuild the nation, starting by directly confronting the “cadáveres reais” (Ribeiro 2004: p. 425). The matter at hand is one of a series of recognizable but, at the same time, transfigured and disfigured physiognomies, such as the visage of those who have witnessed the chaos of war, itself a part of those “acontecimentos que não aconteceram<sup>4</sup>” that, like with the *retorno*, require a space in which to be shared. In these works, the *retorno* of the nation to a more introspective identity, as opposed to an international imperial one, does not create a continuity link to the past, rather, it takes place under the sign of a profound rupture in the national rhetoric and takes advantage of the ruins of this rupture to insert said continuity link within a suspended time, wherein the mutual rejection between past and present can finally be made visible to the conscience. Returning acquires the fullness of an intransitive and problematic action from the moment it does not identify the illusory possibility of an overlap between time and space, but the assumption of a wound on the part of the subject, that “living being who made himself absolutely present to himself and who, ‘discovering that he can no longer coincide with his self-representations,’ in the act of enunciation, in saying I, rejects his experiences in a bottomless past.” (Agamben 2016: p. 114)

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<sup>3</sup> This essay draws on the analysis carried out by Margarida Calafate Ribeiro who in *Uma História de Regressos. Império, Guerra Colonial and Pós-colonialismo* (Porto, 2004), adopts the classical concept of *translatio imperii* and the definition of sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos relating to the construction of Portugal as “imaginação do centro” to re-read the Portuguese peripheral identity in the light symbolic constructions linked to the idea of an empire.

<sup>4</sup> Expression used by José Gil in an interview conducted by Renato Mendes, *Portugal e a síndrome de Lilibut*, for the online magazine *Trópico*, for the occasion of the publication of the book *Portugal hoje. O medo de existir*, in which the philosopher proposes a lucid analysis on contemporary Portuguese society.

It is this narrative *do regresso* (Ribeiro, 1998: pp. 125,149) that *As Naus*, Portuguese author António Lobo Antunes' seventh novel and first published in 1988, reflects in its text. The work is built around the subversion of the journey of the ancient caravels which virtually make their way towards Lusitanian beaches, transporting the remains of an empire which continues to torment the collective imagination in the guise of the *retornados*. Each chapter, marked by an explicit historical disenchantment with the perception of Portugal as a nation devoted to maritime exploration, is built on a script capable of reversing the sense of discovery, no longer translating it into the realization of an identity that it seeks "beyond itself", thus delaying the confrontation with its own limits, but as a transformation of its own physiognomy, imprisoned by a traumatic awareness of the fragility of Portuguese identity. The disintegrating empire, which the poet seems to cram into a dense, demanding and at times claustrophobic prose, is told through a delusional as well as revealing symbolism, the expression of a painful re-enactment of the past that interferes with the present. The descending parable described corresponds to a movement of the emptying of time and redefines the terms of the encounter with the profound truth about the national ontological reality which, recovered from the dimension of the unspeakable, emerges transfigured into a frenzy capable of contouring this change thanks to a word as dreamlike as plastic. The delirium therefore, in addition to constituting a distinctive feature of the narrative, is conceived as the opportunity to reformulate the representations of identity starting from the elements that most perturb it and that resurface within the story in the form of contemporary characters protagonists of a historical trauma that transcends their personal lives. Of course, the caravels docking at harbour are no longer the mighty vassals that turned their sterns to the wise warnings given by the *Velho do Restelo*<sup>5</sup>, but figures with a contemporary, "intermittent" identity, marred by a sense of profound eradication and acting as the last bastions of an ancient memory, as reflected by their anachronistic names, among which appear those of Pedro Álvares Cabral, Diogo Cão, and Vasco da Gama. They are derelict individuals, the spirits of a nation tormented by a fate of guilt and following a path of atonement without actual conviction, lost in a sort of sleepwalking-like state brought on by a dreamed-up African reality that isolates it from the degrading and unrecognizable present:

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<sup>5</sup> Figure introduced in the national epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (Canto IV, stanzas 94-104), through which Camões gives voice to those who spoke out against overseas companies, condemning the avarice and thirst for fame that moved the Portuguese.

Cheirava a calor e a desperdícios e de tempos a tempos farrapos de jornal erguiam uma brisa de notícias de calçada. Urinei à sombra de uma camioneta de fruta e enquanto desabotava a berguilha e o ar se tingia de fragrâncias de pêssego lembrei-me de Loanda às seis da tarde, à hora a que os barcos largavam para a pesca diminuindo a fumejar entre troncos de palmeiras<sup>6</sup>.

The use of the story in *As Naus* always points to its displacement outside the canon of national rhetoric so that it is the decontextualization that causes the first landslide in the identities of characters and readers alike, forcing them to assume the instability of the coordinates that are provided to them and that alternatively transform Lisbon, at the beat of a paragraph, from the city of *Jerónimos* (undergoing construction), to the post-revolution city we have today. The construction of characters traced on the ghosts of history upsets and amplifies the effect of the polyphonic narration halfway between dream and reality, preventing a linear interpretation of the chronological dimension and forcing the reader to decipher, from time to time, extremely fluid identities, never completely coinciding with their own names.

Nonetheless, the delirium, in addition to being synonymous with an escape from reality, is set as the basis for a narrative strategy that transforms the space of the interior monologue into a space of confrontation, in a process of potential interrogation of the self in the presence of the self-image. Within a dreamlike frame, writing becomes the instrument capable of providing visibility to the past that resurfaces as trauma so that the conscience may rid itself of its dismissals. The delusion reflects the loss of contact with reality by some of the characters who, seemingly stuck in time, find themselves relegated to a purgatory where the soul experiences a strange form of alienation from itself. However, the world described is only superficially unreasonable since this autism of the memories is functional to the very structure of writing which, in being delirious, that is, “uscendo fuori dal solco<sup>7</sup>”, constructs the denunciation of contemporaneity on the need to escape a pattern of self-referentiality. Despite the hallucinatory speech of the characters, as with all delusions, giving a voice to a private truth that tends to relegate the interpretation of the story to an airtight dimension, the literary paroxysm that arises from the decidedly ironic tone gives way to the activation of a self-unmasking contrivance which culminates in the reversal of the subject’s perspective, allowing the misunderstanding to deconstruct

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<sup>6</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus* (1988). Lisboa, Dom Quixote, 2006. p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> This makes reference to the etymology of the word *delirium*, which stems from the Latin *delirium*, itself composed of the preposition *de*, which indicates distance of “far-ness”, and *lira*, meaning furrow or ridge. In Italian, the expression *uscir dal solco*, also *uscire dal seminato*, could be figuratively interpreted as meaning “leaving reason behind”, “to wander”.

the colonial myths on which the representation of the empire is based, the images soon removed from the consciousness of the revolutionary nation. So, for example, Diogo Cão or, more precisely, the alcoholic character upon which the name of the famous navigator has been bestowed, tries to persuade Pedro Álvares Cabral, *retornado de Luanda*, of the merits of his past heroic endeavors. The episode draws critical power by virtue of the labyrinthine fiction on which the evocation of the historical reality of reference is based, transfigured by the circumstances of the novel in which a hero consecrated on the national altar can tell a lie that is *also* true:

viver nesse árduo tempo de oitavas épicas e de deuses zangados, e eu fingia acreditá-lo para não contrariar a sua susceptibilidade das suas iras de bêbedo, até ao dia em que abriu a mala à minha frente e debaixo das camisas e dos coletes e das cuecas manchadas de vomitado e de borras de vinho, dei com bolorentos mapas antigos e um registo de bordo a desfazer-se<sup>8</sup>.

The telling of stories dating back to *Tejo* adopts the fictitious element in order to orientate the national rhetoric, employed by the nation to legitimize its presence overseas, in the opposite direction. We do not limit ourselves to a mere parodic reversal of situations and historical characters, but words ride the effect of the evocation of a mythological universe of reference to make the co-presence of irreconcilable elements on a temporal level evident, even if united by the endurance of an abject topicality in which identities move according to the rhythm of an asymmetrical and unpredictable oscillation of time. Nobody occupies a definitive place in the present upset by the revolution, but each character is placed in a place of new articulation, where the Ego is always Other than its re-enactment. In the text, “o homem de nome Luís”, who came from Mozambique carrying the corpse of his recently assassinated father in a wooden crate, is, and at the same time is not, the poet Luis Vaz de Camões; it is as if the light that casts the shadow of the individual characters in the present actually came from a forgotten, but necessary period of time in order to reveal the sense of the metaphor they embody, and which supports the narrative as a fundamental subtext. We cannot establish a univocal truth about the identities of the characters since the key to their contradiction lies in the impossibility of its definitive dissolution. The mixture of different elements produces a form of inconsistency that remains intact, transforming itself into an alienating reference capable of diverting attention from the referent to emphasize the implicit meaning of the narrative. Thus, the sense of emptying originated from a “regresso a lugar nenhum” (Ribeiro 2004: p. 425) is linked to the frustration experienced by Camões, punctually interrupted by the outbursts of an underpaid waiter while writing octaves with a ballpoint

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<sup>8</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus*. p.53.

pen on paper napkins. The estrangement of the characters not only reveals the solitude linked to the lived traumatic experience, but it also translates their being out of place in reference to the literary chronotype, symbolically incarnating, however, a presence that is not entirely “out of place” in relation to the historical drama. The latter is reflected in the rendering of the surrounding space through a writing that constantly alters its references, transforming reality into a universe that deceives the image preserved in memory and that disregards every expectation nourished in the past: a hostile territory completely distant from the elegant time when the air in Lisbon smelled of foreign spices. This is exemplified by the boardinghouse *Apóstolo das Índias*, where *refugiados* stemming from Luanda and Mozambique, after having fled to Lisbon through “freedom flights”, find themselves sucked in by squallor, as personified by the boarding house’s owner, Francisco Xavier, a satirical caricature of the renowned 17th-century Jesuit missionary and who, in the context of the story, oversees the turning to prostitution of unfortunate women.

[...] não consegui recordar-me de uma pobreza como aquela a que assisti nesta tarde, com sujeitos a ressonarem uns sobre os outros em desvãos de chiqueiro, crianças rodendo baratas nos ângulos dos quartos, mulatas submissas inexistentes de magreza, dezenas de vestidos de noite, de lantejoilas assanhadas, com os rasgões emendados a linha grosseira dependurados de maçanetas da varanda<sup>10</sup>.

The revealing power in Lobo Antunes' narrative lies in the ability to broaden the word by triggering a mechanism that goes beyond the creative act itself. The surreal element is not limited to the aesthetic level in the function of providing the original rendering of what is historically known, but the word, radioactive in its instability, becomes above all the parent of new meanings, able to exploit their ambiguous character to explode the story's unexpressed content, that silent meaning, a problematic dream because it is not only hallucinatory, but also not entirely false, as seen in the ravings of Nuno Álvares Pereira, a historical Portuguese figure who, as general, defended his nation from Spanish threats and who, in *As Naus*, is portrayed as a delusional character who constantly believes to hear the distant trombones of incoming Spanish invaders (Lobo Antunes 105). Likewise, we have the character of Dom Manoel, based on one of Portugal's former kings and who, after being pulled over for reckless driving, proclaims himself to be king of Portugal before a dismayed judge:

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<sup>9</sup> While Lisbon lived *o Verão Quente*, chaos reigned in the former colonies. Two air corridors were created in Angola and Mozambique, with the support of foreign governments, to allow around 500,000 people to leave Africa. For further information see: Rui Pena Pires, *Os Retornados. Um Estudo Sociográfico* (Instituto de Estudos para o Desenvolvimento, 1987) and António Gonçalves Ribeiro, *A Vertigem da Descolonização - Da Agonia do Êxodo à Cidadania Plena* Editorial Inquérito, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus*. p. 176.



[...] ajeitou o manto nos ombros antes de responder, numa inocente calma absoluta, sem sequer forçar a voz que no entanto se ouvia sem esforço, com uma irrespondível nitidez de rei: [...] - Só tenho a repetir que esta bodega toda me pertence<sup>11</sup>.

It is in the placement of characters and of us readers in regards to content and time that the statement to stabilize them and discuss their validity is proclaimed. As consequence, we have a relative universe, where the return of the story changes according to a double perspective that does not exclude its opposite: a return of the past to the present time, in the guise of a dream or of delusions *and* a contemporaneity facing backwards, as reflected by a past that, in turn, provides a deformed, quasi grotesque and honest image by virtue of not being perfect.

In this sense, the alteration of the perception of the experience allows us to broaden the interpretative possibilities to a horizon marked by history but, at the same time, unaffected by its absolute weight; a deviation from the norm that flanks the *retorno* as an unfinished and discarded movement with regards to its origin. The delusional word, therefore, expresses a movement. It diverts the sense of speech linked to a familiar and superficial representation towards the depth of the most disturbing expression, enhancing the core of the unspoken through the distorting potential of the images conveyed. In response to the Lusitanian trend of denying its deepest truths and guilt in an effort to remain in a state of “permanente representação” (Lourenço 2014: p. 76), delusion can be understood as a paradoxical remedy, not because it imposes a different mask in a carnivalistic process of replacing one image with another, but because it contributes to the questioning of the representative space, at the center of which lies the problematic vision that the nation has of itself, exposed in its darker aspects precisely through what is already known. Like an antidote to a poison originating in part from the poison itself, Lobo Antunes’ writing seems to change the hypertrophy that characterizes the Portuguese imagination (Lourenço 2014: p. 125) responsible for generating an asymmetrical self-deception as compared to reality, interpreting history as the result of equivocal tangencies capable of exploiting the friction generated by similarity in order to produce the revelatory impact of literary fiction on mystified realities. Perceptual microshocks prevent different spaces and time periods from collapsing one onto the other and, at the same time, allow the interlocutory space, occluded by a homogenizing vision, to expand, as is usually the case in the making of a misunderstanding.

More than a reflection intended to embrace the psychological dimension (with which Lobo Antunes, himself a psychiatrist, was perfectly familiarized) through the functions of the ego, necessary for the creation of an experience of the external world which would also be potentially applicable to

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<sup>11</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus*. p.150.

literary characters, the objective is instead to observe the critical potential of an explicitly fictitious perspective in its meaning of significantly divergent movement, in relation to Portuguese identity which, following the independence of the colonies, returns to itself to discover the existence of a profound disjunction between what it believed itself to be, and what it actually is.

The full assumption of the implications related to this non-coincidence proves to be both traumatic and substantial. No *retorno* can cancel the effects brought on by the voyage, due in part to the impossibility, as described by Jankélévitch (Jankélévitch: p. 128), of making the past reversible. Going back over the chronological line and, therefore, returning to being *who* you once were, is the illusion provided by memory that is built as a partial vision of reality and that works as an instrument destined to wear out in the hands of the subject. Displacement in space cannot be separated from the tragic awareness of the non-return and from the irremediable pain linked to the passage of time not only as a synonym of the gathering of experience, but also as a moment of expropriation of the subject. In this specific case, the *nóstos* of the *retornados* described in the novel reflects the loss of a symbolic universe, the empire as a correlative identity and compensatory for the fragility intrinsic to being Portuguese, together with the real, concrete dimension constituted by the lands in Africa to the aftermath of their independence. In *As Naus*, this sense of loss is expressed, above all, in the shape of two elderly spouses, both *retornados* from Guinea-Bissau. The condition of anonymity (these two characters, along with an elderly prostitute, are the only ones who do not have a name) reflects the emptying of subjectivity affected by the awareness of the profound impotence in which the individual dwells before the brutal eruption of war in the private sphere. Even memories fade like photographs if memory carries the silence of history as its only witness, and when what remains is the contemplation of one's absence, expressed in the sense of non-belonging:

Já não pertencemos nem sequer a nós [...]. Não pertença aqui<sup>12</sup>.

The movement described by the metaphor of the caravels returning to port supposes an inescapable change from their original being and, by virtue of the sense of incongruity that pervades the text, *As Naus* evokes not only the distortion of the spatial and temporal order, but also of the traditional conception of a text in which reality and fiction collaborate in the creation of a coherent universe, despite its being “marvelous”. As Roberto Mulinacci states in his analysis of the work:

[...] ciò che in un testo canonico di realismo magico si presta ad essere prontamente metabolizzato, alla maniera dei prodigiosi eventi di Macondo, incorporati da García

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<sup>12</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus*. pp. 45-46.

Marquez all'esperienza dell'ordinario, qui subisce, di converso, un trattamento derealizzante, che lo sospende a metà strada fra la memoria e il sogno<sup>13</sup>.

The alienating effect, therefore, arose from the irreconcilability between different times within what is defined as a “composite superposition” (Mulinacci, p. 310) where the encounter between present and past takes place by means of a transparent stratification of elements between them in a contradictory relationship. As a signifier to which two semantic referents are attributed, so two different temporal dimensions share the same moment in writing, as can be seen in the moment of enunciation, though without being able to converge in a new synthesis. The name, inhabited by schizophrenic time, is always that of an individual who interacts with himself, but with whom he finds himself undefined and incomplete, since the goal is to transfer him to an unusual space:

[...] uno spazio intermedio, in cui quegli antonimi si incontrano senza amalgamarsi, ciascuno prigioniero dei codici di rappresentazioni, così da esasperare la loro reciproca estraneità<sup>14</sup>.

The space in which the ego is located in one of a problematic, incomplete interpretation where the discontinuous relationship characterizing two different temporal dimensions traces the border between reality and dream, experience and memory. The distinction between different worlds becomes the focal point of the delusional vision, and the place where not only does the contemplation of one's past image finally become visible, but where recognition of its tragic unreality is made explicit. As in the beautiful passage dedicated to the national vate, *O homem de nome Camões* wanders throughout the capital, under the influence of alcohol, until he runs into his own statue when, suddenly, in contemporary Lisbon, the oxymoron opens a glimpse from which the vision of the past that parades in the present in the form of an anachronistic awaiting of the disappearance of the *Encoberto*:

[...] consegui alcançar um troço de escadas entre dois becos, de onde se via ao mesmo tempo o monumento, os comboios para Cascais e as lanternas de pesca das traineiras do rio, e precisamente nessa altura, estimados leitores, a Rua do Carmo acendeu-se de um cortejo de tochas e de risos de pajens, alabardas picavam o asfalto, adenóides de ginetes fungavam, e o rei D. Sebastião surgiu a cavalos rodeado de validos, arcebispos e privados, vestido de uma armadura de bronze e de um elmo de plumas,

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<sup>13</sup> Roberto Mulinacci. “L'ombra di Camões. L'impossibile ritorno della storia in *As Naus* di Lobo Antunes.” p. 319.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, p. 325.

e desapareceu para as bandas do pelourinho da Câmara, seguido pelo espanto dos polícias e dos guardas-nocturnos , a caminho de Alcácer Quibir<sup>15</sup>. (p. 131)

The reorganization of known materials, in the name of a critical and unpublished dialogue of Portugal with the idealized representation of its history, takes place through a labyrinthine movement with the effect of laying bare the profound ambiguity that, according to Eduardo Lourenço, characterizes the country as a “consciência de uma congenita fraqueza” accompanied by the “convicção mágica de uma protecção absoluta que subtrai essa fragilidade às oscilações lamentáveis de todo o projecto humano sem a flecha da esperança a orientá-lo” (Lourenço 1992: p. 19). Writing creates the conditions for the nation’s encounter with its own wounds, allowing the revolutionary potential to express itself in the imagination. This is why the characters, rather than being static ruins, turn out to be rather precarious, the subjects of a continuous “translation” linked to the need to expose the story as a discontinuous and uneven process. The past loses its static nature and the ruins, made ductile by the metamorphosis caused by the imagination, allow us to glimpse the opportunity to compare the real condition of “povo naturalmente destinado à subalternidade” (Lourenço 1992: p. 21), with the unrealistic representation of itself produced by the hypertrophic imagination (Lourenço 2014: p. 127) behind which Portugal conceals itself, a narrow passage to transition from that “consciência hipertrofiada” (p. 133), to an active conscience that is struggling to awaken even in the post-colonial period. Just as the contemporary dimension allows the re-enactment, so too does the past filtered by the dreamlike lens expand the capacity of the present, defining it through a geometric irony that structures the denunciation of current events without harnessing critical thinking. The narrative voice rests on an unstable, changeable reliability in the passages from the first to the third person, and marks the breakdown of the connection between the ontological and psychological dimensions, between identity and memory in the sleepy speech of the characters. This break allows us to approach the subjective dimension of the memory, beginning with a powerful critical distance represented by the implosion of linearity within the autobiographical narrative. The subject’s reality is marked by the continuous interferences provoked by a distorting vision, but this does not only disturb because of what it exposes as incongruity, but because of what it silently filters as authentic information. Indeed, Freud maintains that “in every delusion there is a nucleus of truth, there is always something in it that truly deserves faith” (Freud ch.3). The deformation applied to the truthful content in the dream can be dissolved thanks to the presence of an external agent capable of interpreting the links between fantasy and

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<sup>15</sup> António Lobo Antunes. *As Naus*. p. 131.

reality, as in the case of the story written by Wilhem Jensen and psychoanalyzed by Freud. But while Norbert Hanold's "Pompeian fantasy" is resolved thanks to the intervention of his beloved Zoe Bertrang, transfigured by the protagonist in the figure to which the name of "Gradiva" is attributed, the delusion of *As Naus* denounces the dramatic absence of an interlocutor and isolates reality within the oneiric dimension, incorporating it, without, however, completely metabolizing it, in "o que restou do mar" (Ribeiro, p. 234). The drama of the *retornados* also translates into an event in its state of lacking historical resonance, of possessing a weak voice, because it lacks someone willing to listen to the testimony of those who have directly experienced Africa. In the absence of a third element that allows "healing", the word upsets the relationship between past and present, between the ego and its representations, simultaneously playing the role of mediation and divide, forcing the subjective consciousness to mirror itself in an image that resembles it due to stemming from its memories. In this sense, literary delirium is what can defuse delirium itself, attributing it an unprecedented sense, starting from the overturning of the nucleus of truth and fiction on which the traditional representation, that is, the conviction of the patient, is based. The only word that can contain the hypertrophy of the Portuguese imagination denounced by Eduardo Lourenço with respect to the historical and cultural identity of the nation, the only one capable of containing the image of the self that shifts from its real being, is the delusional one, capable of structuring an alternative vision precisely because it causes a deformation that shuns the "tested" version (Levi: 14) of the past. Delirium is key here because it achieves the phase shift, breaks into the perception of the contemporary, insinuating itself under the skin of the characters, as well as that of the reader, to make a detachment of the gaze, to produce an interference that is able, moreover, to reconnect reality to its shaded areas and finally "domesticar a memória" of the past "que coloniza a vida" (Lobo Antunes 2015: p. 301). The novel puts Portugal in a position to recognize itself as an interlocutor of itself in a frenzy that, like a diaphragm, causes an interruption of the assimilation of the ego to itself, building the imaginative space for the incomplete metamorphosis of the characters in their namesake and making visible the antinomy implicit in the imperfect return of history. The sense of time is based on an apparent lack of criteria and allows the visualization of the differential within the relationship that subjectivity establishes with its consciousness when it falls within temporal dimensions in connection with each other. The story turns to the past to retrace its steps and to discover on each page not only that the physiognomy of time has changed, but also that the point of view with respect to one's own image is no longer decipherable following this shift. If the characteristic of the *retorno* is the inability to bring the subject back to the point of origin by virtue of the change suffered in the journey, then it is the

movement that allows the present to acquire new reading instruments. Therefore, the lack of correspondence shows how the past creates, in the present, the effect of a reflection that is as discordant and disturbing as it is fundamental to the historical understanding that must take place on a dialectical basis (Benjamin 1997: pp. 141,145,149), thanks to a functional distance to the criticism of the present which, as Giorgio Agamben's interpretation notoriously suggested, must be understood as anachronism (Agamben 2008: p. 9). The historical rewriting in *As Naus* allows us to cite the past by depriving it of its exemplary title, in order to adopt the paradoxical use of retrospection to grasp what is authentic in this delusional movement and what manifests itself as fiction, because the re-enactment of what has been actually reflects its profound denial. The prose becomes wandering in order to trace the footsteps of the past in the present time, in order identify those points of contact without assimilating the original messages, to intercept the contradiction capable of revealing what has remained in the shadows. Fiction defuses the distorting potential of a lie that acts under the guise of truth through a mechanism that makes its operation explicit. Words reverberate history, conveying the echo of a human tragedy that originates in the past and reaches the present by incarnating in the *aporia*, to which we have access thanks to a fiction capable of dismantling the cardinal points of a reality considered immovable. The story of the *retorno* in *As Naus* widens the space between the tendency to “desdramatizar o destino colectivo” and that inclination to “converter a vida corrente em drama imaginário” (Lourenço 2014: pp. 256-257) responsible for denying Portugal the possibility of recognizing the tragedy, thereby depriving it of the opportunity to redeem itself. The novel therefore shows how retracing the steps of the past is as necessary as finding alternative ways of relieving a saturated rhetoric due to the “irrealismo prodigioso da imagem que os Portugueses se fazem de si mesmos” (Lourenço, 1992: p. 17). It is, in fact, only then that it is possible to interpret the shipwreck of the *retornados* as a tragic and "exceptional" end in its being, above all, a moment of alternative to the origin, because it is in the courage to recognize the masking, in accepting the dramatic reality behind the demands of the lie, that the true sense of the revolution, the moment of profound discovery, can be inscribed.

At the end of the twentieth century, *As Naus* inaugurates a new phase in the Portuguese scene almost indifferent to the theme of *retorno*. The recovery of the past through fiction responds to two fundamental needs. If, on the one hand, the ghost story problematically results in decolonization as a consequence of a form of domination which, as Rui Ramos points out, the revolution had transformed into a synonym for Portugal's “libertação” (Ramos 2007: p. 445) by means of its "transfiguração espiritual" (p. 458), it nonetheless removes the past from the memorialistic narrative in order to base

the testimony on the precarious and conflictual nature of memory. The denunciation of the trauma not only opens up the possibility of participating in the tragic experience lived by the *retornados*, but aims to show the tensions that cross the memory of decolonization, presenting them as an indispensable element for the creation of an inclusive debate based on awareness of the risk associated with nostalgic drifts and manipulations that have the past as an object. It is thanks to the ability to keep the contrast visible within fiction that, in the novel, the recovery of the past never coincides perfectly with a crystallized memory. Writing takes advantage of the memory by establishing a prospective distance from it, conceiving memory as the instrument of inscribing the unspoken in the public space, aware of that reminiscent mimesis that it only apparently creates. Rather than conveying the past by virtue of its illusory immutability to which memory only partially allows access, what *As Naus* expresses is the need to deepen a dimension of knowledge on an individual and collective level, starting from the conception of memory as the terrain of dispute. In other words, it starts with the idea that trauma can also constitute – as often trauma does (Assmann) – an opportunity for the reconfiguration of the discourse regarding the past aimed at grasping it, above all, in its imperfect images, by means of a *retorno* that, although impossible, is nonetheless able to redirect its gaze towards more conscious landings, new beginnings from which to try to rethink the relationship of Lusitanian identity with its traumatic memory.

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