

THE SILENT WORD: ON ANTÓNIO LOBO ANTUNES

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Resumo: Este trabalho quer explicar geralmente o que é mais distintivo nos romances de António Lobo Antunes. Localiza o carácter distintivo deles na maneira em que os romances se desviam da estrutura narrativa estabelecida por Aristóteles que determina ainda hoje, mesmo negativamente, os princípios de base da narrativa, e inclusive do romance, o mais flexível gênero narrativo. Procede então a uma análise breve de “confusão” de temporalidades e de “atualização de presença” não temporal que são características salientes do desvio de narrativa de Lobo Antunes da estrutura narrativa de Aristóteles. Finalmente, esta confusão de temporalidades é vinculada com a tentativa de atingir uma posição liberta de todas as limitações de tempo, uma posição de silêncio, ou seja, de morte, que é uma admissão de impossibilidade.

Palavras-chave: Aristoteles; gramática; infinitivo pessoal; presentificar; silêncio; verdade

Abstract: This paper poses the general question about what is most distinctive in the novels of António Lobo Antunes. It locates this distinctiveness in the ways that Lobo Antunes’s novels depart from the Aristotelian narrative structure that still governs, even negatively, the basic structural assumptions of narratives and the novel, that most flexible of narratives. It then proceeds to a brief overview of the temporal confusion and “presencing” that are the hallmarks of Lobo Antunes’s departure from the Aristotelian narrative structure. Finally, this temporal confusion is linked to the attempt to attain a position freed of the constraints of time, a position of silence—or death—and admission of the impossibility of doing so.

Keywords: Aristotle; grammar; personal infinitive; presencing; silence; truth

In this paper,¹ I will focus on the work of António Lobo Antunes as a whole, as the integrated total work that it is, from his first novels to his most recent ones. What is special about this body of work? What does it bring to the novel and to literature? Why should it demand our attention? These are obviously very broad questions and no less urgent for being so. I want to address them here obliquely starting with another question that has always struck me: How to approach this work, how to speak about it?

Let me put this question more abstractly and in the context of a traditional conflict.

How does one speak of a poetic body of work from a point of view that originates in its nemesis, the philosophical tradition as decisively shaped by Plato? How does one speak of a poetic body of work without imposing the conceptual armature, the policing force, of that philosophical tradition as reflected in the apparatus of critical judgment? How, then, might one speak of a poetic body of work properly, perhaps even poetically? These are crucial questions when one comes to discuss Lobo Antunes's achievement, an achievement whose strength lies at least partially in its stubborn resistance to the policing force of discourses that seek to explain, master and dominate.

This strength is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the perplexity that Lobo Antunes's work has excited among critics, especially those outside of Portugal where one finds an almost unrelenting litany of admiring comparisons, as if critics sought to pile bodies on top of an unmarked grave. One would do well to inquire as to why Lobo Antunes has been compared to Italo Calvino, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Anton Chekhov, Joseph Conrad, Julio Cortázar, John Dos Passos, Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Faulkner, Nikolai Gogol, James Joyce, Malcom Lowry, Cormac McCarthy, Herman Melville, Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon—and even Bob Dylan.

Why the hasty identifications, assimilations, affiliations? What is it in Lobo Antunes's work that invites comparison? Here we come to a singular point, that there is something in Lobo Antunes's work that invites comparison, something that calls out for classification in a readymade identity. Why? Perhaps this is because Lobo Antunes's work so broadly disturbs classification.

So, once again: How to approach this work?

¹ This paper originates in a talk that the author was scheduled to give to close the celebration of Lobo Antunes's work, "António Lobo Antunes, 40 anos da vida literária" held at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum on September 28, 2019.

I.

Lobo Antunes himself offers a way to address this question. In a recent interview he remarked that a good book is one which forces us to take off our truths, to bare ourselves, if we take the clothing metaphor seriously, as we should.² Here I recall one of Lobo Antunes's preferred passages in the New Testament, John 18:

Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"³

What, indeed, is truth? Lobo Antunes is not repeating the platitudes of our supposedly "post-truth" era. Nor is he engaging post-modern polemic about the "nature" of truth. To the contrary, he recognizes, as everyone does, that we are immersed in durable, variable, working "truths" at every point in our lives; otherwise we could not live, or act, in the world at all. I shall not contest the simple truth that, despite modern technological advancement, I cannot become invisible, defy gravity or become immortal or infinite like God—none of us can without risking madness or death—the truly post-truth state. No, to be alive is to be immersed in truths, in rules, in directives that we can neither fully accept nor fully escape. To accept them fully would be, after all, to become wholly other to ourselves as selves, and to reject them fully would be to achieve the same result.

Taking off our truths, interrogating truth itself—these are two crucial ways to put in question what I refer to as the "logical attitude," an attitude that seeks to make sense of the world, to find its logic, so deftly hidden in the endless vagaries of history that become finally a seamless narrative, with beginning middle and end.⁴ Lobo Antunes's work tolerates none of this, nor does it partake in a simple countermovement. To the contrary, Lobo Antunes's work struggles with sense itself—it is literature not as the creation or securing of sense but as something else entirely, as the continuous contesting of sense, as giving voice to silence or what may appear to the sensible mind as nonsense. Contradiction, error, fancy and illusion—all are essential to the work of Lobo Antunes.

² This is an interview given to Sebastiano Triulze on March 12, 2019 and later published in *La Repubblica* on May 14. The author was present at the interview. The translation from the Portuguese is my own.

³ This translation is mine.

⁴ Aristotle, *Poetics* eds. Leonardo Tarán and Dimitri Gutas (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 176 at Bekker page 1450b26-27.

These are bold claims. Let me break them down, moving from the more to the less conventional. On the level of language and technique, Lobo Antunes's work is "transgressive." What exactly do I mean by this? And why is the transgressive aspect of Lobo Antunes's work interesting? Why should we be drawn to it? I will speak of three aspects of transgression in Lobo Antunes's work: 1) that of grammar; 2) that of narrative structure; and, finally, 3) that of the fantasies we create in order to avoid the ultimate futility of our lives, a final silence we struggle to accept. To take off our truths is in this latter sense liberating indeed because it liberates us from life.

II.

Grammar is one of the strongest expressions of the "logical attitude" to language.⁵ To the extent grammar aims to explain how a language works by identifying operational rules, whether pragmatic or structural, it serves a process of normalization whereby only one way of speaking and writing remains acceptable. To transgress grammar is to question this normalizing aspect with an intent to put in question one of the most important consequences of normalization: the banishment of any other approach to language, not to mention the banishment of innovation as potentially destructive, as error. If grammar seeks to impose a final, definitive picture of a language upon us, the effect of the transgressive is to counter such a picture and to recover the richness which that picture seeks to suppress or outlaw.

In Lobo Antunes's case there is a tendency to view some of his effects as creating a more colloquial Portuguese or as expressing registers in Portuguese that had hitherto been suppressed. While this is no doubt true, it should not blind us to the fact that Lobo Antunes is working more broadly against the normalization that turns language into an instrument and nothing more, a heap of commonplaces to facilitate communication (on an almost transactional basis). Lobo Antunes's work repeatedly emphasizes the recalcitrance of language, its capacity not only to create norms, to be fully "transactional and clear," but also to touch on the obscure, hidden and enigmatic.

Lobo Antunes often creates phrases that are somehow distorted or spelled differently from the standard. I recall here a recent article in a local newspaper decrying the spelling mistakes of Portuguese writers, Lobo Antunes being at the head of the class, with a photograph of the esteemed

⁵ Here I refer to Martin Heidegger's consideration of language primarily in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, a lecture course given in the summer of 1935 and published only after World War II in 1953. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 55-78.

author sticking out his tongue.⁶ But this sort of challenge to convention is perhaps the most superficial aspect of his style (of any style), literally a sticking-out-of-the-tongue, although it does put in question the need for conformity on the basic level of spelling and word-formation. More striking are Lobo Antunes's manipulation of syntax and verb tense including his distinctive use of the personal infinitive, one of the most intriguing elements of the Portuguese verbal system.

Lobo Antunes radically attenuates the complicated verbal system of Portuguese by favoring infinitival structures over finite tensed ones. His use of the personal infinitive in Portuguese allows him to create a “presencing” effect—his novels seem to take place as a performance initiated by the reading process itself. This “presencing” effect is also very evident in Lobo Antunes's pronounced tendency to omit the verb “to be” in the present tense.

An example, chosen at random:

the engines of the unimogs deafened me, the soldiers, three or four, put the animals on a trailer and their legs so thin, it seemed to me people hidden in the jungle seeing that a trembling in the leaves different from the wind, the doctor drew an oval with a pen going around the white stain of an x-ray⁷

Another example:

the impression that a fox up there, next to the cemetery, the impression that a genet, I asked the sergeant that he take care of my son while me in Luanda, no one knew of us in Portugal, no one speaks of war, one pretends that it's forgotten or it's really forgotten, me on the street with bars filled with mulatto women and men at the counter, only elbows, as clumsy as me, with their noses in their glasses like donkeys, tied up to wagons, in front of the baskets, with their snouts in the middle of the hay staring at the people while they were eating, a woman disappeared into the cigarette smoke and emerged from the smoke, next to me, with another ring⁸

Rather than explicitly joining objects or subjects with objects, the suppression of the verb “to be” enhances the dislocation of temporal order by putting in question its basic integrating function. This integrative function matches subjects with predicates and defines relationships; to omit it in a way that calls attention to that omission creates a prose that refuses to succumb to traditional modes of temporal and syntactical subordination. This is a promiscuous prose that can be linked up in many different ways with other segments within the novel or, indeed, within the relevant paragraph of the novel. This is a prose that lends itself to multiple connections, both affirming and threatening each

⁶ The article is in an issue of the weekly magazine *Sábado*, dated November 27, 2017 and entitled: “Quando os escritores dão erros de português.”

⁷ António Lobo Antunes, *Until Stones Become Lighter Than Water* trans. Jeff Love (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

particular connection because so many others offer themselves at any given time; this is thus a prose of what I might call hidden simultaneity.

The upshot of these techniques is to put in question the temporal subordination and logical connection that are crucial to the construction of any narrative. Rather than supplying a story that fits more or less exactly the venerable Aristotelian plot structure of beginning, middle and end that reflects the temporal coordinates of past, present and future, Lobo Antunes emphasizes the fact that all takes place *now*. The now is the only venue of what we call past and future and these temporal coordinates are in fact created by us as ways of orientation that disorient us in the sense that they turn us away from the essential importance of the present. If, for that matter, the present has long been considered indescribable, the ever elusive “now,” Lobo Antunes restores to this “now” an enviable richness, in part by putting in question temporal segmentation itself. Moreover, this refusal to obey the Aristotelian “unities” also undermines another central element of Aristotelian emplotment, that all parts of a narrative prove in the end to fit together in a single, definite purposive manner such that there is no narrative gesture that is not necessary to the conclusion of the narrative.⁹

Hence, another distinctive feature of Lobo Antunes’s style: the constant shifts in time and location. While it can be argued that these shifts are a kind of montage or collage effect similar to techniques deployed in film and the visual arts, the intricate interplay of verbs and persons in Lobo Antunes’s work goes beyond montage. He attempts to suppress *any* overriding temporal order, and also dissolves other available ways of creating an authoritative syntax. In other words, by suppressing even the most basic sequential order that we often assume, erroneously, to be time in its “raw state,” and by suppressing the connective function of the verb “to be” as well as many other modes of syntactic integration, Lobo Antunes creates a text that challenges the most basic modes of assembling narratives. And what has not been “encoded” conventionally will not be decoded — at least not in a conventional way.

Lobo Antunes puts narrative in question not simply as a kind of lie (since other constructions are obviously possible), but as a specifically salvific lie, as a means by which we seek an impossible salvation or, at the very least, we seek shelter from a both expansive and damning present. In this respect, Lobo Antunes’s claim that a good book is one that forces us to take off our truths points in yet another direction—that taking off our truths may also be a shedding of the lies or workable half-

⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics* 178 (1451b30-35).

truths that we deploy to organize them, most of which turn out to be ways of serving our self-interest, and the most powerful core of self-interest, self-preservation, the brute desire to survive, no matter what the cost, to ourselves or to others.

III.

Here, another striking citation from Lobo Antunes:

Writing is such a lonely delirium: it is very similar to the logical edifices of psychotics; first they take an erroneous premise and from there they build. Such is literature: one builds a complete logical structure upon an erroneous first premise.¹⁰

A novel may contain many structures. The one that concerns me at this point is narrative structure, and now I want to consider how Lobo Antunes's novels put in question not only the logical attitude to language but to narrative itself. Let me return again to Aristotle. After all Aristotle, at least in the Western tradition, is the one who first explicitly formulates and imposes a structure on narrative. This structure has determined our understanding of narrative for two millennia. While I have already mentioned the structure briefly, I shall go into more detail here before moving on.

Aristotle's basic claim is that a well-made "plot" (*muthos*) is a whole consisting of three principal parts: beginning, middle and end.¹¹ The beginning should not follow from anything else and the end should be the natural conclusion of the beginning and cannot be followed by anything. A properly structured plot must be complete in and of itself, and every part, as such, must perform a function so that every part is necessary to the articulation of the whole which, in turn, clarifies the identity and necessity of each part. If any part were missing or merely fortuitous the whole would be incomplete and thus not a whole—put differently, a properly made plot is one to which nothing can be added and from which nothing can be subtracted.¹²

¹⁰ Lobo Antunes made this comment (in Spanish) in the presence of the author during a panel on his work, "Friends of António Lobo Antunes" held at the FIL (Feria Internacional del Libro) in Guadalajara, Mexico on November 28, 2008.

¹¹ *Poetics*, 176 (1450b26-30).

¹² *Ibid.*, 178 (1451b30-35): "As in the other mimetic arts a single mimesis has a single object, so too the plot (*muthos*), since it is the mimesis of one action, should be of one whole action, and the parts of the action should fit together (*sunestanaí*) such that, with the removal of any part, the whole will be disturbed or destroyed" (my translation).

These notions of holism and unity continue to retain their commonsense significance, even as negative norms that may be transgressed or parodied. The twentieth century has seen numerous examples of the latter, though one can trace this tendency back at least to Cervantes and Sterne. There is a delicate line here, however, because transgression or parody affirm the models they contest in contesting them. Put differently, the attempts to undermine the Aristotelian model serve merely to affirm it, even if that affirmation is a negative one. The more radical approach is one that attempts to move beyond notions of unity and holism, that attempts to move beyond plot. This approach involves a more comprehensive attempt to overcome narrative itself grasped principally as a determinate, and thus complete, temporal sequence.

I think it is safe to say that Lobo Antunes's novels contain elements of both these approaches. On the one hand, there is an almost parodic delight in inverting or otherwise challenging temporal sequence as typically understood. On the other hand, there is—as revealed with particular force by the use of infinitival structures—a thoroughgoing attempt to dissolve temporal sequence in the continuous performative present the novels create.

We can identify this movement between the affirmation, whether parodic or negative, and the complete dissolution of temporality in Lobo Antunes's novels in many different specific forms. We could argue, for example, that the most fundamental transgressive impulse in Lobo Antunes's novels strives to get beyond transgression as a purely negative endeavor towards something that transcends transgression itself. One way this could happen would be by removing any reference to an authoritative sequential temporal structure, whether grammatical or narrative. I say this because even grammar requires time—no one can read or speak a word without having to do so in time, and even the simplest sentence requires (or perhaps imposes) some sort of temporal sequence. Syntax in this sense is the birth of narrative, even when it most appears not to be so as in a primitive declarative sentence like: "This is a chair." The static aspect of that declaration is undermined by the fact that it cannot even be made without the passing or movement of time. One "runs through" a phrase before completely understanding it: "intellectus noster de uno in aliud discurrit."¹³

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas as quoted (incorrectly) by Martin Heidegger in his lecture on G. W. Leibniz published as volume 26 of the *Collected Edition* of his works. See Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic* trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 47. The Latin is from the First Part of the *Summa theologiae*, Question XIV, Article XIV and reads: "Quod quidem in intellectu nostro non contingit, qui de uno in aliud discurrit." See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 6 vols. (Turin, Marietti, 1938), 1/112.

All structures that attempt to evade time—the possibility of evasion being perhaps the most erroneous of all premises—must meet with failure since they are only explicable *within* time understood most basically as definable sequence. There simply is no way of ascending to the point of pure intuition, the *intuitus originarius* or *visio Dei*, because the atemporal or non-successive quality of that intuition cannot be translated into time—in this sense, pure intuition or divine vision are utterly divorced from any understanding we may have of knowing or seeing.¹⁴ The notion that we can free ourselves from time, that we can retain a continuous (and non-successive) present, is inherently problematic and a striving doomed to failure. Hence, there is a tragic quality to this striving that is at the same time comic or ridiculous. As an influential Russian thinker once said: “Human life is a comedy. One must play it seriously.”¹⁵

Lobo Antunes’s novels play seriously with exceptional intensity, showing at one and the same time respect for the suffering caused by our sense of being trapped in time, in a relentlessly linear plot of birth unto death even simpler than Aristotle’s model as well as contempt for the brutal ridiculousness of this plot—the subversion of time in the novels is serious play indeed: the writer creates by defying this plot, and yet there is no way out of it, and the writer’s own attempt to “speak from and to silence” must fail as all human things do.

What is it then to speak this silence, the silence that emerges as freedom from time?

IV.

As Lobo Antunes has himself implied, silence is central to his work. This statement is not as paradoxical as it might seem since a complex duality in Lobo Antunes’s novels emerges from the tension between the affirmation and negation of silence and thus the affirmation and negation of time itself.

If our tradition has so often sought silence, sought to approach the deity in his imperturbable silence, outside of the world and time, and reconcile ourselves to it, Lobo Antunes’s novels exemplify speech as a rebellion or revolt against silence. This rebellion is not a failed form of silence or a sign of

¹⁴ Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 49 (*visio Dei*), 164 (*intuitus originarius*).

¹⁵ This phrase is attributed to Alexandre Kojève as recorded by Raymond Barre in *Hommage à Alexandre Kojève* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2007), 58. The original reads: “La vie humaine est une comédie. Il faut la jouer sérieusement.”

decay, nor is it simply a shriek of denial. To the contrary, it aims to reconstruct, somehow, the movement between speech and silence so that neither is original or final.

It is hardly a new observation to point out the repetitiveness of Lobo Antunes's works. Normally one hears claims about their repetitiveness at a whisper. Yet, Lobo Antunes himself openly admits repetition—of images, of incidents, of grammatical ticks and unusual phrasings. Repetition is at the very heart of the work as an integrated whole but also as a work that varies certain sustained lines of thought.

Variation and repetition are crucial to music as well—they are crucial to the refusal to succumb to silence.

This refusal is an absolutely central aspect of Lobo Antunes's work: one does not go gently into that good night. One does not simply give in to the silence that awaits us all. Against Aristotle who invites us to obey, to discover the rigid structure that dominates every aspect of our lives, Lobo Antunes celebrates speech in all its forms as a rejection of that silence, a rejection based, however, on an austere appreciation of silence and, of course, on the greatest of all silences: death.

Now one might say that this is just another commonplace about art—that it is a rebellion against death. If my comment were only about this aspect of art, the comment would be justified. But I am in fact after something different.

Lobo Antunes's does not create a world opposed to death and silence. Nor does he create a world that seeks to accept death or silence. I am not even sure if his novels create a world in either of these senses. In their never finished finishedness, they resemble nothing so much as unstable sites of questioning, of interrogating the past and, indeed, of interrogating the urge to interrogate itself. Lobo Antunes frequently cites Walt Whitman to the effect that he likes animals because they do not concern themselves with the question of God.¹⁶

Here is another attitude to truth. Who needs truth? Is truth or the search for truth not both necessary and horrible? Perhaps we all embody a bit of Christ and Pilate when we alternatively embrace the passion for a final story, for freedom from the difficulty of the present, open as it is, and the power of that present, undecided and seemingly limitless.

¹⁶ This is an allusion to Whitman's *Song of Myself* 32.

V.

So, by a commodious vicus of recirculation, I come back to the beginning. This beginning is ever productive because it never ceases to trouble us: we seek and reject truth, we want to be done and do not want to be done, we strive for peace and flee its eternally tedious embrace—we hesitate and repeat, hesitate and repeat so that even to use these words is problematic. The vaunted repetition of Lobo Antunes’s work should not surprise us: to the contrary, it should free us of the illusion of continuous originality.

Repetition and originality both reflect death—repetition the lugubrious (and sometimes joyous) repetition of our physical lives, from smallest detail to grandest pattern (birth to death). And originality the continuous unexpectedness that attaches to the impossibility of our experiencing or knowing our own death. We live precariously between the certainty of death and its utter uncertainty. No one knows death at its most intimate, as my death. We know death only at “secondhand” so to speak.

In this sense our lives are filled with speech and silent at the same time. Lobo Antunes’s work captures this irony essential to our lives with compassion and humor. By this I mean that Lobo Antunes’s work shows, as I have suggested, respect for the suffering that is repetition and the lot of mortal life along with extraordinary insouciance, a refusal of the truths we cannot but obey.

We all know Samuel Beckett’s famous line: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.”¹⁷ Lobo Antunes is rather different—his works do not give us the courageous acceptance of fate, the “amor fati” so dear to Spinoza and Nietzsche. They are works of refusal far more than grim acceptance. They reject silence, they reject the attempt to overcome silence, they reject their own rejections. They are works that refuse finality, that turn on themselves by continuously trying to become other, by trying to escape themselves: in escape there is return and in return there is escape. The attempt to make silence speak, to overcome death, to transform ourselves and others is impossible and, hence, the virtually infinitely fecund source of speculation, of all the attempts to overcome an ignorance we can neither fully tolerate or reject.

There is thus no way of addressing Lobo Antunes’s work adequately.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), 103.

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