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### **The enigma of the Baroness from Madalena do Mar**

Like many of her contemporaries, such as Salmon Rushdie, E. L. Doctorow, A. S. Byatt, the Nobel Prize winner José Saramago or the recently deceased John Fowles, to name a few writers, Agustina Bessa-Luis is a re-interpreter of History.<sup>1</sup> The author of *The Sybil* (1954) often revisits the past, recent or remote, to bestow upon her readers fictional texts where the representation of the historical truth, as it has been passed on to us down the years, is explicitly defied. Her method of reconstructing or, rather, of de-constructing the past tempers the facts narrated in official documents, which are critically analysed and questioned, using on occasion the historical referent as a point of departure for the emplotment<sup>2</sup> of the past in the present.

Intertextual historicism is used in *A Corte do Norte*<sup>3</sup>, a novel written in 1987, purporting to have the island of Madeira as the social and

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<sup>1</sup> By questioning historical truth, regarded as a human construction as much as fiction, some of Bessa-Luis's fiction is considered as historiographic metafiction, to use Linda Hutcheon's neologism ("Historiographic Metafiction: 'The Pastime of Past Time'", in *A Poetics of Postmodernism, History, Theory, Fiction* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 105-123). Here are a few of the writer's novels that fit into this category: *Fanny Owen* (1979); *O mosteiro* (1980); *Os meninos de ouro* (1983); *Adivinhas de Pedro e Inês* (1983); *Um bicho da terra* (1984); *A monja de Lisboa* (1985); *Eugénia e Silvina* (1989); *O comum dos mortais* (1998).

<sup>2</sup> The term is used by Paul Ricoeur in "The Text as Dynamic Identity", in *Identity of the Literary Text*, Mario Valdés and Owen Miller (eds.) (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 175-186.

<sup>3</sup> All references are to *A corte do norte* (Lisbon: Guimarães Editores, Lda., 1987). The novel is referred to as *CN* throughout this essay.

historical space for an interweaving of stories and a complex structure of relationships that go back to the discovery of the island. Fiction alternates with History and fictive characters cohabit with figures whose real existence is beyond doubt, the case of Elizabeth, the Empress of Austria, the stunning Sissi of the big screen,<sup>4</sup> or of Almeida Garrett, the founder of the modern Portuguese theatre, who, though a backstage character in the novel, appears to be ready to come forward, whenever the prompter, that is, the narrator, gives him the clue to play the role of a king-maker, who turns an obscure woman into a celebrated actress.

As is recurrent in Agustina's novels, in *A Corte do Norte*, the thoughts of the main characters are rendered by means of a psycho-narration, quoted and narrated monologues, the variable focalization allowing the reader to follow different perspectives as to the fate of the protagonist, who gradually fades into a shadow or just a memory. The usual narrative techniques are utilized here, such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, repetitions, sudden changes from a third to a first-person narrator, to the benefit of a reader used to the meanderings of the author's craft, including the constant digressions that provide insights on the history of the island. Once in a while, the aphoristic narrator utters general truths on human nature or, as a rebuke, regrets the near absence of a fiction produced in Madeira, where there is no shortage of "characters, situations, lives and stories",<sup>5</sup> plenty of material, says the intrusive voice, to consider as peculiar the "silence of the letters" on the island. As a whole, the polyphonic narration may sound dissonant here and there, but it suits the tone of a novel where a chaotic assembly of characters swap garments and gloves as often as they trade identities, as if in a comedy of errors.

The novel begins with the arrival in Funchal of the Empress of Austria, who in 1860 had come to Madeira for a cure, as it was fashionable those days among European nobility. However, much of the novel has little to do with Elizabeth's own story. Instead, it deals with the enigma around the disappearance of a certain Rosalina de

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<sup>4</sup> The movie *Sissi* (1955), directed by Ernst Marischka, starred Romy Schneider in the role of the Empress of Austria.

<sup>5</sup> *CN*, pp. 8; 95.

Sousa, the Baroness from Madalena do Mar, allegedly blown off the cliffs into the sea by revelling winds. Her legend, which borders on a tragicomedy, was carried on by her descendants' creative imagination, each generation of men and women trying to find clues that might lead to their ancestor's disappearance, a quest that matches the one in a good murder mystery.

According to the narration, Rosalina de Sousa was born in a genteel, but poor family from Porto Santo. However, the reader is also told of a different version regarding the beginnings of Rosalina who, as rumours had it, might have been a prostitute in a brothel run by a woman called Antonia. Struck by the beauty of the young girl, Garrett brought her to the theatre. The sordid tale was confirmed by Rosalina's mother-in-law, but, the narrator adds, no one could say whether it was true or not<sup>6</sup>. Rosalina's questionable past did not prevent her from marrying Gaspar de Barros, a wealthy islander whose money came from the sugar cane industry. The couple had two sons and settled in Corte do Norte, a sombre manor in Ponta Delgada on the northern part of the island. The reader does not know whether Rosalina, like Richardson's Pamela<sup>7</sup>, was a docile wife who showed appreciation for her husband's generosity, or, like the two Emmas – Flaubert's and Agustina's own Boverinha<sup>8</sup> –, found her husband dull and even sly, after finding out that he was cheating on her.

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<sup>6</sup> *CN*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> "I cannot, Sir, said I, have any Fears, any Doubts, but that I shall never be able to deserve all your Goodness, I have no Hopes, but that my future Conduct may be agreeable to you, and my determined Duty well accepted. Nor have I any Request to make, but that you will forgive all my Imperfections; and, among the rest, this foolish Weakness, that makes me seem to you, after all the generous Things that have passed, to want this further Condescension, and kind Assurances. But, indeed, Sir, I am oppress'd by your Bounty; my Spirits sink under the Weight of it; and the Oppression is still the greater, as I see not how, possibly, in my whole future Life, by all I can do, to merit the least of your Favours." Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 350).

<sup>8</sup> The theme of adultery is explored in *Vale Abraão* (1991) where the protagonist, Ema Paiva, wonders why people confuse her with Flaubert's Emma Bovary. Filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira transposed the novel to the big screen.

But, what is the relationship between the unpredictable Sissi and Rosalina de Sousa or Rosalina-Emilia, as she becomes known later on in the novel? We are told that the Empress and her large entourage took the sleepy island by surprise; from then on things would never be the same, particularly for Rosalina de Sousa, Sissi's look-a-like, who appeared to have changed her personality after Elizabeth's arrival in Funchal. Physical duplication was not the only trait that brought Rosalina and Sissi together, so to speak, as the reader is never sure whether the two women actually met at the studio of Vicente, appointed by Elizabeth of Austria as Her Imperial Majesty's photographer. Sissi and Rosalina are described as unstable, both women having marital problems, likely caused by their sexual inhibitions and the infidelities of their respective husbands. Like the Empress, Rosalina was supposed to possess a virile voice and a taste for theatre-acting, especially when it came to dramatic female roles. As rumours had it, Rosalina used to go out late in the night, something that only men would dare do in those days. By the same token, Sissi exhibited a defying less than feminine attitude by posing disguised as a sailor for Vicente, the photographer, whose studio resembled the backstage of a theatre.<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth's male outfit together with her impudent manner, as caught by Vicente's camera, caused great scandal in the Court of Vienna. Besides, her remarkably healthy complexion denied reports put to circulate in European diplomatic circles that the Empress was in very poor health. The external sameness of Sissi and Rosalina might be an extension of an interior one, as they are both represented as distraught cuckolded women, a condition they concealed by flaunting an eccentric unladylike behaviour. Like Elizabeth, Rosalina was also given a romantic nick-name, Boal – "Boal de Cheiro" and "Boal marota" – after a caste of grapes. It evokes the semi-tropical ambiance of the island, recreated in the novel through synaesthetic effects, and serves as a floating signifier<sup>10</sup> as well. Sometimes she is Rosalina and sometimes Boal or "Boal marota", the different names used to shield the Baroness's identity.

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<sup>9</sup> *CN*, p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Expression used by André Brink for the change of names in *Moll Flanders* the purpose of which is to hide identities. See *The Novel, Language and Narrative from Cervantes to Calvino* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1998), p. 71.

Once she vanished from the island, Rosalina became the object of her descendants' speculations, each one having a distinct interpretation of her disappearance. Like fictions-within-a-fiction, their versions interlace with their own stories, which are as quaint as Rosalina's, fitting, like hers, into the gloomy surroundings of the manor. They interviewed people who had known her, went through her private letters and documents and checked the photographer's plates, as everything that happened on the island was filtered through Vicente's objective, the most reliable witness of them all. They bolstered their accounts with hearsay, presumption and pictorial evidence, be it photographs or paintings, like the one showing vindictive Judith determined to carry on with her lover's murder, the Assyrian Holophernes. Discursive segments such as "someone might have said" or "people would say" stand out as ironic, coming from a self-conscious narrator that on the other hand is obsessed with facts and dates, as though to prove historical authenticity.

Rosalina's children, Lopo and Francisco, had opposite views on their mother's fate, a woman who, like Ema Paiva of *Vale Abraão*, was no archetype of motherhood.<sup>11</sup> While for Lopo's rational mind, Rosalina was insane and no longer existed, Francisco's poetical disposition made him believe that his mother might still be alive somewhere. By looking through her belongings, Francisco found the old photograph of the Empress dressed as a sailor, taken in Vicente's studio. He also came across objects that might have been Elizabeth's, such as a handkerchief and a pair of gloves, proving the linkage between Boal and Sissi, at least in his mind. For Agueda, her grand-mother had simply been blown into the sea by the wind, while gazing at a bird's nest. For João de Barros, though, his grand-mother's disappearance turned into an obsession. He tracked down a diary written by Maggie O'Shea, a Scottish woman who had lived on the island, as well as the correspondence exchanged between Rosalina and her friends. Documents of that sort turned out to be vague, only adding to the confusion regarding dates, facts and identities, made worse as time went by and clues became scarce. For Rosamund, Rosalina was the genius of the island, a faceless ethereal

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<sup>11</sup> Luisona and Lolota, Ema Paiva's two daughters, are ignored by their mother who resents motherhood regarded as a consequence of woman enslavement.

apparition regarded as a creative force that drew people together, spooking, though, her offspring with its presence, as in a Gothic novel. Once dematerialized as the Lady of the Sea, Rosalina was nothing else but a myth. Her elusiveness lent itself to a set of hypotheses expressed in the narrative discourse by constant interrogations. The Baroness might have followed Sissi and lived for the rest of her life under an assumed name as the Empress's lady-in-waiting, or died of cholera, as the epidemic had reached the island four years after the Empress's arrival, or fled with a Dostoevskyan character by the name of Luis da Costa, probably her lover or, still, she might have become an actress.

The theatre stub found in the old Indian trunk by the last survivor of the matriarch's dynasty, Gramina Serena, did provide new evidence. In 1860, the year of the Empress's arrival in Funchal, Rosalina had been at a performance of *Judith*, in D. Maria II, the national theatre in Lisbon. She had returned to the island shortly before Elizabeth's departure. If it was true, Boal might never have met the Empress at all, and rumours of their encounter were false. Gramina, who was inclined to accept the theatre version, wondered: "Was not Boal herself an actress who spent long periods of time away from the island due to her theatre commitments?"<sup>12</sup> As far as the reader is concerned, the question is whether Judith was played by Rosalina or by Rosalina-Emilia. The clippings, poems, letters and pictures found in the Indian trunk belonged to Emilia, the actress, who happened to show a remarkable resemblance to the younger Rosalina, that is, to the Empress's counterfeit, as she appeared in the shot taken by Vicente.

In the second chapter of the novel, the reader discovers that physical and psychological duplication does not stop with Boal and Sissi. During a party at the Cossarts', Rosalina, whose thoughts are "seen" through a narrated monologue,<sup>13</sup> exults over a painting where Judith was about to behead Holophernes, her lover and enemy. The figure of the Hebrew heroine might have been modelled on Emilia de Sousa, Garrett's former

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<sup>12</sup> The translations from Portuguese into English are mine: "[n]ão seria Boal, ela própria, uma actriz, e passava períodos muito longos fora da ilha, por razão dos seus contratos?" (CN, p. 263)

<sup>13</sup> CN, pp. 52-3.

protégée and probably his lover, who was peerless in her role as Judith. As rumours had it, the writer and theatre mogul had also met Rosalina at Antonia's brothel before making an actress out of her. As if the coincidence was not enough to confuse the reader as to who is who, the narrator says that after 1860, the year of Sissi's arrival in Funchal, Rosalina and Emilia became one person. Hints on the Baroness's double identity are actually scattered along the narration, here for instance as an assumption: "If in fact Rosalina had two identities in such way that it was not possible to distinguish between the two, then Rosalina was the actress Emilia de Sousa".<sup>14</sup> João Senha, Emilia's husband or Rosalina's lover, we will never know, was the only character who could identify either woman, but he took his secret to the grave.

The figure of the double appears in other novels by Agustina<sup>15</sup>, where the "reproduction" of the "original" personality becomes "a living personality", the "Second-self", in C. F. Keppler's terminology.<sup>16</sup> Regarding the Rosalina-Emilia dualism, it appears to be what psychoanalysis designates as split personality, in this case, the linkage between one half and the other resulting from a physical sameness and simultaneously a psychological contrast. It is represented as a more complex relationship than the one between the pair Boal/Sissi, whose duality derives from a questionable physical resemblance and the fact that they are both portrayed as dressed-up dolls, acting or, rather, reacting to patriarchal societies that imposed strict codes of behaviour upon them, the other females represented in the novel suffering the identical oppression.<sup>17</sup>

With Rosalina-Emilia, the kinship is deeper due to coincidental entanglements and frequent alternations of personality, the shifts from

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<sup>14</sup> "Se Rosalina teve de facto duas identidades, de maneira que não foi possível distingui-las, então Rosalina foi a actriz Emília de Sousa" (CN, p. 54).

<sup>15</sup> In *O comum dos mortais* (1998) and *Antes do Degelo* (2004) the figure of the double is obvious, although in other novels, like *Eugénia e Silvina*, the repetition of female characters with similar traits may be interpreted as doubles.

<sup>16</sup> See *The Literature of the Second Self* Tucson (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1972), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Leopoldina and Rosamund are represented as spurned lovers, Agueda and Gramina, as two lonely spinsters; the former is hopelessly in love with her brother, the latter finds companionship with her cats.



one half to the other gliding so smoothly that we have to be on the look-out to distinguish which one of them is Rosalina or Emilia at any particular moment. Their schizophrenic representation resembles a hide-and-seek pursuit during which now one then the other personality appears as a foreground self, Rosalina being the one who catches most of the reader's attention during the first half of the novel. She thins into a shadow as the other, Emilia, the alternating personality, takes over, a displacement similar to the one of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. The two became inseparable, neither one having an independent existence. It is Rosalina, though, who has to step out of the scene, in order that Emilia may bring to the stage, through impersonation, figures like Mary Stewart, Joan the Mad, Lady Hamilton, Lady of the Camelias, Medea, Maria Telles and Judith. As Emilia comes to life as a stage performer, the other personality half ceases to exist, becoming a memory bound to be extinguished after her last survivor's death, the Baroness's thespian tale also coming to an end.

Curiously, all the parts played by Emilia, the actress, belong to women of dubious reputation, most of them victimized in the roles they played either in History or Literature. The mirror effect caused by the sameness of the female cast enhances the precarious situation of women through the centuries and their forced subservience to patriarchal hierarchies and power. Rosalina herself could very well be one of those stage heroines, a woman who, says the narrator, "was little more than a shadow, but a shadow that resembles someone we know whose name escapes us, which makes us think about her".<sup>18</sup>

By trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle, the reader is lead to believe that if, in fact, the Baroness had a double life, one as the demure lady of the manor with no life of her own, the other as the flamboyant actress with the audiences at her feet, then the theatre is made to be a metaphor for liberation and power. It provided the space for the protagonist to be a self-shaper by wearing different masks and attires. Once she was a queen, like Mary Stuart, next, a dying prostitute, like the Lady of the Camelias, or biblical Judith, the female spy turned assassin. On

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<sup>18</sup> "... que foi pouco mais do que uma sombra que se parece com uma pessoa conhecida e cujo nome nos escapa; o que nos esforça a pensar nela." (CN, p. 176).



the stage, Rosalina-Emilia would attain self-expression, in addition to manipulating the public's emotions, even when they hooted and hissed her. She was a celebrity, in contrast to the other, the voiceless chatelaine of Ponta Delgada, remembered only for her resemblance to the Empress of Austria, as in the shot by Vincent, the photographer. While the show went on, the actress had her moments of glory. Off stage, little was known about Emilia, except that she married João Senha, who could not be the key to the mystery, himself being a kind of surrogate for Gaspar de Barros, the wealthy islander who had married Rosalina, or was it Emilia? One more hurdle in this already complicated game of duplications and identities.

Masks, disguises, red-haired wigs, fancy robes, simulation, acting, sudden disappearances, nick-names, those were devices and strategies that liberate the woman from rules and social constraints. Ironically only through impersonation could she reach freedom and power, privileges denied to her in every day life, which is itself a ruse.<sup>19</sup>

For Gramina, the “two personalities”<sup>20</sup> became the key to the Baroness's enigma, an interpretation bound to raise sceptical eye-brows, as it was a provocation to History or to the objective truth of History, in whose “Court”, says the ironic narrator, a “fictive or a real figure” “cannot be attacked or defended”<sup>21</sup>. Even less a shadow of a woman blown into the sea or her theatrical reincarnation with no existence but on stage, either as a wretched Queen or a woman of ill repute.

In *A Corte do Norte*, intertextual historicity is used as a pretext for mocking any notion of historical authenticity through an entanglement of identities and a series of contradictions, the defiant female trio – Elizabeth-Rosalina-Emilia – being a parody of the romantic male

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<sup>19</sup> The same problem is raised by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar regarding Austen's fiction: “In all six of Austen's novels women who are refused the means of self-definition are shown to be fatally drawn to the dangerous delights of impersonation and pretence”. “Jane Austen's Cover Story”, in *The Madwoman in the Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 168.

<sup>20</sup> *CN*, p. 264.

<sup>21</sup> *CN*, pp. 271-2.

dream of freedom which nineteenth-century women had little or no hope to aspire to. The self-reflexive narrator's apparent resignation with History's irrefutable verdict does not mean that further squabbles won't occur in the future. Knowing the author's obsession both with the past and the past "patriarchal strategy" to circumscribe the woman to a "female enclave",<sup>22</sup> they certainly will, even, if out of despair, the woman is forced into religion, like Alfreda in *Alma dos Ricos* (2002), whose only hope in life is to meet the Virgin Mary before slipping into a coma from which she will never come out, an ironic solution to rescue her from a miserable existence as a wealthy woman.

As other fiction by Agustina, *A Corte do Norte* is an inconclusive novel, its provisional end being a challenge to the reader, who is invited to drop in at the old manor in Ponta Delgada to rekindle the legend of the fiery Baroness-actress and her many faces. But, we may find no trace of her jazzy velvet garments or a picture hidden in a jewel box or a scrap of paper proving her real existence. After all, her story was made up of tales and riddles put together at the whim of a by now I-narrator, who claims to have heard many a person, many a truth, and, one may add, gazed at many a picture before writing the book, a way of validating the many truths that fiction can provide. No one will ever find an answer to the Baroness's enigma, concludes the prankish I-narrator, as if peering over the reader's shoulder, while he or she races through the pages of the novel, hoping to find, if not a clue, a meaning for this enigmatic tale that has the slopes of Madeira as a theatrical setting.

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<sup>22</sup> See Toril Moi, *Sexual Politics, Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 82.

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