

NOVEL, NATION, TRAVEL

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L'article analyse la structure du roman d'Almeida Garrett, *Viagens na minha terra* (*Travels into my Homeland*, 1846), en concentrant l'attention sur le sujet du voyage dans la terre d'origine, au cours du Romantisme portugais (dont Garrett est l'écrivain le plus représentatif), et sur comment ce roman peut être considéré une sorte de récit de voyage « introspectif » de l'auteur.



I.

The literature of European Romanticism is variously concerned with travel, exile and displacement, and often the strong subjective bent of the Romantic era is coupled here with an interest in the question of national character, national difference, or national self-definition. The intersection of new aesthetic sensibilities with an emphatic notion of "place" and the mode of travel might be explored with regard to several Romantic writers, and a prime example would certainly be Madame de Staël's enormously influential "international" novel, *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807). Another prominent example, centrally concerned with cross-border travelling, exploration of a cultural periphery, and appearing directly in the wake of the success of *Corinne*, is Walter Scott's not less influential historical novel *Waverley* (1814).^[1]

However, I would like to draw attention here to a novel that is less well known or influential than either *Corinne* or *Waverley*, but which is equally important in this context, namely Almeida Garrett's *Viagens na minha terra* (*Travels into my Homeland*) from 1846. As the title already indicates, this novel by the most significant writer of Portuguese Romanticism is not concerned with cross-border, or cross-nation travelling (from France and Scotland to Italy in *Corinne*, from England to Scotland in *Waverley*), but rather

with a voyage (or, more precisely, voyages) *within* the borders of one's country. However, the seemingly straightforward title of this novel-generally acknowledged to be the first novel of modern prose in Portugal-is deceptive: this is neither a traditional novel, nor is it a travel narrative in the traditional sense. The very first paragraph makes this clear, by establishing a strong inter-textual relationship with the genre of the literary micro-voyage, as established by Xavier de Maistre in his *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794):

Que viaje à roda do seu quarto quem está à beira dos Alpes, de Inverno, em Turim, que é quase tão frio como S. Petersburgo-entende-se. Mas com este clima, com este ar que Deus nos deu, onde a laranjeira cresce na horta, e o mato é de murta, o próprio Xavier de Maistre, que aqui escrevesse, ao menos ia até o quintal. (I, 5)
[2]

That a person who lives near the Alps, in Turin, which is nearly as cold as St Petersburg, should travel around his bedroom, is understandable. But in this climate, with this God-given air, in which orange trees grow in the back garden and the undergrowth is a mass of myrtle, even Xavier de Maistre, if he were writing here, would at least go as far as the backyard.^[3]

If the narrator of de Maistre never leaves his room in Northern Italy, Garrett's narrator *does* leave his room, but his travel from Lisbon to Santarém, in the region of the Ribatejo-today a good hour's train ride from Lisbon-hardly seems to fulfil the expectations raised by the novel's title. The narrator is detained by a hundred disordered, seemingly aborted thoughts, a series of narrative digressions, which recalls another important literary model, namely the novels of Lawrence Sterne, both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*. When the narrator finally arrives in the valley of Santarém, a travel companion tells him a story, "the story of the girl with the green eyes," which, again not without several interruptions, takes up the good latter half of the book. As it turns out, Garrett's is largely an "interior" voyage, very much in the spirit of his model de Maistre, if also combined here with a typically Romantic preference for the mixing of literary genres and a cultivation of the "fragmentary." Why should this be so? Why is the first modern novel of Portugal written in this bizarre, eccentric style-and what is the relation between novel and travel?

II.

In order to answer these questions, a few words about the author are in order. During the years 1823 and 1824 Garrett had emigrated to England, following the so-called "Vilafrancada" of 1823, a counter-revolutionary movement that brought about the restoration of the absolute monarchy (the revolt started in the city Vila Franca, on 27th May, 1823). An entire generation of liberal intellectuals had been enrolled in the liberal army, took part in various battles, and after defeat emigrated to England. Here they absorbed new cultural forms not yet fully established in Portugal. Because of this characteristic cultural 'delay'-the second generation of English Romanticism was already dead-the Portuguese Romantics gave expression to new ideas of progress and identified with a specifically liberal myth of nationalism.^[4]

In the *Viagens*, the narrator makes explicit his sympathy with the leader of the liberal party, and it is highly significant that he does so with a specific qualification that indicates his sympathy for a politics that fuses the values of modernity with respect for the traditions of the past. In its political verve, the movement of Portuguese Romanticism is most similar perhaps to Italian Romanticism, with the difference, of course, that Italy was occupied by foreign powers, whereas Portugal was experiencing a civil war.

The title of Garrett's book bears witness to the subjective dimension of the text ("minhas"), tied to the generic tradition of the sentimental journey and the voluble narrator of a digressive text that is rooted in an individual voice. At the same time, the reference to "terras," to the land, brings to the fore also a communal dimension, the question of national identity. The conjunction "minhas terras" is significant because it points to a possible pluralization of the singularity of nationhood ("terras"), as well as to a relation between objective ground and subjective perception, or even possession ("minhas"). The very title of Garrett's book, then, raises important questions about its specific generic make-up, as well as the relation between the personal and collective, national identity.

III.

The text builds up a contrast between the Portugal of the past and the Portugal of the present, between antiquity and modernity. As a result, the idea of the novel as *Viagens* takes on not only a geographic, chorographic sense, but also the notion of travel in time. The numerous monuments mentioned and discussed in the text have a clearly symbolic, that is metonymic relation with regard to the nation. In any event, they project a certain image of the past that provides a striking contrast to the present-an

image of the past that is not represented as redemptive.

The narrator, named Carlos, the subject of the archaeological studies, seems to take a stance against modernity and for the national past. The following passage is perhaps the most resonant example for the characteristic shuttling between past and present:

Tinha estado às voltas com o meu Bentham, que é um grande homem por fim de contas o tal quaker, e são grandes livros os que ele escreveu: cansou-me a cabeça, peguei no Camões e fui para a janela. As minhas janelas agora são as primeiras de Lisboa, dão em cheio por todo esse Tejo. Era uma dessas brilhantes manhãs de Inverno, como as não há senão em Lisboa.

Abri os Lusíadas à ventura, deparei com o canto IV e pus-me a ler aquelas belíssimas estâncias.

E já no porto da ínclita Ulisseia

Pouco a pouco amotinou-se-me o sangue, senti baterem-me as artérias da fronte... as letras fugiam-me do livro, levantei os olhos, dei com eles na pobre nau Vasco da Gama que aí está em monumento-caricatura da nossa glória naval... E eu não vi nada disso, vi o Tejo, vi a bandeira portuguesa flutuando com a brisa da manhã, a torre de Belém ao longe... e sonhei, sonhei que era português, que Portugal era outra vez Portugal. (cap. XXVI; 155)

I had been busy reading my Bentham, because he is, when all is said and done, a great man, that Quaker, and he has written great books. My head was tired, I picked up my Camoens and went over to the window. My windows are now the foremost in Lisbon, they overlook the whole expanse of the Tagus. It was one of those brilliant winter mornings such as you find only in Lisbon. I opened the *Lusiads* at random, chanced upon canto IV and began to read those lovely stanzas that begin: 'At last, in Lisbon's noble harbour...' Gradually my blood stirred inside me, I felt the arteries throb in my temples... The letters flew from the page, I raised my eyes and found myself looking at the pitiful galley, the Vasco da Gama, which sits there as a monumental caricature of our naval glory... Yet I saw none of that: I saw the Tagus, I saw the Portuguese flag fluttering in the morning breeze, the tower of Belém in the distance... and I dreamed, I dreamed that I was Portuguese, that Portugal was Portugal again. (147)

The act of reading enacts for Carlos an emotional transport, moving him away from the material surface of the book, finally to look upon "reality," which is immediately marked as ridiculously in contrast with the glorious times evoked through the reading of the *Lusiads*, an epic text centrally concerned with the exultation of the voyages of Vasco da Gama during the sixteenth century. This centrifugal voyage, connected with the glories of the national past, provides a marked contrast with the *interior*, mental, and metaphoric voyages of Garrett's text.

The reality does not live up to the imaginative construct - and thus the subject is redirected to the sphere of the imagination. The dreaming subject yearns for a self-identity that is belied by the rift between Portugal/Portugal. This disappointment then leads to another phase of dreaming, culminating in the wish that Portugal's difference from itself will be abolished. In other words, Portugal's self-identity cannot be imagined but as an (impossible?) restoration of its past.

The act of reading in this scene underscores the fact that the voyage of this book is above all an imaginary voyage. At the same time, the voyage of the novel might then be understood as a "voyage" towards reality, not because the text is in any way "realist," but because it reveals the literariness of its own narrative procedures, including the trope of Romanticist evasion. Of course, the evocation of Camões' epic *The Lusiads* is not an isolated occurrence, but it might be regarded as the most important literary subtext throughout the *Viagens*. As the most prominent example for a literary embodiment of national self-identification, the *Lusiads* provide an obvious point of reference for a text that is also heavily invested in the literary representation of nationhood. In this perspective, even the very title of Garrett's work seems to set up a specific contrast/parallel with the sixteenth-century epic: while much of the *Lusiads* is concerned with a centripetal voyage beyond the frontiers of Portugal, the *Viagens* appropriate de Maistre's joke of the micro-voyage for the purposes of deconstructing the imperial ideology and the expansive movement of the premier work of "national" literature, a text that was also specifically valued by the authors of Portuguese Romanticism.

Jobst Welge

1. ^ See George G. Dekker, *The Fictions of Romantic Tourism. Radcliffe, Scott, and Mary Shelley*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005
2. ^ All quotations, with chapter and page numbers, from Almeida Garrett, *Viagens na minha Terra*, Porto, Porto Editora, 2005
3. ^ All English translations according to: Almeida Garrett, *Travels in My Homeland*. Transl. John M. Parker, Peter Owen, Unesco, 1987, ch. I, 21
4. ^ Here I follow the brief account of José Hermano Saraiva, *Storia del Portogallo [História concisa de Portugal]*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2004, 283-84

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