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WOMEN AND POETRY TODAY**

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Re-inventing Orpheus: Women and Poetry Today*

Páginas que voam de subir o mundo?
Orfeu as leva na descida

Luiza Neto Jorge¹

This essay takes off from a previous one, titled, “Sobre a ‘escrita feminina’,” which I wrote recently in collaboration with Ana Luísa Amaral, a colleague from the University of Porto, who is also one of the poets I shall be dealing with. In the essay just mentioned, the phrase “escrita feminina” appears between inverted commas. The inverted commas are meant to signify our uneasiness with a concept, largely derived from French feminism, which, in Portugal, Isabel Allegro de Magalhães has mainly argued for with great eloquence.² But what can one mean by “feminine writing”? Is it the same as “women's writing,” that is to say, merely writing authored by women, as Isabel Allegro's first book seemed to indicate? If so, is “escrita feminina” an

* Originally presented to the Colloquium on “Writing by Women in Contemporary Portugal.” Institute of Romance Studies, University of London (February 14, 1997). Also delivered at Stanford University in April.

¹ Luiza Neto Jorge, *Poesia* (Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 1993) 236-37.

²Cf. Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, *O sexo dos textos e outras leituras* (Lisboa: Caminho, 1995). Isabel Allegro's thinking in this regard began to take shape in *O tempo das mulheres: A dimensão temporal na escrita feminina contemporânea* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1987); but in this earlier book the meaning of the phrase “feminine writing” did not presume to mean much beyond “literary production by women,” even if the purpose of her research was to identify a particular conception of time in writing by women.

identifiable literary form resulting from a natural, or even biological, bodily condition or quality? Or is it writing which can be seen as essentially conveying what is socially and conventionally constructed as stereotypically “feminine,” that is to say, identifiable as the “proper” of woman-in-society? Are we then speaking of “écriture féminine,” a mode or style of writing, which, though “closer” to the historical and existential experience of women, as Isabel Allegro argues, can still be found, as the French feminists who labeled it (as well as Isabel Allegro) recognize, in the works of such male authors as Joyce, Proust or Genet—not to mention Shakespeare?

These questions are somewhat disturbing in that they do imply a striking and complex contradiction: on the one hand, the phrase ‘escrita feminina’ resonates with essentialism; on the other, its admission of a masculine subject renders problematical the notion of ‘experience’, if not ‘body’, and denounces the very construction of the feminine object at work in its formulation. In “Sobre a ‘escrita feminina’” Ana Luísa Amaral and I give more credit to the poet's chameleon-like “negative capability” than to anything else.³ We believe that (and I paraphrase Wallace Stevens), though a poem may very well happen, it had better be made. We insist, therefore, that it is highly questionable to distinguish between feminine and masculine writing, beyond the social stereotypes that are pervasive in the culture and which can be resorted to by authors of either sex for different kinds of effects, whether it be parody, denunciation or reinforcement. But we also insist that serious attention must continue to be paid to the issue of sexual difference in the study of literature. And even if, or particularly because, the lyric mode (particularly as memorably described by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*) makes the articulation of the poetic with the political (hence, with sexual difference) arguably more difficult

³Cf. Keats's letter to Richard Woodhouse (October 27 1818): “What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet.” In a previous letter to his brothers, George and Tom (December 21 [27?] 1817), Keats had already identified the primary quality of the true poet as “Negative Capability.”

in literary studies, we firmly believe that such difficulty must not be evaded. Hence our concern, in that essay, with the relationship between poetic texts and the conspicuousness (or lack of it) of the sexual identification of their poetic subjects and authors. In “Sobre a ‘escrita feminina”” we were dealing mainly (though not exclusively) with women poets; but the same applies, of course, to poetry authored by men. After all, Keats's “negative capability” can be said to anticipate Foucault's notion of the “subject” as a “place,” or “position,” with multiple possibilities.

One example only (and here I let go of critic Ana Luísa Amaral, lest I compromise her beyond her liking). In his latest book, Boaventura de Sousa includes a poem entitled, “Se eu fosse mulher.”⁴ The title repeats itself anaphorically many times in the course of the poem. Its speaker's voice is obviously not that of a woman. Or perhaps I should say, it is not meant to be that of a woman. The poet poems, so to speak, not just like a man but as a man.⁵ Furthermore, the voice implicitly suggests that being a woman is not only not desirable at all, but also an inescapable, fixed state. To be a woman is a destiny, a fate, and a very bad one, at that. Nobody in her right mind would want to be a woman, the voice intimates. How could anyone rest contented to be entrapped in such a condition of helpless dependencies and dumb subordinations? And yet, the poem does not impersonate the rage of an oppressed woman, a woman who might enjoy finally reaching the moment of rebellion against her supposed ‘fate’. Being a woman in the male poet's imagination means to comply modestly and ungrudgingly with the socially constructed roles of self-denial and sacrifice ascribed to conventional womanhood. It means, in short, to be the dutiful, self-abnegated handmaid of

⁴Boaventura de Sousa, *Viagem ao centro da pele* (Porto: Afrontamento, 1995) 87-91.

⁵I allude here to the question of the possibility or impossibility of critical positioning as summarized by Diana Fuss for feminist theory in “Reading Like a Feminist.” *Differences* 1 (Summer 1989) 77-92. See also the essays collected in *Men in Feminism*. Ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987).

patriarchy. The make-believe woman in this poem would have no more than a personal history of inequality to tell; she'd pretend pleasantries expected of her and never surprise authorities with sudden offense; she'd be grateful for being spared powers and allowed to live longer statistically; she'd be wife, mother, help, secretary—and unrequited lover. And, needless to say, never menstruate on weekends. Though alledgedly provided for, she would be the unacknowledged provider. She would perform womanhood by withholding her pleasure for the sake of everybody else's pleasure. "Se eu fosse mulher," the masculine litany sings climactically towards the end of the poem, "teria de ter ânimo para me vestir e despir / segundo a moda e o emprego, / e manter a calma/ apesar do medo / na alma." Perhaps, on rare occasions—the male poet imagines—the woman might be pestered with inconsequent thoughts of violent revolt: "Se eu fosse mulher, / preparava a comida a pensar em explosivos." Or, "Se eu fosse mulher, / sentiria a revolta do corpo / que chega tarde de mais / por culpa d'outrem." But, save these two mild exceptions, the poet's imagination is clearly that of an intelligent, sensitive, concerned, and compassionate man who sincerely feels for the necessarily sorry predicament of the female sex, while at the same time implicitly cherishing the privilege of his male prerogatives.⁶ Though the male denunciation of the *status quo* by the surmised impersonation of the oppressed female is quite effective, not less because the viewpoint does not pretend not to be male, the male poet's maximum of possible consciousness does not allow for a female imagination fiercely desiring radical change and wilfully fighting for it; it rather envisions her as reinscribing the inevitable perpetuation of a binary conception, which,

⁶An unpublished poem by Mário de Sá-Carneiro, "Feminina" (sent in a letter to Fernando Pessoa in February 16, 1916) comes to mind. But while in the last decade of the twentieth century Boaventura de Sousa constructs "woman" for his poetic effect as a condition of social oppression to be denounced, at the beginning of the century Sá-Carneiro, quite in tune with the (male) poetic sensibilities of the times, had rather reenacted in "woman" the freedom, amorality, and gratuitousness of poetry itself. See Mário de Sá-Carneiro, *Cartas a Fernando Pessoa*. 2 vols. (Lisboa: Ática, 1958-59) II. 159. For a slightly different reading of this poem, which yet does not contradict my own, see Fernando Cabral Martins, *O modernismo em Mário de Sá-Carneiro* (Lisboa; Estampa, 1994) 319-20.

though perhaps wishing to point to a utopia of horizontal difference, will nevertheless go on distinguishing mercilessly, defining identities strictly, and ascribing roles rigorously: “Se eu fosse mulher,” the poem concludes, “quereriam que eu fosse mulher / e eu seria / mas só na condição de o homem / ser apenas homem / tanto de noite como de dia.”

In its skilful portrayal of a kind of experience of oppressive socialization which many real women throughout the world today might still recognize as their own, the poem clearly forces readers to reconsider poetry in relation to sexual difference as a political issue. It forces readers to ask themselves: “Can gender *not* be an issue in poetics?” In the sense that the conventionally masculine has always passed for the universal “neuter,” we could say that poetry is, has always been, gendered. But must gender be a critical issue unless the particular poem offers itself as gendered?⁷ “Se eu fosse mulher” cannot be read without consideration of the politics of sexual difference, to which the poem itself calls attention so forcefully. The same is true of many other texts. *Novas cartas portuguesas*, for example, is an aggressively gendered text with an overt political agenda. To a certain extent, the sexist censors of the dictatorship that banned it and prosecuted its authors understood this as well as Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, who wrote the well-known feminist preface for the 1980 edition.⁸ The *New Portuguese Letters*, she says, rather confirming the prosecutors' zeal, “denounce the oppression of women;” the *Letters* are “an indictment against the society that discriminates, enslaves, passes judgement, and marginalizes.”⁹ The *New Portuguese Letters*

⁷That is to say, if it deliberately uses grammatical gender to call attention to the politics of sexual difference. Monique Wittig has argued that the language itself already does this, anyway, the attempt to suspend the mark of gender being the originary impulse of her creative writing. Cf. Monique Wittig, “The Mark of Gender.” *The Poetics of Gender*. Ed. Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia, 1986) 63-73.

⁸Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *Novas cartas portuguesas* (Lisboa: Moraes, 1980).

⁹Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, *ibid.*, 18. My translation.

are pioneer amongst us, further writes Pintasilgo, in that they join the vast body of literature throughout the world that calls itself feminist writing (note that Pintasilgo never says *feminine* writing). By “feminist writing,” she explains, she means writing in which “the relation of woman to writing is the major theme, whether explicitly or implicitly.”¹⁰ Though Pintasilgo's definition runs the risk of diluting meanings to such an extent that all writing may be perceived as being feminist (for example, poems written by male poets in which women's relation to writing is one of dead silence), it is a good starting point for critics. Indeed, it applies perfectly to feminist *criticism*, particularly if “writing” is metonymically taken to mean “power,” and if feminist criticism is understood as criticism that takes into consideration the importance of sexual difference for the literary construction of poetry and poetics (for example, criticism that engages in the discussion of images of woman in poems written by male poets in which women's relation to writing is one of dead silence).

In her now classic “For the Etruscans,” first formulated in 1979, writes Rachel Blau DuPlessis:

I can prove that different social groups produce differences in cultural expression. I can prove that women are a social group. I can point to examples of differences in our relation to the symbolic order and in our cultural expression.

But I cannot prove that only women, that women only, use this aesthetic.

And then she adds: “And this failure is actually the strongest proof of all.”¹¹ The strongest proof of all, that is, of the need for a feminist poetics. Not

¹⁰Id., *ibid.*, 26.

¹¹Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 14.

so much in order to identify poems as feminist, but to show how such concepts as sex and sexual difference pertain to the literary construction of poetry and poetics. That Pintasilgo's definition of *Novas cartas portuguesas* as a feminist text seems to be widely accepted, including by the three Marias themselves, whatever their differences today, may have more to do with the hybrid character and theoretical and critical self-reflectivity of the text than with the way the authors see themselves vis-à-vis sexual markers. Indeed, as Isabel Allegro has correctly pointed out, in general Portuguese women writers dislike being identified sexually.¹² Either because they refuse to be treated with patronizing condescension; or because they do not want success or recognition, as women writers, to appear to be the result of feminist struggles, rather than "true" poetic merit, however defined. In my title, "Re-inventing Orpheus: Women and Poetry Today," I wish to emphasize these issues as I shall be dealing with them in the rest of my essay. On and off in the Western poetic tradition, and frequently even today, at a time when so many women have earned unquestioned literary canonicity, poets of the female sex have been forced to wonder about their place, location or position as subjects in the culture.¹³ "Re-inventing Orpheus" has the precise meaning of strategies for the interrogation, if not subversion, of poetic roles: putting oneself in the place of Orpheus, the mythic subject of the song, rather than in the place of Eurydice, the mythic object of the song; or making Eurydice the subject and Orpheus the object, or radically questioning the Orphic model itself.¹⁴ "Women and Poetry"

¹²See Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, *O tempo das mulheres* 497.

¹³For a fine overview of women's self-reinventions in Portuguese literature since the beginning of this century, see Graça Abranches, "Verlernen, um zu sprechen: Politik und Poetik portugiesischer Frauen im 20. Jahrhundert." In *Portugiesische Literatur*. Herausgegeben von Henry Thorau (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997) 204-35.

¹⁴An important essay for my reasoning here has been Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira, "Motivos clássicos na poesia portuguesa contemporânea: O mito de Orfeu e Eurídice." In her *Novos ensaios sobre temas clássicos na poesia portuguesa* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1988) 303-22.

points to the different sorts of relations that can be observed in the culture between women and poetry, such as, for example, the one patent in “Se eu fosse mulher,” but privileging, above all, relations established by real human beings of the female sex with poetry as a cultural value and traditional concept. “Today” simply means the twentieth century in Portugal, a time marked by the Republic (1910), the Estado Novo (1926-1974), the April Revolution, and the subsequent explosion of education and its new accessibility, particularly for women.

My working hypothesis is that women writing poetry today tend to construct for themselves different kinds of locations vis-à-vis the dominant culture.¹⁵ Let me isolate a few of these strategies, and then, for reasons of time and space, linger on three of them at greater length. First, women poets discretely assume the traditional neutral position of the Nietzschean “objective” lyric poet, whose “I” is not himself (or, presumably, herself, though for some reason Nietzsche's example was Archilochus, and not Sapho). Think of Sophia de Melo Breyner Andresen and her beautiful reinscription of pure poetry and the everlasting, golden power of the lyric as “Orpheus” in a late poem of the same title;¹⁶ or Fiamma Hasse Pais Brandão and the limpid clarity and transparency of her lyricism, even when she claims Eurydice as her “other name;”¹⁷ or Ana Hatherly and the professional experimentalism of expert poetics. Second, women poets ostensibly invade and take possession of the public realm and “steal” such traditionally “masculine” topics as eroticism and politics. Florbela and her passionate intimations of desire: “Sou chama e neve

¹⁵Though her approach and aims are different from my own, Maria Regina Louro's perceptive analysis of three “voices” in contemporary Portuguese poetry by women was very inspiring. See Maria Regina Louro, “Lyrik: Dreistimmig. Sophia de Melo Breyner Andresen, Maria Teresa Horta, Fiamma Hasse Pais Brandão” (trans. Elfriede Englemeyer). In *Die Schwestern der Mariana Alcoforado: Portugiesische Schriftstellerinnen der Gegenwart*. Herausgegeben von Elfriede Englemeyer und Renate Heß (Berlin: Tranvia, 1993) 55-68.

¹⁶Sophia de Melo Breyner Andresen, “Orfeu.” *Musa* (Lisboa: Caminho, 1994) 23.

¹⁷Fiamma Hasse Pais Brandão, *Poesia breve* (Lisboa: Teorema, 1991) 468.

branca e misteriosa,” she cries out in “Horas rubras;”¹⁸ Natália Correia and her denunciation of the triumph of the fathers over womens' sexuality;¹⁹ Maria Teresa Horta and her defiant celebration of the female body as *desiring* as well as desired; Maria Velho da Costa and the reinscription of the body and eroticism as political and the call for equality and reciprocity by the overthrow of the patriarchal politics of gender in *Corpo verde*: “Que o meu irmão me beije e se beije no meu beijo / como se fôramos a flor de outra justiça.”²⁰ Third, they boldly re-write, in reverse, as it were, the most cherished myths of the tradition. Eurydice, and not Orpheus, as the purest symbol of poetry in early Sophia. Consider her sonnet from *No tempo dividido* (1954), titled precisely “Eurydice.” Eurydice, not Orpheus, goes in search of Orpheus-as-the-traditionally-poetic but, not finding him, does find what will suffice in herself as the transparent being of possibility.²¹ I shall come back to this strategy in my reading of Ana Luísa Amaral below. Forth, they satirically deal with the alledged “masculine” role and topics from the debunking viewpoint of an insolent female location, as I show in Adília Lopes' poetry. Fifth, and finally (for the time being), they defiantly propound an explicitly “minor” poetics of “feminine” insignificances and trivialities, obliquely suggesting that it is in fact “major.” Readers of American poetry would immediately think of Emily Dickinson: “I was the slightest in the House— / I took the smallest Room—” (#486); or, “I'm Nobody! Who are you? / Are you—Nobody—Too?” (#288). The unsurpassed master of

¹⁸Florbela Espanca, “Horas Rubras” (*Livro de Soror Saudade*, 1923). *Sonetos*. Edição completa com un estudo crítico de José Régio (Lisboa: Bertand, 1981) 101

¹⁹Natália Correia speaks of “patrisimo triunfante” in *A mulher: Antologia poética*. Ed. Natália Correia (Lisboa: Estudos Cor, 1972) 13.

²⁰Maria Velho da Costa, *Corpo verde*. Desenhos de Júlio Pomar (Lisboa: Contexto, 1979).

²¹Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, “Soneto de Eurydice”. In her *Obra poética* 2nd vol. (Lisboa: Caminho, 1995) 33. Sophia returns to Eurydice more than once. Cf. Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira, “Motivos clássicos na poesia portuguesa contemporânea: O mito de Orfeu e Eurídice”.

this strategy in Portuguese poetry is still Irene Lisboa.²² Consider her quite Dickinsonian

[Uma] estética,
ou arte, de retalhos,
de insignificâncias...
Arte que deita o pé,
que estende a cabeça
a ver se chove...
patetinha,
pobrezinha...²³

I have just quoted from one of Irene Lisboa's "days" in *Um dia e outro dia... Diário de uma mulher*, first published in 1936 under the pseudonym of João Falco. The following year, the poet, under the same pseudonym, brought out another collection, titled *Outono havias de vir latente triste*. As a kind of unusual self-epigraph that is really a defiant warning to her readers, she inscribed at the beginning of the latter book: "Ao que vos parecer verso chamaí verso e ao resto chamaí prosa." Like the unusual *incipit*, both volumes are a poetic commentary on the conventions of poetry at the height of the *presença* years in Portugal. Irene Lisboa's poems speak the "poesia viva" that José Régio desired, and indeed knew only too well *Orpheu* had inaugurated, but which the poetic practice of *presença*, in its desire to reconcile modernism and classicism, was perhaps never really to accomplish.²⁴ Though the

²²Though for heuristic purposes I here somewhat isolate them, all these strategies, and possibly many others, can be found in different poets in various forms and combinations.

²³Irene Lisboa, *Poesia I*. Org. Paula Morão, intr. José Gomes Ferreira (Lisboa: Presença, 1991) 182.

²⁴I allude here to three essays by José Régio, all originally published in *presença*:—"Literatura viva", "Literatura livresca e literatura viva" e "Classicismo e modernismo"—and which can now be found in *Páginas de doutrina e crítica da presença* (Porto: Brasília, 1977). Cf. Fernando J. B. Martinho, "1936—um ano a três vozes: Régio, Torga e Irene Lisboa", *Colóquio/Letras*, nº 131

presença poets and critics admired her work enough to publish some of her poems, Irene Lisboa remains outside their aesthetic.²⁵ Her poems, says Régio, have no intrinsic music (unlike, he adds, those of Casais Monteiro). At most, they are onomatopoeias or repetitions. They are like cries or stones dropped or thrown, unfinished sentences, reticences, “pure prose, and sharp at that,” emphasizes Régio. Régio also wonders—as many other critics have, while offering various explanations—why the woman poet chose a man's name as a pseudonym. After all, the secret was no secret, and “futile” “femininity,” insists José Rério, is the great originality and true merit of João Falco's poems. Though in all fairness one must acknowledge that José Régio distinguishes the high quality of Irene Lisboa's poetry from the “embroidery” usually exhibited in contemporary poetry by women, what he is not ready to see is that “femininity” is just part of the prose of her poems, as Pessoa would say.²⁶ The contrast between the “femininity” of the poetry and the aggressive, indeed, predatory “masculinity” of the ostensible “author” (João Falco or “John Hawk”) cannot be dissociated from the desired poetic effect.

To my mind, Eduardo Lourenço's controversial landmark essay, “*Presença* ou a contra-revolução do modernismo português” (1960) fails to account for the continued revolution of Portuguese modernism precisely in Irene Lisboa's poetry.²⁷ The being of the *Orpheu* poetry, says Lourenço, is not the expression of personal existence or individual experience; it is rather

(Janeiro-Março 1996) 44.

²⁵Irene Lisboa was very well received in her time by other poets, but whether it is José Régio, Casais Monteiro, Mário Dionísio or Vitorino Nemésio, the question of her sex is always raised and the doubt remains: is she a fine poet? or just a fine *woman* poet? Cf. Paula Morão, “Irene Lisboa e a crítica”, *Colóquio/Letras*, nº 131 (Janeiro-Março 1996) 25-36.

²⁶Cf. José Régio, “*Um dia e outro dia...*, *Outono havias de vir* por João Falco,” *presença* nº 50 (December 1937).

²⁷Eduardo Lourenço, *Tempo e poesia* (Porto: Inova, 1974) 165-94. But see also, in the same volume, “Dialéctica mítica da nossa modernidade” (203-23), where Irene Lisboa is seen, with Casais Monteiro, in the light of Alvaro de Campos' “anti-lyricism” (216). Still, because Irene Lisboa's poetry is more “intrinsically inorganic” and Casais Monteiro's has “complex resonances,” the impression remains that the latter is the finer poet. For an assessment closer to my own, see José Gomes Ferreira's “Breve introdução à poesia de Irene Lisboa” in *Poesia I*.

modernity's consciousness of radical absence. Pessoa, emphasizes Lourenço, using Campos's "Ode Marítima" as an example, imitates the *external* of reality or history and makes them present in the poem *in the negative*. The *Orpheu* poem speaks a strikingly new understanding of space and time, both human and cosmic. The *Orpheu* poet, I would add, is the Nietzschean trans-subjective lyric "I" that invades space and time as mere fragmentary being. This is one of the possible ways of reading the trans-personalization, rather than depersonalization, of the heteronymic drama. On the other hand, Lourenço has argued, the "counter-revolution" of the *presença* poets, in general, brings back subjectivity, individuality, and identity, an "I" concerned with personal salvation or damnation, whether religious or, at times, political as well. Re-inventing *Orpheu*, Irene Lisboa's poems posit the most fragile of individual "I"s of the Western poetic tradition, that of an "absent" female voice, and has it invade all space and time as mere fragmentary being. The banal trivialities of day-to-day human life—literally diary entries of joys and sorrows, memories and forgetfulnesses, desires and anxieties, pleasures and frustrations, work and leisure, inside and outside—thus appear translated into the spots of time of sheer timelessness and spacelessness. The bits-and-pieces kind of fluency that structures the poems themselves reenacts the cosmic theme with uncanny precision. Any little object plays the role of the poem's self-transcending universe. For example, the withering red anemonies of one of the poet's endless "days," as they become nameless flowers, are witness to the transpersonal dimension of a mere identity-less, ignorant "I" under the sun.

O dia de hoje,
porque me dás estas flores
e o sol?
porque me deste o ar tão fresco

desta manhã,
e o tão suave prenúncio
desta tarde?
Dia,
que me prometes?
porque me exaltas?²⁸

The use of a male pseudonym (beyond the predatory resonances I have already alluded to) is also a poetic statement, whether first deliberately intended or not. In the first published volume, *Um dia e outro dia...*, João Falco appears as the “author” of “A Woman's Journal.” The play with male and female authorship—including the oblique allusion to medieval conventions of poetic transvestism—renders problematical the gender issue at the heart of every poem. The book presents itself as written by a man who supposedly writes like a woman writing as a woman. It is, therefore, not a question of a “feminine,” as opposed to a “masculine” poetics. It is rather a question of *art* which implies the negativity of all fictions and masks. For, as the poet herself wrote a few years later, “distinguir arte feminina de arte masculina será sempre coisa temerária e difícil.”²⁹ And yet, a “minor” thematics of “feminine” insignificances and trivialities is proffered in such a subtly ironic way that the “real,” “serious,” presumably “masculine” stuff of literature appears trite by comparison.

Foi, há pouco, publicado
um livro curioso,
que não li.
(...)

²⁸Id., *ibid.*, 178.

²⁹Irene Lisboa, *Solidão. Notas do punho de uma mulher* (1939; Lisboa, Presença., 1992) 163.

só pelo título, é um livro.
Tem assunto!
e, suponho, terá vigor.
Isto...
estas queixas envergonhadas,
ciciantes,
meio estranguladas,
que repiso, não têm além...
são o fruto peço
de uma vida
ao invés de todas as outras,
de uma vida estéril!³⁰

Irene Lisboa uses irony very skilfully but hardly ever satire. Her clever understatements and gentle ridiculings of the dominant cultural and social tastes and conventions are dear, also, to Ana Luísa Amaral, as will be clear below, even if I discuss her poetry from a different perspective.³¹ But satire, though not usually considered a very “feminine” form, is one of the preferred stances of another woman poet from the younger generations: Adília Lopes. Any of the “romances” in *O decote da dama de espadas*, with its little-girlish voice and sing-song verse mixed with occasional prose, is a fine example of her use of unlady-like nonsensical humor, excess, and sarcasm to debunk some of the most sentimentalized values of a culture that remains negatively inscribed in the masculine: childhood, child care, and children's literature; class structure, manners, and femininity; language and the literary canon.

³⁰Irene Lisboa, *Poesia* 1143-44. Cf. a later title by Irene Lisboa, which reads like an ironic commentary on the ironies of this poem: *Título qualquer serve—para novelas e noveletas* (Lisboa: Portugália, 1958)

³¹But see, for example, “A verdade histórica” ou “Ode à diferença” and note the title of the collection, *Minha senhora de quê* (Coimbra: Fora do Texto, 1990) 36-37; 40-42.

Because the poems, in order for their nonsensical poetics to make sense, must really be quoted in their entirety, I wonder if the new critical aesthetic of “the poem on the page” is not being satirized here as well. One of my favorites in this collection is “No More Tears” (in English in the original), which plays with the pains and sorrows of blessed, sheltered childhood and its privileged kind providers: mothers, grandmothers, and multinational Johnson & Johnson, the last one alone being credited with drying out young children's tears.³² “Um figo” deals with the question of identity and property in the craziest way you can possibly imagine: a woman drops a photograph of herself on the street, an attentive man she does not know picks it up and gives it back to her, she declines to take it back arguing that it does not belong to her, there is some discussion on the subject between the two characters and a fair amount of grotesque surmising on identity and representation, property and propriety on the part of the poet, and finally the man gives up and hands the picture over to a beggar. The outrageous closure is provided by the use, in the last line, of a Portuguese idiom (“que lhe chamou um figo”) to assure its readers that the beggar was, unsurprisingly as it seems, absolutely ecstatic with the absurd gift.³³ Far more complex in the same book are poems that deal with the high canonical tradition. “Uma afirmação de Pessoa sobre Milton” parodies the notion of canonicity itself. It is a strange poem about a woman who finds out the hard way that she is not Milton. Nor was she meant to be, of course, but, in this culture, if you are not Milton, or the equivalent, by appropriating what one might call Miltonness (or, for that matter, and by implication, Pessoaanness, that is to say, the celebrated single-mindedness of [masculine] genius), you have no right to exist *really*. In its whole, the poem can also be read as a caustic commentary on mainstream discourses on the appropriate social and sexual

³²Adília Lopes, *O decote da dama de espadas (Romances)* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1988) 47.

³³Id., *ibid.*, 46.

roles, and the relationship between women and education in society at large.³⁴ In “Os cordéis,” Ulysses and the Homeric epic are reinvented in pathetic caricature as Penelope and her patient wait for the return of the warrior are pictured as a woman's compulsive, insane tying and untying of fine threads, or even hairs, with tiny knots.³⁵

In a more recent book, Adília Lopes again chooses to play with intertextuality and the cultural tradition but this time with the sparse contention and even erasure of so-called pure lyricity. The title of the book is *O peixe na água*, an allusion to another well-known Portuguese idiom, which signifies the ease of perfect comfort.³⁶ The way the poet plays with it shows that she is quite at ease in the tradition. The book opens with a few love poems that combine the explicit eroticism of the form with grand phrases and purports, and the most bland colloquialisms:

Pássaros lírios anjos
estamos nus
somos muito bonitos
herdeiros do mundo
(espero por ti
vens ter comigo
convidei-te)
despimo-nos muito depressa
comungamo-nos³⁷

³⁴Id., *ibid.*, 54-55. For Pessoa's statement on Milton, cf. Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas de Estética e de crítica e teoria literárias*. Ed. Jacinto Prado Coelho and Georg Rudolf Lind (Lisboa: Atica, 1973) 239: “Quando Milton escrevia um soneto, fazia-o como se desse único soneto dependesse a sua vida ou morte.”

³⁵Id., *ibid.*, 72-73.

³⁶Adília Lopes, *O peixe na água* (Lisboa: &etc., 1993).

³⁷Id., *ibid.*, 7.

Another effectively upsetting little lyric is “O meu tempo (1960-1993).” Here, in an apparently self-referential gesture, a thirty-three-year old poet deconstructs the discourse of power recurrently uttered by aging people. “In my time,” younger people grow sick of hearing from their elders, “we knew how to handle things in such a better way...” And the poet satirically concurs, pointing at the same time to the utter nakedness of authority's eternal braggart of perfect existing:

Agora as pessoas
não sabem morrer
estar doentes
sofrer
ter prazer
tocar-se
dantes também não
(ó mais nu
e branco dos homens)³⁸

As mercilessly unsentimental and dispassionate portraits of women in a society ridden by deeply ingrained class and sexual prejudice and discrimination, Adília Lopes' poems end up raising interesting and pertinent questions about the role of feminist perspectives in contemporary theory and criticism. Her most important work in this regard is *O marquês de Camilly (Kabale und Liebe)*. This provative little book is a satirical reinvention—impudently sprinkled with farsical echoes of *The New Portuguese Letters*—of the celebrated seventeenth century epistolary romance between the Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado, and the French lieutenant, the Marquis

³⁸Id. *ibid.*, 49.

of Chamilly. The use of Latin, the opening allusion to the traditional cocotte, Mimi, and later to *Hamlet's* Ophelia, as well as the ambiguated identity of the several Mariannas mentioned in the poems, introduce, to my mind, two major theoretical issues: first, the poetic question of language and representation, the neuter and the universality of poetry; second, the philosophic question of essentialism versus constructionism in the assessment of the condition of women across times.³⁹

Power, authority, property, propriety, and the tradition—such are Ana Luísa Amaral's topics as well, but in reverse, as it were. Silvina Rodrigues Lopes has suggested that Amaral's "poems' voice has no master."⁴⁰ From her very first volume on, beginning with the title itself, *Minha senhora de quê*, Ana Luísa Amaral creates in her poems a persona who presumes to own nothing and thus *to be* ("dona de nada," as she says in the title poem, "nem de mim"). The title is, of course, a commentary on Maria Teresa Horta's subversion of the male voice of *cantigas de amigo* by the modern woman's daring appropriation of her own body.⁴¹ But what, if bold, seemed so simple for Maria Teresa Horta (the woman reinvents her female body to *authorize and delight in* its possession by the male body), appears now far more complex and perhaps not so bold, after all. In her second book, *Coisas de partir*, a poem, whose title ("Título por haver") is actually the suspension of title (in every sense of the word, thus uncannily evoking, for this reader, Irene Lisboa's *Título qualquer serve*), teaches us that the apparently clear-cut distinctions of identity and difference, including the comforting binarism of sexual roles, have exploded and left everything upside down:

³⁹ Adília Lopes, *O marquês de Camilly (Kabale und Liebe)* (Lisboa: Hiena, 1987).

⁴⁰In her presentation of *Coisas de partir* (Coimbra: Fora do Texto, 1993), later published as "A proximidade do caos," in *Público* ('Leituras,' [May 14, 1993]).

⁴¹See Maria Teresa Horta, *Minha senhora de mim* (Lisboa: Futura, 1974).

No meu poema ficaste
de pernas para
o ar
(mas também eu
já estive tantas vezes)

Por entre versos vejo-te as mãos
no chão
do meu poema
e os pés tocando o título
(a haver quando eu
quiser)

Enquanto o meu desejo assim serás:
incómodo estatuto:
preciso de escrever-te
do avesso para te amar em excesso⁴²

The motif of the reverse, an implicit strategy in Amaral's first collection, *Minha senhora de quê*, is here made explicit and will continue to shape many of her poems. In her third book, *Epopéias*, the reverse is actually the very topic of "Avessos contos de fadas."⁴³ Fairy tales in this poem are the many inventions in the culture that make up the tradition and its beliefs, ideologies, and constraints. Amaral's poetry pulls them apart and turns them inside out, radically questioning their deeper meaning. Alluding to Garrett's *Frei Luis de Sousa*, the Portuguese tragedy of identity caught at the crossroads of religion, mores, and sexuality, the poem wilfully wonders whether the Pilgrim himself

⁴²Ana Luísa Amaral, *Coisas de partir* 71.

⁴³Id., *Epopéias* (Coimbra: Fora do Texto, 1994) 8-9.

has not spoken the truth after all: "E se o Romeiro afinal / for mesmo Ninguém-ninguém?"

The reverse of the tradition or the tradition on the wrong side, whether upside down or inside out, is thus the chosen strategy of this Portuguese woman poet who knows what we might call the obverse of the tradition only too well. Hades, Orpheus, Dante. To plunge down into the dark abyss and come back unscathed from the other side of the unknown. The theme makes its appearance in "Minha senhora de quê," where the woman poet presents herself as the reverse of the poet as the tradition has pictured him: a woman, and not a man; dispossessed, because unable or reluctant to accept Maria Teresa Horta's gift of self-ownership; uninspired, because forbidden the privilege of the Orphic catabasis to follow Dante down to Hades and speak with Vergil; indeed, as the constructed hole gaping in all the four stanzas glaringly states, a wholly absent or even nonexistent poet:

dona de quê
se na paisagem onde se projectam
pequenas asas deslumbrantes folhas
nem eu me projectei

se os versos apressados
me nascem sempre urgentes:
trabalhos de permeio refeições
doendo a consciência inusitada

dona de mim nem sou
se sintaxes trocadas
o mais das vezes nem minha intenção
os sentidos diversos ocultados

nem do oculto nascem
(poética do Hades quem me dera!)

Dona de nada senhora nem
de mim: imitações de medo
os meus infernos

“Imitations of nothing,” she also says of her writing in a poem which bears a twisted syntax in its title (“Minha senhora a nada”) and prolongs the poet's meditations on poetic identity.⁴⁴ In *Coisas de partir*, a poem whose title, “Soneto em fragmentos (e a seguir),” already points to the shattering of conventions and the tradition (if for nothing else, because the poem is obviously not a sonnet technically), the woman poet's desire to be the greatest love poet ever (greater than Orpheus, Safo or Dante) succeeds in imagining the poetically unimaginable: the poet a mere woman of flesh and blood, a sinful Beatrice collapsed with Sapho to reinvent Lesbos, the magic island of lyric poetry itself.⁴⁵ Such is the voice, a woman's voice, that resounds in six difficult poems on the grand theme (love), included in *E muitos os caminhos*, and gathered together under a common title (“Histórias de uma noite de verão”).⁴⁶ The opening poem is the simplest one of all. Like the one I just mentioned, it calls itself, this time explicitly, a sonnet that is not a sonnet: “Soneto científico a fingir.” In a light, facetious tone, the voice identifies itself as a woman's voice, such identification pointing discretely to the subordinate position of women in the culture (“Se me dobro demais por ser mulher / esta rimou, mas foi só por acaso”). But subalternity is undermined by the boldness of the poem's meaning. If she dares to upset the sonnet scientifically so as to

⁴⁴Id., *ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁵*Coisas de partir* 44.

⁴⁶Id., *E muitos os caminhos* (Porto: FLUP, 1995) 35-43.

make it rigorously not-a-sonnet, she will dare anything. She can make a limp sonnet think love anew by deviation. And so, the poems that follow powerfully sing the theme of love as if for the first time, as if a new love had suddenly irrupted calling for a new language of passion, as if the Hades, the fires of love and creativity, as well as the poets themselves, had to be reimagined and Beatrice given a voice, too, to underscore, not the serene divinity, but the overwhelming terribleness of love. A contemporary American poet that Ana Luisa Amaral knows well, Adrienne Rich, with a little help from Jean Cocteau, once wrote a poem titled “I Dream I’m the Death of Orpheus.”⁴⁷ In her dream, the woman poet becomes the death that drives Orpheus to the Underworld, where the ur-poet learns how to walk backwards on the wrong side of the mirror. In “Orfeu do avesso,” by Ana Luísa Amaral, the woman poet, now evidently a magnificently reinvented Eurydice, boldly refuses to die.

De pé sobre o abismo
e não morri:

Canto gregoriano
muito limpo
não me chegou:
o fim

Catedral
sobre o risco
sobre um azul tão grande
que afundar-me podia

⁴⁷ Adrienne Rich, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (New York: Norton, 1971) 19. Cf. the motion picture written and directed by Cocteau, and entitled *Orphée* (1950). In 1971, Rich also wrote a landmark essay stressing the need for re-invention, or re-vision as she calls it, in women's writing. See , “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision” (1971), in Rich, *On Lies Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979) 33-49.

Ao fundo do mais fundo
mergulhei
e não morri:
amei⁴⁸

The woman poet's imagination is not a thing apart. Whether she sings it in reverse or not, the beautiful myth of Orpheus as the very idea of poetry as the power to create life itself, or, shall we say, as ordinary poeming, cannot but haunt her, too. Sometimes, in a very indirect and even cryptic way, as in "Visitação," the poem, that lends me my epigraph, where Luiza Neto Jorge once again sings the unsolved mystery of poetry / life inscribed in the Western tradition in the very name "Orpheus."⁴⁹ Sometimes very explicitly, as in "O canto de Orfeu," where Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão, by resorting to myth once again and reinventing both Orpheus and Eurydice, momentarily succeeds in liberating poetry from the Orphic myth of origin itself:

Mas o sábio Orfeu deixou a lira
somente ser tocada pelo vento
quando o canto perseguia a imagem.⁵⁰

This radical gesture of origination is, to my mind, the mark of all great lyric poetry in the culture, whether poets are male or female, and whether they present themselves, or not, as male or female. And if the culture, or language, does not allow them to forget when a poet is a woman, she very often tricks

⁴⁸Ana Luísa Amaral, *Epopéias* 70.

⁴⁹Luiza Neto Jorge, *Poesia* (Lisboa Assírio e Alvim, 1993) 236-37.

⁵⁰Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão, *Cantos do canto* (Lisboa: Relógio de Água, 1995) 56-57.

them by appearing loftily 'in reverse'. As Luiza Neto Jorge does in her beautiful "Minibiografia:"⁵¹

Diferente me concebo e só do avesso
O formato mulher se me acomoda.

⁵¹Luiza Neto Jorge, *Poesia* 254.