António Lobo Antunes

Stops: Angola, Portugal

(1942 - 2026)



António Lobo Antunes was a Portuguese writer, born in Lisbon, in the Benfica neighbourhood, a setting he used for the books that make up the Benfica cycle, the third of his novelistic production: *Tratado das paixões da alma* [*Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*] (1990), *A ordem natural das coisas* [*The Natural Order of Things*] (1992), and [*The Death of Carlos Gardel*] (1994). After completing his degree in Medicine at the University of Lisbon, he was assigned as a military doctor during the colonial war in Angola (Luambala Guimbo, Chiume, and Malanje), where he remained between January 1971 and March 1973. In Africa, he experienced the hell that, in varying degrees, fills the narrative framework of *Memória de Elefante* [*Elephant's Memory*] (1979), *Os cus de Judas* [*The Land at the End of the World*] (1979), and *Conhecimento do inferno* [*Knowledge of Hell*] (1980). This experience, with ramifications extending into the post-colonial period, its characteristics and consequences, translates into an obsessive topic that runs through almost all of his work. It is in this space, and with its people, that he learns the notion of time that he uses in his novels: an extended, indefinite time without clear, exact boundaries. A time that is written "from behind, in reverse" (Blanco, 55), undergoing successive expansions and dilations that involve various deviations and radiations, in a polyphonic manner that will progressively characterise his style more systematically, potentially confusing readers who are more accustomed to linear narratives.

According to what we read in *Knowledge of Hell*, it is during this period that he writes "the long novel that I would never publish, that I will never publish, and from which all my books

are nourished" (p. 76), referring to *Dilúvio* [*Deluge*], a title that, in *D'este viver aqui neste papel descripto* [*Of this life described here on this paper*] (which in 2016 would be adapted for the big screen by Ivo Ferreira), we learn is later changed to another that "suits it perfectly" (p. 115, cf. p. 45): *O Voo Nupcial de J. Carlos Gomes* [*The Nuptial Flight of J. Carlos Gomes*].

The content of the novel passages transcribed in the correspondence published by Maria José and Joana Lobo Antunes and the material provided by the letters undeniably substantiate the laboratory of Antunes' writing. On the one hand, they certify the author's propensity for mockery and/or caustic historical-social critique, in a certain burlesque humour that runs through his work, illustrated by the novels of the aforementioned phases, and those that are part of the cycle of the counter-epics (*Explicação dos pássaros* [*Explanation of the Birds*], 1981; *Fado Alexandrino*, 1983; *Auto dos Danados* [*Act of the Damned*], 1985; and *As naus* [*The Return of the Caravels*], 1988). Also, the same features can be observed in the following novels that belong to the cycle of power: *O manual dos inquisidores*, [*The Inquisitors' Manual*], 1995; *O esplendor de Portugal* [*The Splendour of Portugal*], 1997; *Exortação aos crocodilos* [*Warning to the Crocodiles*], 1999; and *Boa tarde às coisas aqui em baixo* [*Good Evening to the Things from Here Below*], 2003. On the other hand, these texts confirm not only a characteristic sentimental frankness (evident in the first three novels, which belong to the autobiographical or learning cycle) but also attest to the close ties to the reality experienced during wartime. This is combined with the knowledge gained from others, as he confessed in an interview given to Ana Sousa Dias in 1992, and with his experiences as a psychiatrist at the Miguel Bombarda Hospital. With the relative exception of the novel *Até que as pedras se tornem mais leves que a água* [*Until the Stones Become Lighter Than Water*] (2017), which belongs to the last cycle, the cycle of finitude, the works following *Não entres tão depressa nessa noite escura* [*Don't Enter That Night So Fast*] (2000), the first of the phase of lyrical counter-epics, up to the recent *O tamanho do mundo* [*The Size of the World*] (2022), including the narratives of the cycle of silence (between 2008 and 2014), seem to move away, diluting the recognised topical obsession with Africa or the memory that António Lobo Antunes has of it on various levels.

A closer reading, however, reveals that even in the novels not directly rooted in the overseas setting (or, for the same effect, as occurs in some of the chronicles), it is always possible to sense the smell of the African soil. For instance, in *Explanation of the Birds*, the colonies are vividly present in the father's vehement and racist brief speech about "our civilising mission in Africa" (p. 126). In *Act of the Damned*, among multiple indications that also reveal the dissolution of customs, the arrogance, fears, and anxieties of certain social strata after the April Revolution, Africa subtly extends into the very decoration of Nuno's house ("the African horns on the coat rack," pp. 23-24). In this same novel, Africa makes a direct appearance in the character's memories of his father's business interests, which were tied to the fortune that the continuation of the war in Angola could bring (p. 58). In a more indirect reference, the effects of decolonisation are mentioned, noting those who came to the metropolis (p. 89). In *The Natural Order of Things*, besides the mention of the "chaos of independence" (p. 92), we find Iolanda, born in Mozambique, and Lucília, the mulatto who came from Angola. In *The Death of Carlos Gardel*, there is an allusion to "a neighbourhood of the Roma community, poor people, and people from Africa on the hill" (p. 15) and a mention of Celeste, "the black concierge, who was from São Tomé" (p. 76). Regarding the systematic presence of Africa in Antunes' narrative, the following works stand out: *The Land at the End of the World*, *The Splendour of Portugal*, *Good Evening to the Things from Here Below*, *My Name is Legion*, *Until the Stones Become Lighter Than Water*, *The Other Side of the Sea* (2019), "The Story of the Seaplane" (1994), and, indirectly, *The Return of the Caravels*.

In the first, in a romanesque intrigue that closely interacts with *Elephant's Memory*, he narrates episodes from his military (and also emotional) life where he interacts with other actors in the theatre of war, for whose outbreak, on February 4, 1961, the events described in the 2019 novel contributed. This refers to the Baixa do Cassanje revolt on January 4 of that year, in which thousands of peasants from the Luso-Belgian company Cotonang rose up against the Portuguese colonial regime, setting the cotton plantations on fire – another way of addressing the Portuguese diaspora in Africa. *The Land at the End of the World* contributes indelibly to the portrayal of what the colonial occupation was like, as well as the forced diaspora of thousands of military men and its traumatic effects. This portrayal also includes

descriptions of the landscapes he travelled through, making us feel the smells, hear the sounds, and see the colours. Essentially, this depiction aims to combat forgetfulness, the "phenomenon of collective amnesia" that, as he tells Maria Luisa Blanco (p. 58), marked post-April Revolution Portugal. In this context, we cannot overlook another diaspora: that of the affluent and complicit with the Estado Novo regime who, after the Carnation Revolution, found themselves forced into exile in foreign lands, primarily in Brazil. This occurs with Inês' family, the wife of Lieutenant Jorge, in *Fado Alexandrino*; with Rui S.' parents in *Explanation of the Birds*; with Ana and her relatives in *Act of the Damned*; or with Francisco's family, a former minister under Salazar, in *The Inquisitors' Manual*.

The Splendour of Portugal is illustrative of the Portuguese presence in Angola and, similarly, of the diaspora of those who returned from there after independence on November 15, 1975. This novel bears an ironic title, which draws attention to the "supposed glory of colonial Portugal and describes a universe of degradation and moral ruin" (Blanco, p. 63). The narrative, anchored in the voices of Isilda (the mother), Carlos (the adopted son), and Rui and Clarisse (the children) – "a mixed-race, an epileptic, a prostitute" (p. 236) – interweaves the memory of colonial times and the complex relationships between colonisers and Africans with the experience of the post-colonial era and the equally complex relationships with whites from Lisbon. Simultaneously, it presents the dramatic consequences of military power in the hell of the civil war (1975-2002), and from Isilda's point of view, who, like others, refuses to abandon the farm and return to Portugal, it portrays the maintenance of colonial mentality: "take it, kill them if you like, take it, we've been here for twenty or fifty or a hundred or two hundred years but take it, my sunflower, my cotton, my corn, my house, my work, my parents' work" (p. 297).

Differently, yet similarly, neo-colonial practices are brought into play, disguised as the (tragic) greed of diamond trafficking in the Angolan space in *Good Evening to the Things from Here Below*. But for what matters now, the narrative also focuses on the story, the experience of the three children who travel to a country they do not feel as their homeland and to a Lisbon they do not know and cannot adapt to, especially Carlos, bought by Isilda

from a Cotonang employee who was her husband Amadeu's lover (pp. 95-96). Top of Form The same happens with Artur, a character in "The Story of the Seaplane", who, along with the blind man, remains perpetually unable to adapt to the Portuguese space, unable to forget Africa in a Lisbon where "people fleeing from the war" built a "camp for the poor," a "village of misery" (p. 9), "hammering shacks in a wilderness of weeds in front of the Tejo steamers, between abandoned warehouses and a seaplane that was the skeleton of a bat with its canvas skin unravelling under the surprise of the seagulls" (p. 7). Therefore, it should not be surprising that, in the end, in an imagined flight, both disappear, carried away by this aircraft whose presence punctuates this and other narratives by the author.

Regarding the issue of the identity quest that Carlos undergoes, or agonises over, *My Name is Legion* also builds upon all that human material which was/is still the (inevitable?) result of a decolonisation process, which there was not enough time to properly contemplate. We refer to the many men and women, descendants in the second or third generation of those who, in the post-April 25th era – either to escape civil wars or simply to seek better living conditions – chose to return to a country that, in the recent past as well as in the present narration, was not equipped to receive them with dignity and equality, relegating them and confining them to second-rate ghetto neighbourhoods. An example of this is the 1st of May Neighbourhood, which is the backdrop for this novel, and which António Lobo Antunes discusses in an interview with Rodrigues da Silva (2006) as follows: "a group of black or mixed-race kids, born in Portugal and who do not belong to Portugal or Africa. The book is about a gang of these kids who rob, steal, etc. A gang that the police pursue and try to kill one by one. Children aged 12/13/14."

Speaking of the diaspora in Antunes' work, or of the return journey to a homeland that did not fit them, also implies invoking *The Caravels* (the title in Portuguese), initially conceived as *The Return of the Caravels* (a title already registered by Vitorio Kali). In a process of demystifying the grandeur of History and the race of a group of Portuguese heroes – both emptied of honour, glory, and historical profit – important figures from Portugal's past are recovered for a present that is the time of decolonisation. Names such as D. Manoel, Nuno

Álvares Pereira, Vasco da Gama, Manoel de Sousa Sepúlveda, Diogo Cão, Pedro Álvares Cabral, Luís de Camões, or Fernão Mendes Pinto, among others, are brought into the narrative. Through a parodic adjustment and rewriting of their well-known historical trajectories (in a strategy that does not reject comedy), an anti-epic narrative is constructed, turning the heroes of the past into returnees from the former colonies who, as in other novels, return to a country without meanings, to which it seems not worth returning.

According to the above, it is perhaps inevitable that Antunes would write a novel like *Until Stones Become Lighter Than Water*. In revisiting the theme of the patriarch's death, alongside the return (in this case, the return of a lieutenant from his commission in Angola with his adopted son), the novel allows for a rich symbolic reading. Thus, after (or simultaneously) being presented with the collection of the most varied atrocities committed in African lands, we are granted entry into the intimate universe of the consciousnesses that structure the work: that of the white father, who, unable to forget "the horror of Angola" (p. 101), calmly accepts the death that was destined for him because, as read in the excerpt where their voices blend, it is not possible to forgive "the ears cut off, the hands cut off," the villages and bodies set on fire, the shots and the noise of the shots (p. 327); that of the Black son, who, despite struggling between affection and resentment for the one who spared him from death, or between sorrow and progressively awakened thirst for revenge, ultimately prefers the latter, killing his own father, as if, in doing so, ultimately, by transfer, he were killing his own homeland, the war, and the racism it represents (or): "it wasn't some pig that came from the pigsty (…), it was my father." A father, he swears, whom he didn't want to harm, for having taken care of him, for liking him: "it wasn't my father that I killed, it was the shots and the war, the diesel, the fire, it was the memory of the paratrooper lieutenant by the bridge, it was the trip wires, it was the jumping mines, it was the general on the dock (…), it was just that, gentlemen, the joy of serving the homeland, it was the blacks whom the political police forced to dig the grave to make their heads jump inside, to see them bounce against the earth walls until they finally stopped, it was the electric shocks on the testicles, it was the dentist's drill on a healthy tooth, it was the toothpicks under the nails, it was the psychologist in the hospital circle – This cannot have happened" (p. 453).

Quotations

“Why the hell isn’t anyone talking about this? I’m beginning to think that the one and a half million men who roasted in Africa never existed, and I’m telling you some kind of tasteless novel impossible to believe, an invented story that I’m moving you with in order to win you over more quickly (…) that you see the morning born with me in the pale blue clarity that pierces the blinds (…). How long has it been since I’ve been able to sleep?” (*Os cus de Judas*, p. 69)

“It was in Brazil, one or two years after the revolution, that I realised that Portugal, like my father’s trains, did not exist. It was a burlesque fiction created by geography and history teachers, who invented rivers and mountains and cities governed by successive dynasties of card players, followed by a few feeble pops of shooting gallery booths, subjects with goatees and monocles trapped in oval portraits, gazing into the Future through the severe myopia of the chosen ones, only for everything to dissolve into the white, flat peace of Salazar rule, during which my family prospered like woodworm in the wood, devouring the sawdust of factories and hills. In Brazil, I understood that the generally poor, short, and dark-skinned people who spoke in the same way I did were, after all, nothing but the valets of history teachers stripped of their colourful deck status, carrying in São Paulo, under their arms, tied with string, the packages of their tiny hopes”. (*Auto dos Danados*, p. 118)

“(soldiers military marches weapons prisons my mother-in-law and sisters-in-law in Spain in third-rate hotels on the outskirts of Madrid without suitcases without passports terrified trying to call Lisbon without getting an answer trying to call the estate and the peasants insulting her loudly my mother-in-law and sisters-in-law in Spain with several fur coats on top of each other with several gold watches on each wrist and my mother-in-law’s brothers humiliated by civilians with guns at the insurance company humiliated by civilians with guns in Guincho my

mother-in-law's brothers transported in butcher vans to Caxias to Peniche to Vale de Judeus)". (*O manual dos inquisidores*, p. 21)

"Lena gradually returned with fingers extended towards the breadbasket. 'You haven't seen your brothers in fifteen years.' Suddenly, I realised how much time had passed since we arrived from Africa, from my mother's letters from the farm first and then from Marimba, four huts on a hill covered with mango trees (I remember the district officer's villa, the shop, the ruins of barracks sinking into the grass). (…) Speaking to me about what I didn't want to hear, her farm, her life (…), I'm not interested in Angola full of blacks in the fortress, in the Government palace, and in the island huts basking in the sun, thinking they're us (…)". (*O esplendor de Portugal*, pp. 13-14)

"He had passed through Lixbon eighteen or twenty years ago on his way to Angola, and what he remembered best were his parents' arguments at the Conde Redondo Inn, amidst the clattering of buckets and the exasperated grumbling of the woman. (…) And now, as the plane approached the Lixbon runway, he was amazed by the buildings in Encarnação, the vacant lots where shattered pianos and prehistoric car carcasses were erected, and the cemeteries and barracks whose names he did not know, as if he had arrived in a foreign city lacking, to recognise it as his own, the notaries and ambulances of eighteen years before". (*As naus*, pp. 12-13)

"I believe they look at me as the people from the neighbourhood look at me, thinking of me as white, me who was neither white nor mixed race nor black, I was scarlet and lilac, just as they didn't speak to me, they moved away when he wasn't in his corner of the deck, they threw things in the room / (Where I live, there are plenty of rooms) / to call those rooms, dead gas burners, mugs, one time a shot and the pot would come to life and fall as I will fall breaking the necklace that remains when the pill finds my heart, I bought it I don't know where from a street vendor, tell the truth, don't lie". (*O meu nome é legião*, p. 110)

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