

*From Centre to Periphery:
Facing the Self in Eça de Queirós's
The Mandarin*

In 1880 the Portuguese novelist Eça de Queirós handed the editor of the newspaper *Diário de Portugal*, his friend Lourenço Malheiro, the manuscript of the story he had written while on vacation in Angers and which came to be known as *The Mandarin*. The newspaper published this narrative in eleven episodes from the 7th to the 18th of July, and this serialisation eventually led to its publication in book form in the same year.

Born in 1845, José Maria de Eça de Queirós studied Law at Coimbra University, eventually followed a diplomatic career and wrote widely, *The Maias* being considered his masterpiece. He was appointed consul in Havana (1872–1874), as well as in Newcastle (1874–1879), Bristol (1879–1888), and Paris, where he served from 1888 until his death in 1900. Eça de Queirós was never in the Far East; his main contact with the Orient goes as far as the Near East, Egypt in particular.¹ While on consular service in Havana, Eça directly dealt with Chinese immigrants who lived in miserable conditions, and this is just how close he ever was to China.

Traditionally labelled as a realist writer indebted to Proudhon's progressive ideas,² Taine's "race, milieu et moment" triad and Zola's naturalism, Eça disrupts readers' expectations in *The Mandarin*. He

¹ His trip to Egypt to take part in the inauguration of the Suez Channel in 1869 resulted in the diary posthumously published as *O Egipto – Notas de viagem* [*Egypt – Travel Notes*] (1926).

² See, for example, Joana Duarte Bernardes's 2008 article: "Quando ainda se acreditava que as ideias faziam revoluções – Manuel Emídio Garcia e Eça de Queirós" (*Revista de história das ideias* 29: 405–430).

abandons the naturalist standpoint of objectively studying human reality and offers a counter narrative to his more than acknowledged literary dependence on the French literary canon. Yet his *Mandarin* echoes intertextual links³ with French literature, especially with Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* (1802), since it enacts the Mandarin paradox⁴ in a chapter entitled "Du remords et de la conscience":

... je m'interroge; je me fais cette question: "Si tu pouvais par un seul désir, tuer un homme à la Chine, et hériter de sa fortune en Europe, avec la conviction surnaturelle qu'on n'en saurait jamais rien, consentirais-tu à former ce désir?" (1966: 200, part I, book VI, chap. II)

In the Portuguese version, Teodoro, scribe at the Ministry for Internal Affairs and Education, narrates the fantastic story of his life. In spite of describing himself as a superstitious bachelor who "always took care to enter a room right foot first," "kept a lithograph of Our Lady of Sorrows," and "trembled at the mere sight of a mouse," Teodoro "aspired only to what was reasonable, tangible" (Queirós 2009: 17, 18, 19). However, one night he unexpectedly receives the strange visit of a "bulky figure, all dressed in black, a tall hat on his head and his two hands encased in black gloves resting gravely on the handle of an umbrella" (ib. 21). This bourgeois-like dark figure is the devil, which comes to tempt Teodoro to commit a crime in exchange for avaricious compensation. The only thing he has to do is to ring the bell mysteriously placed next to his bed. As soon as the bell twinkles a far-off mandarin painlessly dies and Teodoro inherits his fortune. Though enjoying a luxurious lifestyle, Teodoro grows in remorse. His guilty conscience projects itself into the vision of the bellied and pigtailed figure of the dead Mandarin who, dressed in

³ António Coimbra Martins (1967) has extensively analysed these intertextual links in his *Ensaíos queirosianos – O Mandarin assassinado, o incesto d' "Os Maias", imitação capital* ([n.p.]: Publicações Europa-América).

⁴ Chateaubriand's paradox is a derivation of Kant's moral theory. Since the Kantian paradox favours human reason, it advocates suspicion towards human instincts and human nature, which are always unpredictable.

yellow silk and holding a paper kite, starts haunting him. Unable to bear such visitations, Teodoro seeks refuge abroad visiting several European capitals before deciding to find the Mandarin's family in China. Failing to fulfil his plans in that alien territory, Teodoro runs back to Lisbon with the Mandarin's fortune, thereafter haunted by the old Mandarin and leading an unhappy existence.

Narrated in a confessional tone, Teodoro's account is preceded by a theatrical prologue consisting of a dialogue between two nameless friends who put forward a reading protocol:

Friend no. 1 ...

My friend, let us ... rest a while from the harsh study of human Reality. Let us depart instead for the fields of Dreams and wander those blue, romantic hills where stands the abandoned tower of the Supernatural, where cool mosses clothe the ruins of Idealism. Let us, in short, indulge in a little fantasy!

Friend no. 2

... let us add just a pinch of Morality. (Ib. 15)

Through this metatext, readers are told they are about to venture into the unknown realms of fantasy and reverie, an overturn in Eça's realist aesthetics in favour of Romantic creative imagination. It further warns that *The Mandarin* is also embedded in some sort of morality, which obviously resonates with medieval morality plays and might be linked to the Romantic revival of an individual religiosity mediated by man's conscience.

Indeed, as previously mentioned, the mandarin *topos* is retrieved from Chateaubriand's paradox, "tuer le mandarin,"⁵ which, as the Portuguese critic Coimbra Martins has shown in great detail⁶ and

⁵ In *Génie du christianisme*, it is Chateaubriand's purpose to introduce religion as a second-order conscience synonymous with believing in soul's immortality and God's existence. He advocates that forgetting God lies at the heart of humanity's crimes.

⁶ António Coimbra Martins traces the metaphor "to kill the mandarin" as back as to Plato and Cicero, going through the reformulations and re-adaptations of that metaphor especially by French writers, from Montaigne

Margaret Jull Costa briefly explains to the readers of her English translation of *The Mandarin*,

... means either to commit some evil act in the hope that no one will ever find out, or to harm someone whom you know you will never meet in order to gain some personal advantage and in the certain knowledge that you will never be punished. (Ib. 10)

But Teodoro's conscience does punish him, and only when he arrives to China does the figure of the dead Mandarin cease to pursue him. This event complies with the general acceptance of the Orient as place of spiritual rest and as background scenery for an exotic adventure. As Eça de Queirós will later confess in his 1894 essay entitled "Chinese and Japanese," the Far East is "a region of fantasy" (1997: 32; my translation), hence conflating the Orient with exoticism and echoing the Romantic lure for foreign or displaced settings.

Taking on the benefactor role so as to ease his conscience and anguish, Teodoro sets the following programme:

I would leave for Peking; I would search out the family of Ti Chin-Fu, marry one of the ladies of the house, thus legitimizing my possession of his millions; I would return that learned house to its old prosperity⁷; I would hold grand funeral ceremonies for the

and his anthropologic exoticism to La Bruyère, Rousseau, Diderot, Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, Chateaubriand, Alexandre Dumas father, Auguste Vitu, Albert Monnier and Edouard Martin, Louis Protat, Urbain Didier, Annie Edwards, Armand de Pontmartin (1967: 14–123).

⁷ Teodoro mentions more than once the adjective "old" to refer to China – e.g., "in the ragged remains of *old* silk dresses," "the disappearance of Ti Chin-Fu really had proved disastrous for *old* China," "its *old* prosperity" (Queirós 2009: 40, 42, 44; my italics) –, which echoes the European curiosity over the classical oriental past: "Faced with the obvious decrepitude and political impotence of the modern Oriental, the European Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past classical Oriental grandeur in order to 'facilitate ameliorations' in the present Orient" (Said 2003: 79). From this point of view, Teodoro perfectly fits into the figure of the European orientalist whose inclination towards the Chinese Orient translates

Mandarin in order to calm his restless spirit; I would travel through poverty-stricken provinces distributing massive quantities of rice ... I would replace the vanished Ti Chin-Fu and thus restore to his country, if not the authority of his wisdom, at least the might of his gold. (2009: 43–44)

The protagonist indulges himself with the task of rescuing first the Mandarin's family and then the whole China. This brings us to Edward Said whose seminal *Orientalism* (1978), shaped by the historical process of three colonial empires, the French included, accuses the West of justifying its colonial intervention overseas on humanitarian grounds.⁸ Teodoro thus calls upon himself the rhetoric of the 19th-century European colonizer, who would self-legitimise his action on the basis of the West's superiority over the Oriental's inferiority. The spiritual journey Teodoro undertakes to the Orient can then roughly be described as a pilgrimage towards redemption, but instead of spiritual purification he comes across a *locus horribilis*. To go further into this negative otherness, I propose a two-fold focus on one particular episode – which I have decided to call “the bestialisation of the native.”

In this episode, shifting from spectator to victim, Teodoro is assaulted in the town of Tien-Hó by an enraged “black horde” of “dogs” (Queirós 2009: 67), who had been warned about a stranger carrying along great fortune. This mob is no different from Teodoro himself, since all they want is what had led Teodoro to kill the Mandarin in the first place. The Chinese unbounded eagerness for wealth makes this mob suffer a process of *bestialisation* or animalization. But does not facing the Other retrospectively and

the need of rescuing the Orient from its “memories, suggestive ruins, forgotten secrets, hidden correspondences” (Said 2003: 170). This focus on the exotic, traditional past is in stark contrast to the modern(ised) image the Far East was interested in conveying (the World Expositions illustrate that effort), which the West was already too familiar with.

⁸ For a brief approach to *The Mandarin* from Edward Said's viewpoint, see Ellen Sapega's 2002 essay “O Oriente do sonho e o sonho do Oriente n'O Mandarin” in *Congresso de Estudos Queirobianos – Actas IV Encontro Internacional de Queirobianos*, vol. I. Coimbra: Almedina, pp. 443–450.

gnoseologically become facing the Self? Indeed otherness reads as the Self's alter ego, so it illustrates one's position towards his or her own culture (Kapor 2007: 261). Therefore, this episode serves as fertile ground for criticising the capitalist thirst for riches and the European society's hypocrisy, vileness, and shallowness.

China is depicted negatively as a terrain where the native's primitiveness and barbarism is caricaturised in opposition to the West's corrupt and corrupting soul. Leaving the Western world means entering brutality and savagery, but such behaviour is set off by the presence of western materialism as embodied in Teodoro. It is then the Western material progress which is portrayed as epidemic and corrosive of human morality. That is why *The Mandarin* provides as well an unfavourable portrait of Paris (Benjamin's capital of the 19th century) as a debauched place of bohemian life disfigured by an uncontrolled consumerism that awakes animal-like behaviours: "parties that ... in their extravagance and, at the height of this libertine frenzy, ... when bare-breasted prostitutes would be shrieking out the filthiest songs and my Bohemian guests ... raining down curses on God, then I [Teodoro], ... by a fury of bestiality, ... would hurl myself to the floor on all fours and bray loudly like a donkey" (Queirós 2009: 43). From Edward Said's vantage point,

Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. (2003: 205)

The Oriental is stereotyped as backward and described in terms of "decadence," "ruined provinces, dying cities, starving peasants, plagues, rebellions, crumbling temples, the undermining of the authority of the law, the disintegration of a whole world" (Queirós 2009: 42). Again in his later essay "Chinese and Japanese" Eça de Queirós himself subtly admits that his knowledge (like Teodoro's *ad hoc* knowledge) of the peoples of the Far East was learned from

newspapers, second-hand accounts, art collections, and other indirect sources. Eça's depictions of China are based on his textual experiences and literary memory rather than on eye-witness testimony.⁹

It should be noted that until the end of the 18th century China was particularly evoked by Enlightenment philosophers as both a civilisational centre and urban model. By contrast, 19th-century China was in clear decline due to internal instability – mainly caused by the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860), the Boxers' Revolt (1899–1901), the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), and war with Japan (1894–1895) – and also to the inability to catch up with the European industrial development. The descriptions provided in *The Mandarin* comply with readers' expectations and prejudices. *The Mandarin* operates as overall citation of a larger 19th-century discourse on the Chinese Orient. Edward Said bases such rhetorical device on “state-ment[s] about [the Orient], authorizing views of it, describing it, by

⁹ This indirect knowledge explains the recurrence of preconceived and clichéd images on the Orient. Much inspired by the 18th and 19th century *chinoiserie* and oriental collecting, some of the descriptions that compose the exotic colour of Eça's narrative mirror those “made-in-Europe” tableaux. This interference is most notable in the limited range of lexical choices: “He wore a long pigtail and was dressed in yellow silk and in his arms, as if too were dead, he held a paper kite”; “The extravagant architecture of its ornate gateways stood silhouetted against a sunset of sanguine reds and purples”; “Beneath a colonnade of vermilion-painted wood hung with garlands of paper lights ... a vast porcelain tub of lilac-scented water bobbing with white sponges and thin slices of lemon”; “huge paper kites hovering in the air, some in the shape of dragons or whales, others in the shape of fabulous birds ... In the distance we saw triumphal arches made from purple-painted beams topped by an oblong roof of varnished blue tiles that gleamed like enamel. A dense, noisy crowd, dressed mainly in brown and blue tunics”; “her eyebrows ... seemed purer and blacker. ... her small, firm breasts. ... her slender ankles and her yellow silk stockings, gave her the graceful look of a figure in a seraglio. Her feet were so small I could fit only three fingers of my hand into her tiny slipper”; “It was strangely ornamented with dragons cut out of paper and suspended on strings from the roof beams” (Queirós 2009: 33, 46, 47, 53, 60, 65). Even the cities Teodoro visits stand out for their monumentality echoing the 16th century Jesuits' reports and diaries on the land of the Chins.

teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (2003: 3), hence contributing to the dissemination as well as uncritical and continuous acceptance of the same images on alterity, the so-called *idées reçues*: "what matters is that they are there, to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed uncritically" (Said 2003: 116).

The orientalism underlying this narrative reproduces the orientalism of the empires which Said focused upon, and at the same time it is manipulated so as to mirror the flaws and vices of Western society in general and the Portuguese people in particular. Teodoro's experience in and with the Orient falls short of being a human experience, since both the East and the West fail to achieve a successful dialogue which none seems to be truly interested in. In failing to find humanity in the oriental Other, Eça's literary treatment of radical alterity winds up bestialising it, therefore conjuring up Teodoro's own negative image of falling in lust. *The Mandarin* ends with Teodoro's return and failure to escape from the Faustian curse he put himself into. Good fails to beat Evil and to restore him to the "peace of poverty" (ib. 83); hence the impossibility of erasing one's moral consciousness (Sequeira 2002: 395).

As a fantastic equation of national identity with otherness, *The Mandarin* results in a process of self-discovery and self-awareness through the instrumental use of two kinds of otherness – the French and the Chinese that overlap via French interference. In *The Mandarin* the representation of the Chinese builds up a mirror to the Portuguese society, so it is emblematic of a "self-reflexive literature" that makes readers discover their limits by asking themselves the question: would I kill the Mandarin? To this Teodoro responds,

... "The only bread that tastes good is the bread we earn day by day with our own hands; never kill the Mandarin!"

... not one Mandarin would remain alive if you, dear reader, creature improvised by God, a poor creation shaped out of poor clay, my fellow and my brother, if you could snuff him out as easily as I did and thus inherit all his millions! (2009: 84)

The Mandarin becomes a morality tale since it advises humankind on how to perfect itself and society. But in order to grasp the full

significance of this advice, why not construe the aphorism “the only bread that tastes good is the bread we earn day by day with our own hands” in the light of Eça’s Proudhonian readings, which advocate work as the creative force of society and education? Should then this ending be interpreted as a return to realism even if the escape into fantasy translates a disbelief in the realist tradition (Simões 1987)? *The Mandarin* and its *chinoiserie*, though imported, are after all isomorphic with Eça’s realist goals of social criticism. To what extent did Eça actually abandon his realist French-based heritage? This question becomes all the more pressing when four years after the Portuguese edition the French translation of *The Mandarin* is published in the *Revue Universelle* (1884) alongside with a French preface specifically written for this magazine and targeting both its editor and the French audience in general. Only from 1907 onwards was this preface, duly entitled “À propos du ‘Mandarin’ – Lettre qui aurait dû être une preface,” included in Portuguese editions (cf. Appendix).

Asked by “Monsieur le rédacteur de la ‘Revue Universelle’” to describe contemporary Portuguese literature, Eça de Queirós sets out classifying *The Mandarin* as “fantastique” and “fantaisiste” so as to underline its fictionality. In this letter-preface, he expands on the prologue’s opposition between Realism and Romanticism arguing in favour of the latter:¹⁰

¹⁰ Nearly 25 years after writing this preface, we will find echo of the ideas there expressed of national literature in the essay “O Francesismo” or “The French Hyper-Influence” (as suggested by Frederick Nunn) (1912): “A França é um país de inteligência; nós somos um país de imaginação. A literatura da França é essencialmente crítica: nós, por temperamento, amamos sobretudo a eloquência e a imagem. A literatura da França é, desde Rabelais até Hugo, social, activa, militante. A nossa, por tradição e instinto, é idílica e contemplativa” [France is a country of intelligence; ours is a country of imagination. Literature in France is mainly critical: we, in view of our temper, particularly love eloquence and image. French literature is since Rabelais until Hugo social, active, militant. Ours, by tradition and instinct, is idyllic and contemplative] (Queirós [n.d.]: 406; my translation).

... cette œuvre appartient au rêve et non à la réalité, [qu]'elle est inventée et non observée, elle caractérise fidèlement, ce me semble, la tendance la plus naturelle, la plus spontanée de l'esprit portugais. (Queirós 2005: 7–8)

“La Lettre qui aurait dû être une préface” offers a comparatist framework opposing the Portuguese literary spirit to that of France, which Eça considers to oppress Portuguese literature through its “incommoda soumission à la vérité, la torture de l’analyse, l’impertinente tyrannie de la réalité. On est en pleine licence esthétique” (ib. 12). Such aesthetic freedom must be understood as the reverse of, and in close conjunction with, Eça’s militancy as member of the intellectual group known as the Generation of the 1870s. This *Geração de 70* not only criticised ultra-romantic excess but also embarked on a programme of social, cultural and artistic reform¹¹ to help modernise Portugal – a country plunged into political instability and social discontent – and draw it closer to European capitals such as Paris and London. Conversely, *The Mandarin* proposes as part of the key solution to the country’s decadence and identity crisis the poetical return to Romanticism, in that the genius of the Portuguese nation lies in fantasy whilst the French prefer subordination to human reality. “La Lettre qui aurait dû être une préface” provides critical ground for asserting a major rupture from the observation of human reality, and it additionally devises a programme for the development of a national literary tradition against the mainstream realist tendency imported from France, centre of the European polysystem par excellence. As José Lambert clearly puts it, “[t]he paradigm of national literature is a paradigm of the nineteenth century” (2006 [1991]: 68), throughout which Europe was an arena of expansionist nationalisms that Romanticism had greatly reinforced.

¹¹ This *Geração de 70* would from time to time face hostility from the monarchical regime. It would be interesting to consider Eça’s literary imitation of the republican France as a statement against the Portuguese monarchy (Queirós [n.d.]: 401), which was only overturned with the death of king Charles, the overthrow of Manuel II, and the implementation of the Republican regime in 1910.

Writing from the periphery of the European polysystem, Eça challenges the hierarchical structure of the polysystem by struggling for the visibility of a minor (or less influential) literature that had been living under the shadow of the more prestigious France. It is Eça's purpose to put an end to a one-sided dependence in which both national literature and culture mimic an extraneous cultural centre:

Car nous imitons ou nous faisons semblant d'imiter en tout la France, depuis l'esprit de nos lois jusqu'à la forme de nos chaussures; à un tel point que pour un œil étranger, notre civilisation, surtout à Lisbonne, a l'air d'être arrivée la veille de Bordeaux, dans des caisses, par le paquebot des Messageries. (Queirós 2005: 10)

Yet Eça fails to realise that for a writer from a peripheral literature such as himself to be translated into a major language is an attempt from that major system to push him into its central repertoire. Translation is, therefore, always an event of prestige and consecration.¹² On the other hand, a culture only gains authoritative centrality when its satellite cultures¹³ perceive it as such. When the perceiving culture imports from the central system, it means it has something to learn from it (Lefevere 1992: 118); there is a lack the perceiving culture tries to fill in through the cultural and central Other.¹⁴ Once that lack is filled in and a national system is

¹² As stated by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters*: "From the point of view of a major target language ... the importation of literary texts written in 'small' languages or ones belonging to neglected literatures serves as a means of *annexation*, of diverting peripheral works and adding them to the stock of *central resources*" (2004: 135; my italics).

¹³ I borrow the phrase "satellite culture" from Maria de Fátima Outeirinho's "cultural satellite": "En fait, les dynamiques culturelles qui traversent le XIXe siècle portugais, nous renvoient, à plusieurs reprises, l'image du Portugal en tant que satellite culturel de la France" (2006: 174).

¹⁴ Clem Robyns in his "Translation and Discursive Identity" describes four attitudes towards "discursive migration," one of which is the defective stand according to which one culture seeks to import external influences when in need of renewing the literary system: "Finally, a discursive practice may acknowledge that it lacks the necessary components for renewing itself, for adapting to a changing social context. It will then take a 'defective' position,

sufficiently strong to grow steadily and more or less autonomously, it will no longer need to recognise another system's centrality. Although trying to break free from the oppressive shield of French literature, Eça eventually recognises he will resignedly return to it almost in an act of vampirism or master-slave relationship. Mirroring the tensions and strains of Portuguese literature, his preface ends with this prediction: "la dernière épreuve corrigée, on quitte la rue, on reprend le trottoir, et on se remet à l'étude sévère de l'homme et de sa misère éternelle. Content? Non, Monsieur, résigné" (2005: 13). As Even-Zohar exemplified in his essay "Polysystem Theory":

Consider, for example, the reduction of the writer's creativity to vague notions such as "imagination" and "inspiration." Using them in fact is a renouncement of the possibility of disentangling the knotty complex which constitutes the conditions under which a writer works ... while part is a function of the writer's personal ability to create new conditions not imposed *on* him but *by* him. (1990: 14)

The distinction Even-Zohar draws between patient and agent, *on* and *by*, shows how French imitation is ultimately a self-imposed condition which Eça cannot simply or totally renounce to. His *Mandarin* constitutes thus a unique pause within his literary creation as well as a reaction to those who accused him of being "Frenchified" and of disfiguring the Portuguese identity (Queirós [n.d.]: 388). That is why

turning to 'alien' discourses and importing discursive elements from them." He further adds that "[s]ince the target discourse's repertoire is seen as insufficient, the imported elements will not be transformed in accordance with target-discourse conventions. Translation, then, will be viewed positively" (1994: 420). Eça de Queirós's narrative clearly supports this defective strategy. Moreover, Eça rewrites his literary experience in his native language including disguised translations into his texts. Although this needs further research, see Santos Alves: 1988. *Presença clássica em Eça de Queirós*. In *Dicionário de Eça de Queirós*. Lisbon: Editorial Caminho; 1983. *O Legado clássico de Eça de Queirós através da cultura francesa*. In *Rapports culturels et littéraires entre le Portugal et la France, Actes du Colloque, Paris, 11–16 octobre 1982*. Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Centro Cultural Português, pp. 393–410.

Eça's literary manifesto of the aesthetic tenets for national literature should rather be confined to the microsphere of his personal writing, which ideally tries but fails to subvert the general laws of the polysystem's *modus operandi*. According to Pascale Casanova,

The creative liberty of writers from peripheral countries *is not given* to them straight away: *they earn it* as a result of struggles whose reality is denied in the name of literary universality and the equality of all writers as creative artists, by inventing complex strategies that profoundly alter the universe of literary possibilities. (1999: 177; *my italics*)

It is our contention that Eça *could* have subverted the polysystem, which he did not, because his interest lay in challenging the historical evolution of his own literature, in putting his finger on the lack of a national literary tradition,¹⁵ and proving it can survive outside the influence of a supranational model. But can it indeed?

By the same token, *The Mandarin* can be described as a paragenre; "para" because it conveys the marginal position of that literary text within not only his literary production but also within Portuguese literature. Although it manages to blend fantasy with criticism, this narrative is not usually viewed as part of Portuguese canonised repertoire, for it brought no significant innovatory change either as text or as paragenre or as model of national literature. It had no direct impact on the Portuguese literary agenda. Eça has his own

¹⁵ In the essay "The French Hyper-Influence," the gap between what Eça believes to be possible and his actual literary behaviour is again clearly underlined: "Mas, pergunto eu, este *collage* com a França, esta imitação, esta preocupação da França, é uma tendência fatal, necessária, de temperamento, de congeneridade, de similitude, a que não possamos escapar, como a Dinamarca não pode escapar a imitar a Alemanha, e a Bélgica se não pode eximir a imitar a França? Não creio" [But, I ask, this *collage* to France, this imitation, this concern of France, is it a fatal, necessary tendency of temperament, of congeneracy, of similitude, from which one cannot escape, as Denmark cannot help imitating Germany, and Belgium cannot exempt itself from imitating France? I don't think so] ([n.d.]: 405; *my translation*).

view, however, that before his letter-preface “Portugal was a country translated into French” ([n.d.]: 398; my translation), but after its publication it became a country translating itself to France.

The Mandarin could serve as an example to rethink European literature and canon, as well as the peripheral position of less visible literatures against the French literary monopoly. It relies on the Romantic triad “language, literature, and nation” in combination with a literary programme geared towards social criticism and promoter of national consciousness even if grounded on the assimilation of French literary motifs and fictional ingredients. Both the novel and the preface show how Eça de Queirós manipulates French culture and language against itself and his own literary education, and how he uses the language of authority to criticise its centrality in Portugal, thus hampering for the emergence of a truly national literary voice.

Appendix

Monsieur le Rédacteur de la «Revue Universelle»

Vous voulez, Monsieur, donner aux lecteurs de la «Revue Universelle» une idée du mouvement littéraire contemporain en Portugal, et vous me faites l'honneur de choisir le «Mandarin», un conte fantaisiste et fantastique, où l'on voit encore, comme au bon vieux temps, apparaître le diable, quoique en redingote, et où il y a encore des fantômes, quoique avec de très bonnes intentions psychologiques. Vous prenez là, Monsieur, une œuvre bien modeste et qui s'écarte considérablement du courant moderne de notre littérature devenue, dans ces dernières années, analyste et expérimentale; et cependant par cela même que cette œuvre appartient au rêve et non à la réalité, qu'elle est inventée et non observée, elle caractérise fidèlement, ce me semble, la tendance la plus naturelle, la plus spontanée de l'esprit portugais.

Car, quoique aujourd'hui toute notre jeunesse littéraire, et même quelques-uns des ancêtres échappés du romantisme, s'appliquent patiemment à étudier la nature, et font de constants efforts pour

mettre dans les livres la plus grande somme de réalité vivante, – nous sommes restés ici, dans ce coin ensoleillé du monde, très idéalistes au fond et très lyriques. Nous aimons passionnément, Monsieur, à tout envelopper dans du bleu; une belle phrase nous plaira toujours mieux qu’une notion exacte; la fabuleuse Mélusine, dévoratrice de cœurs d’hommes, charmera toujours nos imaginations incorrigibles bien plus que la très humaine M.^{me} Marnesse; et toujours nous considérerons la fantaisie et l’éloquence comme les deux signes, et les seuls vrais, de l’homme supérieur. Si par hasard on lisait en Portugal Stendhal, on ne pourrait jamais le goûter: ce qui chez lui est exactitude, nous le considérerions stérilité. Des idées justes, exprimées dans une forme sobre, ne nous intéressent guère: ce qui nous charme, ce sont des émotions excessives traduites avec un grand faste plastique de langage.

Des esprits ainsi formés doivent ressentir nécessairement de l’éloignement pour tout ce qui est réalité, analyse, expérimentation, certitude objective. Ce qui les attire, c’est la fantaisie, sous toutes ses formes, depuis la chanson jusqu’à la caricature; aussi, en art, nous avons surtout produit des lyriques et des satiristes. Ou nous restons les yeux levés vers les étoiles, laissant monter vaguement le murmure de nos cœurs; ou, si nous laissons tomber un regard sur le monde environnant, c’est pour en rire avec amertume. Nous sommes des hommes d’émotion, pas de raisonnement.

Nous savons chanter, quelquefois railler, jamais expliquer. Voilà pourquoi il n’y a pas de critique en Portugal. Aussi le roman et le drame jusqu’à ces derniers temps n’étaient que des oeuvres de poésie et d’éloquence, quelquefois des plaidoyers philosophiques, d’autres fois des élégies sentimentales. L’action y était conçue hors de toute vérité sociale et humaine. Les personnages étaient des anges cachant leurs ailes sous leurs redingotes, ou bien des monstres symboliques, taillés sur le vieux patron de Satan: jamais des hommes. Un style riche et métaphorique couvrait tout cela de fleurs et de panaches. Les auteurs dramatiques, les romanciers, en créant leurs épisodes, n’avaient qu’à s’abandonner à cette espèce d’ivresse extatique qui fait chanter les rossignols par nos beaux soirs de pleine lune: tout de suite le public se pâmait. On jugeait alors une pièce de théâtre d’après la splendeur de la rhétorique.

Ceci ne pouvait pas continuer, surtout après que l'évolution naturaliste eut triomphé en France, et que la direction des idées, en fait d'art, semblait devoir rester aux mains de la science expérimentale. Car nous imitons ou nous faisons semblant d'imiter en tout la France, depuis l'esprit de nos lois jusqu'à la forme de nos chaussures; à un tel point que pour un œil étranger, notre civilisation, surtout à Lisbonne, a l'air d'être arrivée la veille de Bordeaux, dans des caisses, par le paquebot des Messageries. Cependant, même avant le naturalisme, déjà quelques jeunes esprits parmi nous avaient compris que la littérature d'un pays ne pouvait rester pour toujours étrangère au monde réel, qui travaillait et souffrait autour d'elle. En s'isolant dans les nuages, occupée à ciseler des préciosités de style, elle risquerait de devenir dans une société vivante, un objet de bric-à-brac. On s'est donc imposé bravement le devoir de ne plus regarder le ciel – mais la rue. Seulement, faut-il le dire?, on faisait cette noble besogne, non par une inclination naturelle de l'intelligence, mais par un sentiment de devoir littéraire – j'allais presque dire de devoir public. Pour l'honneur des modernes lettres portugaises, on tâchait de mettre dans ses œuvres beaucoup d'observation, beaucoup d'humanité; mais il arrivait qu'en étudiant consciencieusement son voisin, petit rentier ou petit employé, on regrettait les temps où il était permis, sans être démodé, de chanter les beaux cavaliers aux reluisantes armures. Les temps de flânerie idéale à travers les bois de la fantaisie étaient passés, hélas! L'art n'était plus un facile épanchement de l'âme trop chargée de rêve, mais une âpre et sévère recherche de vérité. Il fallait maintenant, pendant de grands volumes de cinq cents pages, se mêler à une humanité qui n'a plus d'ailes, qui nous semble n'avoir que des plaies, et on était forcé de remuer avec une main, habituée au duvet des nuages, toute sorte de choses attristées et basses, la petitesse des caractères, la banalité des conversations, la misère des sentiments... La langue même, cette langue poétique et imagée qu'on se plaisait à parler ne pouvait plus servir à rendre ces choses humbles et vraies; il fallait se servir d'une langue exacte, sèche, comme celle du code civil... Eh bien, Monsieur, dans ce milieu réel, contemporain, banal, l'artiste portugais habitué aux belles chevauchées à travers l'idéal, étouffait; et s'il ne pouvait quelquefois faire une escapade vers l'azur, il mourrait bien

vite de la nostalgie de la chimère. Voilà pourquoi, même après le naturalisme, nous écrivons encore des contes fantastiques, des vrais, de ceux où il y a des fantômes et où l'on rencontre au coin des pages le diable, l'ami diable, cette délicieuse terreur de notre enfance catholique. Alors, du moins pendant tout un petit volume, on ne subit plus l'incommode soumission à la vérité, la torture de l'analyse, l'impertinente tyrannie de la réalité. On est en pleine licence esthétique. On peut mettre dans le cœur de sa concierge tout l'idéalisme d'Ophélie et faire parler les paysans de son village avec la majesté de Bossuet. On dore ses adjectifs. On fait marcher ses phrases à travers la page blanche comme à travers une place pleine de soleil avec des pompes cadencées de procession s'avancant parmi des jonchées des roses... Puis la dernière feuille écrite, la dernière épreuve corrigée, on quitte la rue, on reprend le trottoir, et on se remet à l'étude sévère de l'homme et de sa misère éternelle. Content? Non, Monsieur, résigné.

Eça de Queiroz
Lisbonne, le 2 août 1884

(in Eça de Queirós. 2005. *O Mandarin*. Lisbon: Livros do Brasil)

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