

Problems social and eternal

Alexandre Pinheiro-Torres

JOSÉ CARDOSO PIRES

Alexandra Alpha

448pp. Lisbon: Dom Quixote. Esc 1,200.

LÍDIA JORGE

A Costa dos Murmúrios

259pp. Lisbon: Dom Quixote. Esc 1,200.

VERGÍLIO FERREIRA

Até ao fim

273pp. Lisbon: Bertrand. Esc 1,300.

BAPTISTA-BASTOS

A Colina de Cristal

212pp. Lisbon: O Jornal. Esc 700.

ANTÓNIO LOBO ANTUNES

As Naus

247pp. Lisbon: Dom Quixote. Esc 1,200.

MARIA VELHODA COSTA

Missa in Albis

465pp. Lisbon: Dom quixote. Esc 1,480.

ÂNGELA CAIRES

Daqui em Diante só há Dragões

196pp. Lisbon: Bertrand. Esc 980.

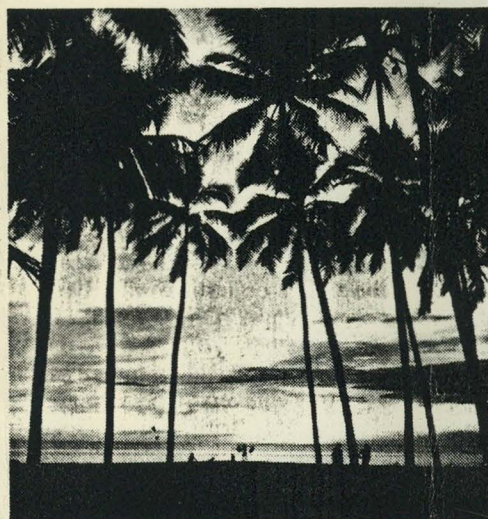
Contemporary Portuguese fiction is mainly concerned with social realities – the upheavals of the recent history of Portugal, the forty-eight years of fascism, the colonial wars, the fight for freedom and the changes brought about by the emigration *en masse* during the last half-century. At the same time one of its main characteristics, as exemplified in the works of some of Portugal's most problematic writers, Vergílio Ferreira, Agustina Bessa-Luís, José Cardoso Pires or Almeida Faria, is a profound concern for the eternal problems of man. So far, though, it has barely been translated into English. Although in the past four years António Lobo Antunes's *South of Nowhere*, José Cardoso Pires's *Ballad of Dog's Beach*, the late Jorge de Sena's *The Wondrous Physician* and the outstanding *Baltasar and Blimunda* by José Saramago have all been published in Britain, during the same period some twenty Portuguese novels have been enthusiastically received in France; Belfond is about to produce Almeida Faria's trilogy *Trilogia Lusitana* ("Les Jours de la Passion"), the saga of a family of landed gentry from the Alentejo province which spans the past five centuries.

The English-speaking world has traditionally exhibited a certain superiority towards the writing of countries which it regards as literary outposts. But the best Portuguese novels published this year are in no sense peripheral.

Pride of place must go to Cardoso Pires's *Alexandra Alpha*, in which contemporary Portugal becomes a metaphor for the failure of the socialist ideals of the 1974 revolution. Particularly successful is the author's depiction in precise and rich detail of Lisbon and its environs. In his protagonist Alexandra, Pires reflects the huge variety of challenges which face Western women today; unlike traditionally sheltered Portuguese women, she is a kind of yuppie who experiences several physical and emotional worlds at the same time. Many of Pires's characters are outcasts, symbolizing the enormous gulfs within modern Portugal. *Alexandra Alpha* is a remarkably Pirandellian novel, full of surrealistic humour.

Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (*The Whispering Coast*) is ostensibly about the colonial war in Mozambique. Jorge does not, however, dwell on by now well-known events, on Portuguese massacres and acts of barbarism, but rather on the empty lives of officers' wives who while away their days in the Stella Maris hotel in Beira, awaiting their husbands' return from the front. They pass the time fantasizing that the war will soon end in a Portuguese victory, a belief sustained by the conviction of high-ranking officers that the blacks are doomed; they also dream of a local Portuguese unilateral declaration of independence in emulation of Ian Smith in Rhodesia, so betraying the expectations of the Fascist government in Lisbon. We meet Luis Alex, obsessed with the solution of insoluble equations of the fifth order, who is transformed by the pressures of war into a barbarian who exhibits the heads of blacks on pikestaffs. Lídia Jorge skilfully avoids journalistic clichés, and at the same time frees herself from the magic realism that coloured her earlier *O Dia dos Prodígios* (*The Day of Miracles*) and *O Cais das Merendas* (*A Quay not for Ships but Picnics*). *A Costa dos Murmúrios* has its symbolic and mythical dimension as well as an ironic, even burlesque, note – as in the tragicomedy leading to the death of the mathematician, Alex.

In contrast, Vergílio Ferreira's *Até ao fim* (*Right to the End*) is a philosophical novel. Ferreira has for many years probed the same sort of existentialist problems as those addressed by Sartre. But in a few *tours de force*, such as *Aparição* (*The Vision*), *Estrela Polar* (*The Northern Star*) or *Para Sempre* (*For Ever*), he strikes a peculiarly personal note. *Alegria Breve* (*Brief Happiness*), published in 1965, is perhaps his masterpiece. *Até ao fim* is ostensibly



Michael Teague's photograph of the beach at Calicut in Kerala where Vasco da Gama landed in 1498. It is reproduced from Teague's *In the Wake of the Portuguese Navigators* (121pp. Manchester: Carcanet. £20. 0 85635 823 1).

ably an account of dissent in a middle-class family – journalist Claudio confronting his wife Flora and son Miguel. But through the clash of their temperaments, Fernando discusses fundamental issues such as the crisis we face at the end of the millennium.

A Colina de Cristal (*The Glass Hillside*), by Baptista-Bastos, is the story of two road engineers, Centauro and Remora, who attempt to ignore political turmoil in Lisbon during the years preceding the revolution of May 28, 1926, which led to the imposition of fascism in Portugal. They are forced to confront reality and, incapable of distinguishing between various courses of action open to them, they end up in Salazar's Fascist Legion. Baptista-Bastos is especially good on the mechanisms of fear and "the fascination with the tyrannical image of power". António Lobo Antunes's *As Naus* (*The Galleons*) is a fantastic inversion of Camoens's *The Lusíads*. It is an attempt to dismantle the myth of empire, and to this end Lobo Antunes invents a band of colonial Portuguese who, immediately after the African colonies gain their independence, rush to escape to Portugal. Theirs is an almost universal exodus; hundreds of thousands of people are stricken with panic at the idea of black rule. Lobo Antunes attributes to these terrified expatriates the names of a series of great figures from the era of Portuguese overseas expansion, navigators such as Diogo Cão, Cabral

(who discovered Brazil), and Vasco da Gama; literary figures such as Camoens, Mendes Pinto, Fr. António Vieira. *As Naus* is, in the main, entertaining, though not perhaps as humorous as it might have been – although for those who have already had a surfeit of bombastic commemorations of the Discoveries, it has the salutary effect of a purgative.

Missa in Albis, by Maria Velho da Costa, one of the "three Marias" responsible for *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, 1972 (*New Portuguese Letters*, published by Gollancz in 1975), is also set in contemporary Portugal, and is a demanding but important novel. Da Costa deserts traditional models, shatters conventional structures and meanings, and skilfully undermines readers' expectations. Through an evocation of another ex-Portuguese colony, Timor, on the brink of invasion by the Japanese during the Second World War, she too deals with the conflict of generations, the ways in which patterns of behaviour are imposed and derided in our time.

Perhaps the best, partly because least expected, Portuguese novel of 1988 is *Daqui em Diante só há Dragões* (*From here on there will only be dragons*), by Angela Caires. This is a story of petit-bourgeois experience in a small town on the Angolan coast, shortly before the upheavals of Angolan Independence. It is not an account of the war but, rather, a picaresque portrait of society full of hilarious episodes, a carnival in which comic moments abound: the hounding of Sampaio, who has been branded as a communist by Oliveira, the police chief; the way in which Sampaio succeeds in altering the results of the rigged elections which Oliveira took for granted; the election of Miss Ambriz in a local beauty contest. Characters such as Oliveira, Sampaio and especially the Rabelaisian, middle-aged Dona Amélia, whose martyrdom consists in trapping a series of eligible partners who prove to be either pimps or idiots, are only a few out of a very extraordinary collection.

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