



ANA LUÍSA AMARAL

(Portugal, 1956-2022)

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Ana Luísa Amaral (1956) teaches English literature at the University of Porto. She obtained her Ph.D. with a thesis on Emily Dickinson. Since her 'late' debut in 1990 *Minha senhora de quê* (Milady of what?) she has published seven collections that surprised critics by their self-willed female tone.

Although Amaral admits to a high proportion of autobiography in her work, she also emphatically places herself in an old literary tradition that she finds herself at odds with: the male-dominated poetry and male-dominated sagas of western culture. She frequently mixes everyday 'female' themes and images with Biblical lore and Greek myths retold from a female perspective.

Amaral displays a similar contrariness in her tendency to approach her subject from the opposite direction: not reality but irreality, not possibility but impossibility. The lamented impossibilities (the perfect poem, but also lost love and devastating death) place her work in the poetic tradition of *échec*: man's inability to express and, consequently, communicate his inner self in words, resulting in mistrust of the words and one's own poetic ability.

Another feature of Amaral's oeuvre is a constant dialogue with her own work and with voices from the poetic past. 'A little bit of Goya: letter to my daughter' may serve as a case in point. Goya's painting 'Los Fusilamientos del 3 de Mayo' earlier inspired the Portuguese poet Jorge de Sena (1919-1978) to write a 'rhyming letter' to his children. Besides referring to the form and content of De Sena's poem, Amaral's version also alludes to the painting itself, to Emily Dickinson, and to some autobiographical poems about her daughter. In 'Redondilhas and Other Loves', finally, tradition and *échec* are expressed also in the classical verse forms she employs.

[Ana Luísa Amaral took part in the Poetry International Festival Rotterdam 2003. This text was written on that occasion.]

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POEMS

THE PAST

THE PAST

Ah... old copybook
where I wrote out my French themes,
Mes Vacances: I adored holidays
je suis allée à la plage (with two e's,
the verb *être* asking to agree), *j'ai beaucoup*
nagé and then I'd end with the sunset
over the sea, looking up 'gulls' in the dictionary

Corrections in red and the *Passé Simple*,
writing *nous fûmes vous fûtes ils fûrent* a
hundred times
during sunny afternoons
and *Madame Denise* who said *Toi ma petite*
like a drill sergeant her face turning angry
and red (I have too many globules! *faites*
attention)
and that look which contradicted it all
with *remplit* tenderness

And the rules memorized and the verb
endings *ais, ais, ait*
during extra help and the falling afternoon light
pooling beneath the desks,
our nun lost in her psalms
me dreaming over my open book

once upon a time there was a little boy
and the algebraic equations
with x as unknown

Ah... beautiful afternoons when it was good
to be good, and neither the little saint nor candy,
but the sweet word fondling me from within,

PASSADO

Ah velha sebenta
em que escrevia as minhas composições de
Francês
Mes Vacances: gostei muito das férias
je suis allée à la plage (com dois ee,
o verbo *être* pede concordância), *j'ai beaucoup*
nagé e depois terminava com o sol a pôr-se
no mar e ia ver gaiivotas ao dicionário

As correcções a vermelho e o *Passé Simple*,
escrever cem vezes *nous fûmes vous fûtes ils*
fûrent
as tardes de sol
e *Madame Denise* que dizia *Toi ma petite*
com ar de sargento e a cara zangada a fazer-se
vermelha (tenho glóbulos a mais, *faites*
attention)
e o olhar que desmentia tudo
em ternura *remplit*

E as regras decoradas e as terminações
verbais *ais, ais, ait*,
a hora de estudo extra e o sol de fim de tarde
a filtrar-se pelas carteiras,
a freira a vigiar distraída em salmos
eu a sonhar de livro aberto

once upon a time there was a little boy
e as equações de terceiro grau a uma
incógnita

Ah tardes claras em que era bom
ser boa, não era o santinho nem o reбуçado

our white smocks spotted with bright hued
gouache

the blue belt I always wore draped
like a swashbuckler

Creaking wooden stairs
rhyming to steps
twenty years on,
falling into formation to the roll,
“present” seemed so logical and certain then,
like going to prayers in the chapel and reading
the Epistles
(Saint Paul to the Corinthians:
In that time...),
You have such a beautiful voice and read so
well,
and then they made me tighten my belt,
primed in my pew
to the right of the priest

The pull of the confession,
voices murmuring through the fine wooden web
dissembling defects,
smell of the waxed floor and the wax of the
candles
and when I stopped believing in sin,
knew words didn’t do any good,
that the wooden web
was useless

Ah... nights of insomnia twenty years on
*once upon a time there was a little boy
and he went on a journey
there was a little girl, une petite fille*
and the simple past, how its seemed simple and
past

*Au clair de la lune
mon ami Pierrot
Prête-moi ta plume
pour écrire un mot*

era a palavra doce a afagar-me por dentro,
as batas todas brancas salpicadas de gouache

colorido e o cinto azul que eu trazia sempre
largo
assim a cair de lado à espadachim

As escadas de madeira rangentes
ao compasso dos passos, sentidas ainda
à distância de vinte anos,
todas nós em submissa fila a responder à
chamada,
"Presente" parecia-me então lógico e certo
como assistir à oração na capela e ler as
Epístolas
(De São Paulo aos Coríntios:
Naquele tempo...),
tem uma voz bonita e lê tão bem, e depois
mandavam-me apertar o cinto para ficar
mais composta em cima do banquinho,
à direita do padre

E o fascínio das confissões,
as vozes sussuradas na fina madeira
castanha a esconder uma falta,
o cheiro do chão encerrado e da cera das velas
e quando deixei de acreditar em pecados
e comecei a achar que as palavras não prestam
e que era inútil
inútil a teia de madeira

Ah noites de insónia à distância de vinte anos,
*once upon a time there was a little boy
and he went up on journey
there was a little girl, une petite fille*
e o passé simple, como parecia simples o
passado

*Au clair de la lune
mon ami Pierrot
Prête-moi ta plume
pour écrire un mot*

To write just a word
just one moonlit word
to request concordance like a caress

*Elles sont parties,
les mouettes*

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Escrever uma palavra
uma só
ao luar
a pedir concordância como uma carícia

*Elles sont parties,
les mouettes*

© 1990, Ana Luísa Amaral
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