

Ramos, Manuel de Silva

(1947)



Manuel da Silva Ramos was born in 1947 in Covilhã (Refúgio), the town where he concluded his lyceum studies. He studied Law at the University of Lisbon for four years before his exile in France. He lived in Toulouse between 1970 and 1997. Upon his return to Portugal in 1997, he began a decade of intense literary activity, publishing several novels dealing with certain aspects of the exile narrative, emigration, colonization and the Portuguese diaspora. In some recent works, displacement is also seen as the journey of literary creation, designed to incorporate the geographic and cultural spaces into the literary space. In his debut book, *Os Três Seios de Nouvélia* (1969, Almeida Garret Novelistic Award), wandering around Lisbon is a starting point to the extensive set of travels in the spaces of the world and writing which his work would come to materialize.

The theme of 'Portugality' dominates the narrative and typographic experimentation of his initial works. Co-written with Alface, the *Tuga* trilogy includes the novels *Os Lusíadas* (1977), *As Noites Brancas do Papa Negro* (1982) and *Beijinhos* (1996). Departing, living in another place and returning define the trilogy's cycle. In the three novels, the physical journey is absorbed into the journey within the mechanisms of paronomasia of language and speech. The text presents itself to the reader as a journey of decoding its associative verbivocovisuality, overloaded with anal and genital images. The parodic procedures, both stylistically and narratively, are particularly evident in *Os Lusíadas*. The trilogy's Joycean

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heritage is visible in its verbal inventiveness, in the sexual and scatological comicality, in the parodic and meta-referential irony, and in a Rabelaisian maximalism. The journey and the wandering reappear in other works like *Viagem com Branco no Bolso* (2000) or *Jesus - The Last Adventure of Franz Kafka* (2002). His writing can be said to be itinerant, with an attending double meaning: that of the constant travelling through identity creating spaces, and that of the journey through mental and verbal spaces which reproduce ways of thinking, speaking and creating the experience of the world.

Sarcastic irony and literary parody are, sometimes hilariously, part of his solo works. His savagely metaphorical creative skill alternates between the lyrical and the narrative, in long or short forms — an instability of style and genre already detected by Óscar Lopes in 1969. The omnivorous torrent of his inner monologues shapes the sexist and racist structures of the Lusitanian *macho* ideology, as well as a certain mental atavism in the Fátima-Fado-Football trinity. The portrayal of the erotic body is associated with forms of figuration which work almost always as objectifiers or subordinators of women. Similarly, the character of the black man emerges frequently in the various verbal manifestations produced by the visceral fear of the other in the colonial unconscious. These and other archetypes, such as the tavern and the brothel, materialize certain ghosts of power in the Lusitanian ideology, proving its virulent and persistent nature even in a Europeanised and globalized society.

The option for the principle of surrealization and verbal deformation of the real is visible in the almost arbitrary relation that his novels establish between facts and fiction. In works like *Viagem com Branco no Bolso* (2000), *Café Montalto* (2003) and *A Ponte Submersa* (2007), for instance, Manuel da Silva Ramos bases himself on a historic or journalistic investigation of individuals and events, but is unconcerned with reconstitution or verisimilitude. In *Viagem com Branco no Bolso* (2000), the characters of the Dwarf of Arcozelo (António Lopes Ferreira, 1943-1989, 75 cm) and the Giant of Manjacaze (Gabriel Estêvão Mondlane, 1945-1990, 2.45 m), which connect the North of Portugal with Mozambique, work as caricatures of cultural and social practices of the fascist and colonialist Portugal. In *Café Montalto* (2003), several photographs are used as traces of the wool industry and the social and economic life in

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Covilhã between 1963 and 1986. In *A Ponte Submersa* (2007), the starting point is a set of murders that took place in Santa Comba Dão. However, documents and testimonies were appropriated and redefined by the discursive order of representation and by the obsessive figures of that discourse, among which are notable the figures of wandering, the whore, the *macho*, the labourer, the boss, the dwarf, the black man, the foreigner or the *portuga*.

Through the torrent of words one can understand the ideological dimension of fiction as a specific technique for deforming the world. The ghosts of fascism, racism, sexism or liberalism are embodied in their own linguistic structures, and not merely in described or recalled characters, spaces and environments. Language emerges as speech act of the phallus, an implement of power and of the violence that individuals exert and suffer. Occasionally, the invasive voice of the writer himself, or of one of his figures, interacts with the internal plane of the narrative, undoing the realist transparency or the caricature-like logic of the framing. The presence of rain as a narrator in *A Ponte Submersa* is another example of the coming together of the narrative and the discursive. Therefore, readers can only believe in the 'verbifying' mechanism of language and writing, in its ability to make fiction factual and present the real as a comic parody and alienated speech. Prisoners to the ideology of form and language that they are, the texts combine the implausibility of narrative self-reflexivity with the self-surprised laughter of the word with itself and the affective *pathos* of the inner monologue.

Travels

Portugal, France, Mozambique, Czech Republic.

Quotations

Holy fuck! I haven't seen so many people in one place since I was a gravedigger in Arcozelo.

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Friends family a thousand flowers an excited priest and even the Porto flag covering him. However, a special little coffin. Men are more than their height said the priest over his little body during the funeral mass and the emigrants from France wanted to remember him in marble. Just like the marble worker who came up with the globe. Everyone talked about it it's true and the engraved map and Portugal look right. Damn that guy has a look. I'm talking about the little statue. Made in the Vila Nova de Gaia foundry (it's copper). 300 grand. An exemplary collection. I didn't give any. That would have been too much. Burying the stinkers and still having to pay for the photos. It's enough for me to catalogue them in ass-fucked dreams. (translated from 2000: 17)

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My mother still says I'm insane
If insanity is the feeling of having a navel in the middle of your forehead then I am insane
This navel burns constantly
It's a little flame, smaller than the one crackling in Vulcano kitchen heaters,
Which burns on my forehead
Sometimes when it refuses itself I emit a foul stench
However, even unlit, this navel exists and can be seen from all sides
This navel is deep, elastic and has floodings in certain periods
During the cold it is a quick liquid, almost invisible, overlaid over a slight itch
However in warm weather the flame is almost fully inundated with a white, gooey liquid
which sticks to the hands
When I am in this state I cannot imagine I live and walk about a large city
Because thousands of men follow me and spy on my, preoccupied with the blue flame on my
forehead
One day I found myself climbing such a steep street my navel almost went out
A man hurried down with a sack of coal on his back

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As soon as he saw me, he stopped, put the sack down and asked for a used brazier from the nearest restaurant

When he came back he lit the coal quickly and stared at me

I had to run away

Another time in another city I almost called the police

I was sitting outside eating ice cream when a very tall man sat down at the table next to mine

He had a sturdy trunk and must have worked with a great commercial establishment because after he removed several shiny sets of silver cutlery from the trunk he began carefully cleaning them with a white cloth

I had to run away again

When you get your first boyfriend that flame will go away, prophesies my mother. (translated from 2006: 129-130)

I fall now, timid, on the careful yard, over the careful cabbages, the careful lettuces, the careful flowers, the careful greenhouse, the careful cherry tree, the careful fig tree, the careful apple tree, the careful water tank. Then I give up. I let the sun in. On the house wall, I see St Anthony isn't wet but still exposes the child to dry in the sun. To its side, the cloth witch got some drips on the broom bristles. It is the month of May and the rest of the day will be splendid. (translated from 2007: 49)

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