

Re-exploring the Empire

Maria Ondina Braga's Journeys to Macao and Other Places

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The work of the Portuguese teacher, translator and writer Maria Ondina Braga (1932-2003) is generally split into two categories: that set in or inspired by her travels to Macao and other places, and the rest. She is known for her intense, dark, short stories that often border on the fantastic; her portraits of characters who love solitude and self-analysis; her ambiguous, suggestive¹ style, often described as 'discreet'² – placing the subject of the sentence last, or dispensing with a subject at all; the relative unimportance she attributed to plot (focusing instead on impressions, psychological states and atmosphere³), and her combination of staccato syntax yet baroque vocabulary. But it is the memoirs of her childhood in Braga and her journeys abroad to the last outposts of the Portuguese empire that add an exotic and unique dimension to her literary reputation. This paper will show how the author's physical dislocation through space and mental and emotional displacement into the past are narrated concurrently in her writing, and will reflect upon her constant, yet ultimately unsuccessful search for identity, against a variety of backdrops, summed up in the phrase 'acima de tudo, quero encontrar-me comigo'⁴. At the

same time, it will point out parallels between life and fiction.

When referring to 'travel literature' I am referring to Braga's autobiographical works (even when categorised as 'autobiografia romanceada') that describe her passage through landscapes unfamiliar to her and to the majority of her readers, certainly when the works were first published. I am also conscious of the difficulty of defining 'travel writing' as a genre but follow Holland and Huggan's approximation, which is useful when dealing with Braga: travel writing concerns 'literary artifacts, mediating between fact and fiction, autobiography and ethnography, and combining – often with a whimsical self-consciousness and an awareness of the temptations of fraudulence – a number of academic disciplines, literary categories, and social codes'.⁵ Braga's non-fiction writing also includes the intimate diary form, brief descriptive *crônicas* intended for publication in newspapers and the memoir, relating her own and her family's lives. It could even be described as 'postmodern travel narrative',⁶ in that it records impressions in fragments and flashes, alternating them with personal history, random comments, poetry quotations and philosophical questions, achieving the aim of making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

Although they give the impression of freedom and wonder, Maria Ondina Braga's journeys were made not for pleasure, but with an underlying educational or economic imperative (she always had money problems and could not rely on fiction writing to earn a living). She was never simply a tourist, although she made tourist trips during her journeys, but rather a resident earning and spending money in distant lands. In the early 1950s she attended language courses in Paris and London, and found work as an *au pair* in two British

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cities far apart and very different from each other: Worcester (in the south-west of England) and Inverness (in the north-east of Scotland). Her investment in learning foreign languages enabled her to travel abroad (if she had not been an unmarried orphan, she would have needed her father or her husband's permission to leave Portugal at the time), to find work as a teacher, and later, back in Portugal, as a translator (like the protagonist of her novel *A Personagem*).⁷

She worked at convent schools in major cities of the disintegrating Portuguese empire, in Angola in 1961, from where she was evacuated to Goa, shortly before *that* territory was, in turn, reclaimed by force by India. She moved on to Macao, which was still firmly under Portuguese administration. Perhaps the fact that she was writing about the last bastion of the empire explains why her first book to be published, *Eu Vim Para Ver a Terra* (1965) was chosen by the Agência-Geral do Ultramar to launch a series of collections of *crônicas* written by 'autores nascidos ou radicados nas nossas províncias ultramarinas'.⁸

From an early age Maria Ondina was aware that there was a world beyond the confines of Braga; Portugal's most conservative and religious city, its name synonymous, in the proverb, with the great age of its beautiful cathedral. In a city full of churches, the writer grew up hearing stories and seeing photos of relatives who had emigrated to Brazil or travelled to France, some of whom made their fortunes abroad, others returning unsuccessful.⁹ She calls these ghosts of relatives 'sombras' and is haunted by them in a positive way, that helps her remember or reconstruct her and their pasts. In an interview with Ana Paula Costa she explained that one of her uncles was obsessed with the Orient,¹⁰ and that his influence, together with a lecture given at her school by a visiting specialist in Chinese history (*Vidas Vencidas*),¹¹ and a deep curiosity about other countries and cultures impelled her to travel away from her home town.

She was careful not to comment on the political situation in Portugal until after the 1974 revolution, and she returned to Lisbon in 1965, so she was not in self-imposed exile against the regime, although she did not approve of it. Instead, it is clear from her memoirs that she had always felt out of place, different from her friends and family, and needed to explore and discover alternative identities. Macao seems to be the place with which she found most affinity: the site of multiple

languages and identities, neither totally Chinese nor totally Portuguese, neither completely ancient nor thoroughly modern, but fluctuating somewhere in-between:

'Macau é minha alma a revelar-se, é toda uma vida de exaltação e de mágoa analisada, revivida, pronta a ser cantada. [...] Ou me volto toda para trás (fique embora transformada em estátua de sal) ou me perco neste mundo remoto, como que eterno, de uma raça sem idade. / Macau é, portanto, inédito para mim na medida em que eu própria me busco.'¹²

The reference to the pillar of salt, the title of her 'autobiografia romanceada' is telling. It implies that she is looking back at a city (or an empire) that is being destroyed for its wickedness and that she will be punished for her actions. The titles of her other works are equally symbolic of recurrent themes: *Os Rostos de Jano*¹³ emphasises conflicting identities and *Passagem do Cabo* refers back to the brave and dangerous exploits of the early navigators as they rounded the Cape of Good Hope and passed from one ocean to another. David Brookshaw comments on the aptness of this title:

'The passing of the Cape of Good Hope represented a defining moment in the history of the Portuguese discoveries, for it signalled the passage from the known Atlantic to the less familiar world of the Indian Ocean. Similarly, Maria Ondina's passage represents a kind of threshold journey, a quest for the intangible.'¹⁴

The importance of having access to an intimate, personal space (what we might call 'a room of her own'), wherever she travels, is paramount and she recreates in her works numerous rooms where she has dwelt. She invests the objects that surround her, particularly those that always accompany her on her travels, with intense symbolic meaning. She describes the view from her window, highlighting the frontier between the safe domestic habitat and the potentially dangerous unknown beyond. In *Nocturno em Macau* and *Estátua de Sal* she depicts



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'a Casa das Professoras', her lodgings in the convent that runs the school where her character Ester, her alter ego in the novel, teaches.¹⁵ She is somewhat trapped within an asphyxiating Catholic, female environment. This lends an erotic charge to every excursion into the streets and every encounter with a man.

Outside the sometimes oppressive comfort and familiarity of the domestic space, Braga (or her lone female character) is able to wander and explore. When she is not on foot, she entrusts herself to the drivers of trains, trams and taxis, submitting to fate, rather than taking the initiative or responsibility of driving herself. This puts her in the contradictory situation of being immobile whilst travelling through space, free to observe the other passengers, the driver and the constantly changing landscape. Hence her fondness for the *sam-lun-che* or tricycle taxi, which is less effort than walking but keeps the traveller on a level with passers-by.

However, it is when walking that the traveller is in control of her route, her pace and the possibility of changing direction, wandering aimlessly, hiding, or even stopping. She is more aware than ever of her individuality and solitude even within crowds. She is unprotected by the metal casing of a vehicle and vulnerable to the elements and there is always the possibility of getting lost. Travelling on foot is altogether a more physical and interactive means of transport.¹⁶ For example:

'[Decidi] caminhar à sorte, sem pressa, nem destino, mas sempre, sem parar. [...] A caminhada era agora a minha única defesa e o meu descanso. [...] Vejo-me nessa cena [...] sem nunca parar. E toda empenhada em tão caprichosa peregrinação como se cumprisse uma promessa.'¹⁷

When she thinks back to the compulsive walking exploration of Hong Kong described in the quote above, she feels quite traumatised.

Wandering around and discovering, Braga also depicts the vehicles that transport her and the unsettling fact of being simultaneously motionless and in transit as the landscape flies past the car/ bus/ train window, or deck. She is drawn to places which many people pass through, or where they halt only temporarily: waiting rooms,¹⁸ cafés, bars, hotels, airports, markets,¹⁹ spaces where her protagonist can watch unnoticed from the sidelines: 'Sempre achei valer a pena observar as pessoas, imaginar-lhes vidas, fixá-las na memória, ignorando-

as'.²⁰ She is always aloof, even when accompanied, unable to empathise with people or feel totally comfortable in her surroundings.

She is fascinated by other travellers, vagrants, madwomen and sailors particularly, because of their freedom to roam. For example: 'O russo corria mundo, livre como o vento, mas transportava consigo as raízes do sonho'²¹. An attractive single woman, she has to be more careful about her travel arrangements and about the assumptions men make when she wanders the streets or sits alone in a bar. She and the protagonists of her fiction, often lone travellers themselves, seem to attract both strangers and strange situations during their journeys: people start to talk to them spontaneously, to confess or confide in the protected, neutral space of a train carriage or boat cabin. These encounters may be so intense and meaningful that they have lasting effects. The short story 'O homem da ilha', for instance, relates the reunion of the narrator with a man who she met by chance on a train years before, corresponded with, and who visits her intent on marriage.²² In another, similar story 'Olhos de Jade' is the Chinese name of a sailor who tracks down a female author whose writing he admires and tells her about the women he met and his search for love on his travels.²³

When staying for some time in one place, Braga describes how she likes to wander through cities in the early morning or late evening, when solitude is guaranteed, but there is always a frisson of danger and the possibility of an unexpected encounter. This experience of being in motion or in transit is key to the way she constructs her identity because it emphasises the journey rather than the arrival and allows the traveller to wallow in anticipation and dreams that are never quite fulfilled by the reality of reaching the destination. In Stuart Hall's formation identity 'is a matter of "becoming" as well as "being". It belongs to the future as well as the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. [it undergoes] constant transformation'.²⁴

Braga emphasises journey rather than arrival, as can be seen in the epigrammatic phrase: 'Partir é esperança. Chegar desencanto'.²⁵ The dissatisfaction and melancholy of her writing links in with her narrator and characters tendency to flirt with others but draw back before too much intimacy is reached. She rarely speaks of the difficulties of being away from home but allows her nostalgia and yearning to show through

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her constant references to Braga and Portugal, woven between her excited impressions of new territory. In fact, she claims not to feel 'saudades' for any place she has lived, although her insistence upon revisiting those places through her writing would seem to contradict such a statement. She writes about them in retrospect; in diary format (*Estátua de Sal*), as reportage (*Passagem do Cabo*) and in fiction (*Nocturno em Macau*). This looking back from the present enables her to make comparisons between Portugal, Britain, Angola and Macao; in relation to any number of events or sights that have particularly impressed her: rainstorms, Easter celebrations, markets, Autumn, the habit of taking tea. She may conclude that she prefers one example, but usually she finds pleasure in each, satisfied at having witnessed several alternatives. Thus 'Sonhar com lagartos em Angola traz-me a infância em Braga',²⁶ or 'Dias assim [de cacimbo, em Angola], que crescem devagar entre o cinzento e o lilás, e que me lembram as de Londres, embora sem frio nem chuva'.²⁷

As previously stated, Macao is the place with which Braga seemed to identify most closely. She had always been fascinated with the Orient but the reader gathers from her writings that she ended up in Macao as a refugee from the coup in Goa rather than intending to go and work there. She recreates the feelings of apprehension, yet hope that she could find somewhere different and satisfying, as she waited for the ferry in Hong Kong: 'preguntava a mim própria como seria Macau. Sem mesmo me aperceber, começava aí a estranhar os usos destes sítios, começava de certo modo a decepcionar-me destas civilizações'.²⁸ During her stay there, knowing and understanding Macao becomes a kind of mission for her, parallel with gaining self-knowledge. The torrent of writing about Chinese and Macanese customs and ways of life for a Portuguese woman experiencing them, makes up about half Braga's complete works. Macao was the setting she returned to again and again in her fiction, but she only visited it twenty-five years later (1992), on the occasion of the publication of her collection of stories *A China Fica ao Lado* (1968) in Chinese translation.

Arriving after a quarter of a century's absence, Braga observes that the people, '[as] feições, a figura, o fôlego do homem' look the same, the smell is the same 'o mesmo cheiro a sal, a sutate, a incenso'²⁹, but that the place has changed. Transport between the islands has improved and the effects of increasing tourism

have marked them like typhoons, rather than winds of change. She looks at the other visitors, disembarking from the plane in the new airport on Coloane:

'Forasteiros, enfim, que tanto podiam ser moradores de Marte como puros investigadores das secretas por vezes sinistras seitas orientais [...]. Além de outra variedade de visitantes, munidos de memorandos, de cadernos, para escrever crónicas, comentários, encómios, críticas até a um Macau todo forte, fácil, florescente'.³⁰

These observations lead her to remember her own first visit and her attempts to get to know Macao by writing about it. She pictures herself in her room, composing stories and novels,

'como se as tivesse sonhado, ou, sabe-se lá, experimentado noutra encarnação. Como se tudo quanto aqui conto (a um tempo com amargor e complacência, que isto de contar a vida é sempre mais triste que vivê-la), tudo fruto, porventura, da minha febril efabulação'.³¹

Writing may well be a way of recreating the past, and other places, which led Maria Ondina Braga to wonder whether or not she had invented them, but it is also a journey. For her, the object of desire is always at the end of the line, but only as long as the journey lasts. Once one has arrived, she tells her readers, the impulse is to start travelling again, if not physically then through nostalgia, through memory and through the therapeutic process of writing.³² **RC**



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NOTES

- 1 Jacinto do Prado Coelho, review of *Amor e Morte*. *Colóquio Letras* 2 (1971), pp. 86-7.
- 2 Natália Nunes, review of *A Revolta das Palavras*. *Colóquio Letras* 28 (1975), p. 78.
- 3 Eugénio Lisboa, review of *A China Fica ao Lado*, 2nd ed. *Colóquio Letras* 23 (1975), pp. 81-2.
- 4 Maria Ondina Braga, *Estátua de Sal* (Edição refundida e ampliada). Lisbon: Círculo de Leitores, 1976, p. 7.
- 5 Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists With Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. xi.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 157-78.
- 7 Maria Ondina Braga, *A Personagem*. Lisbon: Bertrand, 1978.
- 8 Maria Ondina Braga, *Eu Vim Para Ver a Terra*, p. 125. Lisbon: Agência-Geral do Ultramar, 1965. The volume was reworked and republished as *Passagem do Cabo*. Lisbon: Caminho, 1994.
- 9 For example, in *Estátua de Sal*, p. 97, or the story 'O Tio Joaquim.' In *A Revolta das Palavras*. Lisbon: Bertrand, 1975, pp. 49-54.
- 10 Ana Paula Costa, 'Sou muito do silêncio'. *Jornal de Letras* (30 July 1971), pp. 6-7.
- 11 See Maria Ondina Braga, 'O Oriente'. *Vidas Vencidas*. Lisbon: Caminho, 1998, pp. 173-82.
- 12 *Estátua de Sal*, pp. 5-7.
- 13 Maria Ondina Braga, *Os Rostos de Jano*. Lisbon: Bertrand, 1973.
- 14 David Brookshaw, *Perceptions of China in Modern Portuguese Literature: Border Gates*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2002, p. 86.
- 15 The Colégio Rosa de Lima is still functioning in Macao. It is fictionalised in *Nocturno em Macau*, 2nd ed. (Lisbon: Caminho, 1993 [1991]) as the Colégio de Santa Fé. It is also described in *Estátua de Sal* and *Passagem do Cabo*.
- 16 'Without the encapsulating carapace, without the speed of railway or automobile travel, the traveler cannot easily detach herself from the space of travel. Evanescent reality – that detached sense of reality that technologies of speed introduce through modernity, that reality rushing past train and automobile windows... – has been left behind for another kind of reality, a more immediate and situated reality recovered through a visceral mobility... The three-dimensionality of space is restored, as is the long duration of time,' Sidonie Smith *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 32.
- 17 Maria Ondina Braga, *Passagem do Cabo*, pp. 101, 102, 104.
- 18 Maria Ondina Braga, 'Salas de Espera.' In *A Revolta das Palavras*, pp. 89-91.
- 19 Maria Ondina Braga, 'Mercados.' In *A Revolta das Palavras*, pp. 105-7.
- 20 Maria Ondina Braga, *Estátua de Sal*, p. 125.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 This story appears in several of the collections published in Braga's lifetime. The first was in *O Homem da Ilha e Outros Contos*. Lisbon: Ática, 1982, pp. 63-78.
- 23 Maria Ondina Braga, *O Homem da Ilha*, pp. 151-63.
- 24 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' (1990). In *Theorizing Diaspora*, edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 233-46, p. 236.
- 25 Maria Ondina Braga, *Estátua de Sal*, 79.
- 26 Maria Ondina Braga, *Passagem do Cabo*, p. 18.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 102.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 154.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 32 An earlier version of this paper was given at the 'A Vez e a Voz da Mulher Portuguesa na Diáspora: Macau e Outros Lugares' conference in 2007.