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THE POSITION OF THE BODY IN THE POETRY OF ISABEL DE SÁ

“Só o lume dos teus beijos rompe
a treva onde a solidão nos mata”
O Brilho da Lama, 1999: 29

Introduction

Taking into consideration some of the comments made across the years concerning the poetry of Isabel de Sá, a critical review by Eduardo Pitta asks for renewed attention: “Fazendo nossas as palavras de Fernando Guimarães, podemos incluir I. de Sá naquele núcleo de autores que propiciam o entendimento de ‘algumas das novas direcções da nossa poesia actual’”. Eduardo Pitta’s citation of Guimarães’ remark in his review (Pitta 1989) of *Escrevo para Desistir* (1988) raises the question of what new direction Isabel de Sá was leading contemporary Portuguese poetry into. And whether this remark now, more than two decennia later, still holds value.

Although it is not the aim of this essay to evaluate the effect of Isabel de Sá’s poetry, written during the past 28 years, on Portuguese poetry as a whole, I would like to examine the possible value of the quoted remark today. In order to do so, I will concentrate on the poems of Isabel de Sá that were published in *O Brilho da Lama* (1999). A work that has recently been collected, together with Isabel de Sá’s former poetry since 1979, in *Repetir o Poema* (2005). In order to justify the relevance of the subject of this article, I will first indicate the actual position of her poetry in relation to contemporary Portuguese poetry. Secondly, I will point out which problem de Sá’s poetry confronts, in my opinion, in the context of the problem of representation. As I will argue, the visibility of the subject of her poetry forms the main challenge de Sá confronts. This will bring me to the main subject of the article: the struggle for representation. In this light I will demonstrate this struggle in Isabel de Sá’s poetry and consequently show the innovative character of the poems analyzed.

The context of contemporary Portuguese poetry

In an attempt to position the poetry of de Sá in the context of Portuguese contemporary literature, I will consult three authoritative resources on the field of Portuguese Literature and that of Portuguese poetry in particular: António José Saraiva e Óscar Lopes’, *História da Literatura Portuguesa* (2000), Fernando Martinho’s, *Literatura Portuguesa do Século XX* (2004) and Nuno Júdice’s, *As Máscaras do Poema* (1998).

In the first, *História da Literatura Portuguesa*, de Sá is mentioned, logically, as part of the generation of poets that writing in the years 1970 -1990. As one of the characteristics of Portuguese poetry in this period, Saraiva and Lopes mention “[a] convicção de

comunicabilidade humana através de meros actos de linguagem” (2000, 1081). This conviction to communicate life, and even more, to need poetry to communicate life, can especially be found in the poetry of de Sá. As Saraiva and Lopes notice analyzing the latter works of de Sá (2000, 1086): “uma reflexão já quase descritiva ou narrativa (...) em que assoma a conscientização verbalizada (...), que é o próprio poema.” In other words, de Sá doesn’t only need poetry to communicate life, but poetry forms a part of life itself.

In the second authoritative work mentioned, *Literatura Portuguesa do Século XX* (2004), Isabel de Sá is mentioned as one of the poets of the last three decades of the twentieth century worth mentioning. But Martinho unfortunately doesn’t go into a further description of the position of her work in the context of contemporary Portuguese literature.

In the third work *As Máscaras do Poema*, de Sá is placed with other poets as being one of the new voices of poetry in Portugal. She is mentioned among others such as Adília Lopes and Ana Luísa Amaral to name just two other well-known Portuguese women poets of this period. Describing some of the characteristics of the poetry of the authors in this period, Júdice underlines that this poetry contains a philosophical development that takes the poem to a high reflective level (1998, 236). Comparing this remark to the description of the poetry of de Sá by Saraiva and Lopes (2000), de Sá’s work takes a logical place among the poetry of her time, as being highly reflective. The second conclusion we can abstract from the above, concerns the relevance of the poetry of de Sá to contemporary Portuguese poetry, as we can conclude from the descriptions in the authoritative works mentioned. This second conclusion offers a justification to return to the question formulated in the beginning of this article, namely to investigate the new direction in which de Sá’s poetry is (or would be) leading contemporary poetry to.

Having mentioned self-reflection is an important characteristic of the style of Portuguese poetry in the last decades of the twentieth century, I would like to pose the question: what is it that is being reflected on in the poetry of de Sá in particular? As I will demonstrate in the analyses of her poems, the reflection on Portuguese society plays an important role in de Sá’s works. Before going further into the problems de Sá confronts in her reflections on Portuguese society, it might be useful to (re)read one of her poems, in which society is reflected on in *O Brilho da Lama* (1999). The work of poetry is divided in two parts: “Das trevas para a luz” and “Na escuridão do espelho”. The following poem is the last poem of the first part and recapitulates the presented vision of the described world/society of de Sá:

Juventude e beleza, também
decadência e devassidão. Tudo
é possível por ser interdito.
Homens de fogo, mulheres de lama.
Saíram do mundo para a minha pasta
forrada a papel de fantasia.
Usam ligueiros, pênis
e *soutiens*. Máscaras e luvas.
Há zonas no corpo enegrecidas
pelo chicote. Amam-se, fornicam.
Exibem o ódio, a quase demência
de um mundo maldito.

This poem doesn’t only illustrate the reflective style of de Sá’s work quite explicitly, but it also demonstrates some key-characteristics in her texts. In order to point these out, I will first make some particular observations.

An important first observation concerns the relation between the presented world (“um mundo maldito”) on the one hand and the textual world of the poem itself (“a minha pasta forrada a papel de fantasia”) on the other. The personages (Homens de fogo, mulheres de lama) exit reality and enter the textual world. So we find in the cited poem an attempt to reshape reality into a textual world. An attempt that is essential for de Sá’s poetry. In the analyses of other poems I will come back to this point. What is striking about the poem in the second place is the critical tone of voice in which society is being reflected upon. (Please note that the poem doesn’t attempt to describe a certain, explicitly marked part of society. On the contrary, we find the generalization “um mundo maldito”, blaming the world as being a place of hatred, almost of dementia.) In the third place I would like to draw attention to the explicit mention of (certain parts of) the body. This corporeal focus and awareness calls for further investigation.

The reflective style of the poem on the described world/society confirms the “highly reflective level” that Júdice refers to (1998), or the “descriptive reflection” Saraiva and Lopes (2000) observe as typical of Portuguese poetry written in the last three decades of the twentieth century. To come back to the critical review quoted in the first paragraph of this article, Eduardo Pitta points out the direct and nothing concealing style of de Sá’s poetry: “Esta *verdade* “disfarçada”...aplica-se a toda a sua poesia” (Pitta 1989,152). As I hope to demonstrate in this essay, the revealing style of de Sá’s poetry makes her able to demonstrate the ‘weaknesses’ she finds in society. And her creation of an alternative textual world offers, as I will argue, an option to revise society in a different light.

The problem of representation

As already mentioned, I would like to draw attention to the problematic issues that de Sá’s poetry confronts. As I will argue, this is the struggle against underrepresentation. Before going further into the work of de Sá, I will comment on some studies related concerning the subject of representation.

One of the leading principles in the discussion on the *problem* of representation is the controversy nature of the very notion of “representation”. As Judith Butler in her philosophical essay on gender and sexuality (Butler 1990, 1-34) points out, representation is on the one hand a key-term in a political process that can be used to give women visibility. But on the other hand it simplifies what can be said about the represented subject and deforms what can be called truth. Taking the first part of this duality into consideration, it is useful to consider the discussion on representation of the lesbian body in specific. In *Space, Time, and Perversion* (1995) Grosz examines, among many other questions, the issues that concern representation of the lesbian body. As Grosz explains – taking into consideration among others the studies of Foucault – the problem of representation is closely related to the (understanding of) relations of power and domination. As Grosz formulates: “Difference, alterity, otherness are difficult concepts to incorporate into the humanist and phenomenological paradigm of oppression” (Grosz 1995, 211). So the problem of representation is embedded in the problem of defining “the Other”, or defining the deviation of the norm. When it is difficult to name a subject, its destiny to end up in the “arena of the pre, proto- or non-human”, seems to be inescapable (Grosz 1995, 211). From the above can be concluded that in the struggle for representation an important obstacle has to be confronted: the problem of defining identity, or defining ‘the Other’. As Grosz specifies this problem in the representation of the lesbian body, she comes to the conclusion “there is no representation of lesbians as lesbians in certain key discourse deeply invested in power relations” (Grosz 1995, 220). Exemplifying her point, Grosz mentions “the status of lesbianism in the eyes of the law”,

“discourses of medicine”, “discourses of the erotic” and the lack of “erotic language” to represent lesbian sexuality.

Taking the issue of underrepresentation into consideration in my reading of the poetry of de Sá, I want to demonstrate the awareness of the issue in the presented poems and the explicit struggle for representation. This struggle calls, as I will argue, not only for a definition of the represented subject, but in the first place for a definition of the place for this subject in the world/society.

Representation in the poetry of Isabel de Sá

In the work of poetry *O Brilho da Lama* (1999) the struggle for representation is made visible in different ways: explicitly and implicitly, in the title(s) and in the poems. To start with the titles of the two parts of the book (“Das trevas para a luz” and “Na escuridão do espelho”) it becomes clear that the visual effect, in the form of the suggestion of light and shadow, plays an important role. As I will argue light plays an important role in the enfolding of the problem of underrepresentation. The first title suggests a journey towards the light. But it can also be read as a more implicit suggestion. In this way the title suggests a journey towards visibility. The second title (“Na escuridão do espelho”) suggests a lack of identity. This title can also be read as a more implicit suggestion. The title also suggests a lack of representation of the self in reality. (I will come back to this problem). Although this message is hidden quite implicitly in this title, the reading of the first poem of this part will reaffirm the implicit message. This is the following poem in the book, after “Juventude e beleza, também”:

Só o lume dos teus beijos rompe
a treva onde a solidão nos mata.
Enrolamos a vida no escuro,
na semente de um amor atribulado.

Conhecemos o ritmo e a sede,
a convulsão do desamparo.
No sentido do corpo, no acerto
desce a força pelos braços
na violenta festa do prazer.

Tudo o que disseste
no desaforo da paixão
só podia incendiar a vida inteira
e encher de esperança o universo.

In my analysis of the last poem of the first part of *O Brilho da Lama* (1999), I made three major observations. In order to analyze this poem, I will outline the most important characteristics of the poem in a similar sequence. To start with the first observation, the relation between the presented world and the textual world, at the first sight the textual world is not explicitly mentioned in this poem. The characters of this poem are simply representations of people who exist in reality. But regarding the poem closer, it becomes clear that there has been a shift. Whereas in the first poem reality (presented by the characters) entered the poem, in this poem it is the (poetic) word that will enter reality. The words spoken in the “scandal of love” will enflame life. And where in the first poem reality is limited to the *world*, in this poem the power of the word will be broader and reach the *universe*.

Secondly, I will make some observations concerning the criticism of society presented in the poem. The contrast of light against shadow is (again) a demonstration of the journey from darkness to light. Starting point of this journey is “a treva onde a

solidão nos mata”. The fact that again shadow is the starting point of a journey corresponds with the thematic of the first part of the book (“Das trevas para a luz”). But this time, criticism of society is formulated in a more personal and urging way. The characters (the implicit “we” of this poem) will die from loneliness in the dark. The third line of the poem positions the subject of the poem even more clearly, stating that the characters live life in the dark. These dramatic expressions should be considered in the context of the argumentation presented in this article, the context of underrepresentation. In this sense the poem can be read as a call for recognition of the existence of their “tormented love”. A love that is presumably *not* being recognized and which cannot exist in clear daylight. In this context criticism of society is inevitable because it is necessary for the described subject to claim its existence.

The third observation about this poem concerns the explicit role of the body in the text. The search for light in this poem is explicitly illustrated by an implicit reference to a kiss: “o lume dos teus beijos”. But the body proliferates even more in the second strophe, where we can almost hear the body “breathe” in the rhythm and thirst, in the convulsion and descending of a certain power that finally ends passionately. The second strophe functions in this way as a body, directing the power of the poetic words into the universe. In this way the poem successfully created a new space and facilitates the representation of a “tormented love”.

The line of thought that is set out in poem quoted above can also be found in the title of the work itself, *O Brilho da Lama*. The title shows a funny play with light and representation. Clearly mud has a negative connotation, so the title of the work contains a striking controversy: mud isn’t very brilliant. But the title can also be read in another way, if mud is seen as a representation of reality, referring concretely to earthly reality. The poetic word becomes in the quoted poem part of the world. The poetic word enters reality. This can be seen as something brilliant (“Tudo o que disseste (...) só podia incendiar a vida inteira”) that *becomes* mud (earthly reality). Then some of the brilliance of the words is integrated into the mud. In other words: the world becomes a more brilliant place.

As I demonstrated in the analyses of the poem “Só o lume dos teus beijos rompe”, the problem of representation, and the lack of representation, forms an essential theme in the poem. The invisibility of the represented subject has to be struggled against. Society is referred to as a negative place, a place of darkness that has no space for the representation of the subject. Consequently the poem criticizes society. And secondly the poem explicitly describes the body of the seeking subject, a body that has the function to direct passion into the world, and to enlighten the world.

Representation of the body in the poetry of Isabel de Sá

Although the problem of representation can be pointed out clearly in the quoted poems, a relevant question still remains. Is the problem of the (in)visibility of the subject related to his/her homosexuality? Or, with other words, does the poem attempt to describe a lesbian body? This question cannot be answered unambiguously, because none of the poems in *O Brilho da Lama* (1999) refer explicitly to a lesbian subject/body. In order to demonstrate the involvement of de Sá’s poetry in this subject, it is necessary to refer to another work of poetry (which was published earlier), namely *Em nome do Corpo* (1986) in which homosexuality is referred to in a *relatively* more explicit way:

(...)

Um dedo tocara meus lábios numa carícia leve. Ela tomava-me o corpo num abraço voluptuoso, feminino. Eu era a figura ambígua de encontro ao seio onde a palavra renascia.”

(*Em nome do Corpo*, “O Abraço”, 1986, 19)

An important sign in this fragment are the words “figura ambígua”. The I-figure in this poem isn’t defined as either male or female: the I-figure is explicitly defined as ambiguous.

A Dutch researcher, Maaïke Meijer, confronted a similar problem. Analyzing early poems of two well-known Dutch poets, Blaman and Haasse, Meijer comes to the conclusion that both were pioneers writing lesbian Dutch literature in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century: “They found a language for ‘the lesbian’, which had been criminalized by sexologists and psychiatrists for more than a half century to “The love that dares not speak its name.” (Meijer 1988, 276, my translation). This silence around ‘the lesbian’ leads the poets of their generation and those of the following, according to Meijer, to a sex-neutral strategy. Among the poets who apply this strategy Meijer names well-known writers as Iris Murdoch and Gertrude Stein. This strategy made them able to avoid ‘the lesbian’ as it was constructed by sexologists: they wrote poetry in which neither the ‘I’, nor the loved-one has a ‘gender’. And on the other hand this strategy made it possible for these writers to be published and be respected, while at the same time they created a world out of the traditional gender-divisions. And so, neutrality that is explicitly present becomes in this way a sign (Meijer 1988, 277) for a lesbian theme.

Taking the above seriously, the ‘darkness’ and ‘ambiguity’ around the subject in the poetry of De Sá can indeed also be interpreted as a sign for the description of lesbian love. Which leads me to a contradictory silence in her work. The poems in *O Brilho da Lama* contain detailed descriptions of bodies in it. Moreover, almost each poem in the second part (“Na escuridão do espelho”), contains the description of a part of a body (some examples are: corpo, rosto, braço, curva da tua nuca, coração quebrado, a pele, carne, lábios, pernas, boca). Even so, the gender of the personages isn’t mentioned in *any* of the poems in this part of the book. This becomes even stranger when one realizes that some of the poems contain a sexually related description (for example in the poem “Só o lume dos teus beijos rompe”). Although it is not the object of this article to prove the sexual orientation that may or may not be presented in the poetry of de Sá, the lack of representation of the gendered body does underline an important point: the gender of the subject is silenced. In this perspective the title of the second part “Na escuridão do espelho” can indeed point towards the problem of representation: the lesbian body is and cannot be represented in reality. Although it still exists, the lesbian body finds itself in “a shadow where loneliness is killing it” (my translation). So the position of the body in the poetry of de Sá is in the dark, undefined and not explicitly present. The body is ambiguous, neither male nor female.

Rereading the poetry in “Na escuridão do espelho” the lack of a gendered identity of the subjects, the exclusion of these subjects, and their consequential search for identity becomes now clearer.

“(…)
As palavras e o desejo
no perigo do isolamento. Trazias
o coração quebrado,
corremos o risco da viagem
à procura do verdadeiro rosto”

“(Ofereceste-me o corpo”, *O Brilho da Lama*, 1999, 32)

Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay I noted the revealing style of de Sá's poetry and the fact that it makes her able to demonstrate the 'weaknesses' in society. Indeed, the sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit references to the lack of space in society for 'the lesbian body' indicate underrepresentation in a 'dark' society/world/universe. As I demonstrated de Sá can be seen as a pioneer who struggles for attention to the subject of her poetry, for attention for 'the Other'. But this 'other' cannot be represented explicitly. Further, the poetry of de Sá creates a textual alternative that brings light, brilliance, to the world. In other words, her poetry makes a beginning and opens the way to a world in which the lesbian body can be.

Does Isabel de Sá in this way indicate a new direction for Portuguese poetry of her time? I would be inclined to answer the question positively, although it may not be a direct answer to the question whether Pitta's remark still holds value. Pitta, in the words of Guimarães, indicated the reflective style of De Sá's poetry. As I demonstrated, the reflective style in her work plays an important role. But the work of de Sá developed in the past decades. And in my opinion what became even more important, in her latter works, is *the reaction* of de Sá to the reflections on society, that is, her struggle against underrepresentation. A topic that necessarily requires further investigation. And it requires comparison with other authors who examine the (lesbian) body in Portuguese poetry as well. And, finally, it requires a more specific contextualization in (Portuguese) contemporary poetry. Because if Isabel de Sá's poetry indeed proves to be a light that moves the lesbian body away from the shadow, it may well set out to be an innovative development in an important part of West-European poetry.

Obras Citadas

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