

‘LIKE A CANDLE UNDER A BUSHEL’: RHETORICAL  
IDENTITIES IN PORTUGAL AND ENGLAND  
(16<sup>TH</sup> –21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURIES)

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Anyone working today at the interface of Anglo-Saxon and Lusophone cultures is likely to be keenly aware of the differences between Portuguese and English academic writing styles. For while Portuguese tends to be very elaborate, with complex coordinated syntax, theatrical flourishes and high-flown diction, English is much more straightforward, employing a more down-to-earth vocabulary, simpler sentences and a clear linear style of argumentation (Bennett). In this paper, I argue that these differences may be traced back to the Early Modern period when Protestant and Catholic identities became clearly distinguished in the wake of the Reformation, and that they subsequently became *markers* of those identities, hotly disputed at moments of political or religious tension.

Even more obviously than in architecture, where the elaborate Baroque of the Catholics stood in stark contrast to the plain aesthetic favoured by the early Protestants (Levy), these two rhetorical styles accumulated around them a plethora of social, cultural and political values that persisted for centuries in Portugal, becoming one of the battlegrounds in the long-drawn-out conflict between “ancients” and “moderns” (Serrão 52). That is to say, as the “plain” style was gradually adopted in England in the 16th and 17th centuries as the only suitable vehicle for the “new science” that was being developed by figures such as Newton, Boyle and Hooke, it became associated not only with a progressive brand of politics that favoured the interests of the bourgeoisie above those of the landed aristocracy, but also with the forces of capitalism and democracy that were being ushered

in at the same time (Hill; Weber; Tawney). Over the coming centuries, religious and political leaders in the Catholic world showed their distaste for these developments by proscribing authors and ideologies associated with this progressive current and reinstating traditional epistemologies in their schools and universities. Hence, the elaborate “Ciceronian” style of rhetoric that had fallen out of favour in England with the onset of the scientific revolution remained for centuries the preferred style in Portugal (and indeed, elsewhere in the Catholic world), associated in people’s minds with “the virtues of distinction, elegance, nobility and classicism” (Timmermans 214) in direct opposition to the forces of socialism, liberalism and positivism.

This paper examines the historical circumstances that led up to this rhetorical schism, briefly tracing the developments of both English and Portuguese writing styles in their respective cultures. It then looks more closely at four distinct moments in history when these two rhetorical attitudes came into conflict, closing with a brief discussion of the rather different balance of power that exists today.

## 1. Historical Overview

The two styles in question (which, for convenience’s sake I shall here term the “traditional” and “modern” styles) have their origins in Classical Rhetoric, which played an important role in both Scholasticism and Humanism, the educational methods that were dominant all over Europe until the 17th century. Both of these philosophies differed from the modern scientific approach in that they believed knowledge to reside exclusively in words; consequently, schooling at pre-university level focused almost exclusively upon the exegesis of authoritative texts and training in the use of language. Indeed, for the humanists, language was a civilizing force, a God-given faculty, which could move men to virtue and bring about good, justice and liberty. Hence, eloquence was cultivated as an educational discipline and literary ideal, and abundant speech was valued as an indication of inner worth – “a magnificent and impressive thing, surging along like a golden river, with thoughts and words pouring out in rich abundance” (Erasmus 638).

Within this tradition, there were three aspects to language that the effective orator needed to consider: *logos*, the referential dimension; *ethos*, the moral dimension; and *pathos*, the emotive aspect. There were also three styles that he could choose from, ranging from the Grand Style, characterised by heightened

emotion, erudite diction and the use of richly ornate figures of speech, to the Plain Style, which was simple, direct and unambiguous, with the Middle Style falling somewhere between the two. A competent orator was expected to have command of all three styles, in order to be able to suit his words to a particular occasion and public.

However, after the Reformation, the Ciceronian grand style began to fall into disrepute in England. It was naturally distrusted by Protestants, who disliked ornamentation and artifice in all realms of life, and its appeal to the emotions began to be condemned as sophistry or unfair manipulation. Moreover, the early scientists, who were themselves Protestants (Merton), required a linguistic tool that was clear and simple, in order to provide a transparent window onto the physical world. Hence, of the three Classical styles, the plain style was gradually reified as the only worthy vehicle of the “truth” (Croll).

An important figure in this process was Francis Bacon who, in his *Advancement of Learning* (1605), attacked the very philosophy of language upon which the rhetorical and scholastic tradition was based, criticizing as “the first distemper of learning” the tendency to “study words, and not matter”.

It seems to me that Pygmalion’s frenzy is a good emblem or portraiture of this vanity, for words are but the images of matter, and except they have life of reason and invention, to fall in love with them is all one as to fall in love with a picture (3.284).

This was echoed by other men of the age, such as Ben Jonson, Hobbes and Locke, who also called for precision and economy in the use of language, priority to content over form, and the avoidance of fancy terms and “affected obscurities”. Then, when the Royal Society was formed in 1660, the plain style was made a prerequisite; Thomas Sprat, in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667), recounts how it specifically rejected “amplifications, digressions, and swelling of style” in favour of “the primitive purity, and shortness, when men delivered so many things, almost in an equal number of words” (113).

It should be pointed out that this was not just a question of linguistic taste. What was taking place here was nothing short of a major epistemological revolution, in which the text-based philosophy of the Scholastics and Humanists was being ousted by another that gave priority to “things” over words. The Scholastic deductive approach was replaced by an inductive one; observation and experimentation were installed as the only reliable methods for gleaning knowledge about the world; and

(perhaps most importantly for our purposes), the theory of signs that underpinned both Scholasticism and Humanism (Foucault 19-49) gave way to a philosophy of “linguistic realism”,<sup>1</sup> according to which “truth” could be accessed directly by the use of simple straightforward language that was believed to reflect the way things actually were in reality. The plain style was thus instituted as the only acceptable vehicle for “factual” or objective knowledge, which, over the course of the following centuries, became firmly demarcated from “fictional” or subjective representation. Today, as White (22) has pointed out, proficiency in it is felt to constitute basic literacy in the English-speaking world.

In Portugal, however, Enlightenment values never really took hold, due largely to the power of the Catholic Church supported by a succession of conservative political regimes. Scholasticism was reinstated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) as the official intellectual method of the Catholic Church, and implemented by the Society of Jesus throughout their extensive network of educational establishments; and as a result, classical rhetoric retained an important role in the *curriculum* long after it had been abandoned in England. As the Jesuits’ goal was above all to impress and seduce, it was the elaborate Ciceronian style, with its emphasis upon pathos and beauty, that was favoured (Timmermans 123; Levy 46; Conley 152-157). It is not surprising, therefore, that this style should have become associated with the conservative ideology promoted by the Catholic Church and by social factions committed to preserving the *status quo* against the forces of change that were causing such upheavals elsewhere in Europe.

Over the coming centuries, these rhetorical identities came into conflict on a number of occasions. As we shall see, they were initially associated primarily with religious denomination, but later acquired broader political and ideological implications in the context of the Enlightenment and Catholic Counter-Enlightenment.

## **2. The Haddon/Osorius Controversy (1562)**

By the middle of the 16th century, connections were already being made between rhetorical style and religious identity. When the Portuguese bishop, Jerónimo Osório, wrote to the

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<sup>1</sup> This is defined by Michael Dummett as “the belief that statements (...) possess an objective truth-value independent of our means of knowing it” (146).

recently-crowned Queen Elizabeth of England in 1562 urging her to return to the Catholic fold, his richly ornate style (which had earned him the epithet of “the Portuguese Cicero”) became the target of satirical attack from Protestant opponents. Indeed, Bacon, in the *Advancement of Learning*, predictably included Osorius on his list of men who “hunt more after words than matter”.<sup>2</sup>

Following the publication of the epistle to the Queen, a controversy arose between Osorius and the distinguished English Latinist Walter Haddon (1516-1572) that to some extent served as the prototype for subsequent contentions. As Osorius’ attack on the English Reformation was rhetorical rather than theological (Ryan 143), Haddon, who was regarded as the best Latin orator, poet and epistolist of his generation, was selected by the English court to respond to the letter. Thus, with the honour of the nation to defend, Haddon set about demolishing Osorius’ argument point by point (Ryan 145-147).

Particularly interesting in the light of later developments in both English and Portuguese discourse was Haddon’s criticism that Osorius does not present any evidence to support his charges, but merely attacks with vague generalities. Indeed, Osorius accuses the modern “spoilers” of the church of leading unseemly lives, as well as preaching heretical doctrines; but he does not name a single modern reformer apart from Luther, and gives no indication of any familiarity with specifically English aspects of the Reformation (Ryan 146, 154 note 13). Haddon, for his part, takes care to support his own reply with references to specific historical figures (Ryan 146). Thus, we have here an early manifestation of a feature that continues to distinguish the two discourses today, namely the taste for abstract generalization typical of the “traditional” style, *versus* the insistence that assertions be supported by concrete evidence of particular instances in the “modern” style.

The reception that these two texts received outside England offers some insight into the cultural climate of the time. While Osorius’ letter enjoyed great popularity on the Continent, becoming the “rage of Paris” (Ryan 143), Haddon’s reply seems to have had very little circulation (Ryan 149). Nevertheless, the controversy attracted sufficient attention in learned circles for others to enter the fray, with the focus inevitably falling upon the quality of the prose rather than the content of the argument.

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<sup>2</sup> “Then grew the flowing and watery vein of Osorius, the Portugal bishop, to be in price” (Bk. I.iv.ii).

For example, the English Catholic Richard Shacklock described Haddon as “a candle vnder a bushell” compared “to the glistryng stares, whiche are this day in the Catholike church, and namely to Osorius, against whome he setteth hymselfe”(Shacklock 4, cit. Ryan 149)

Unfortunately, the fact that Osorius was writing in Latin means that we cannot readily compare his discourse with what is produced in Portuguese today. However, it is clear from the terms of the above controversy that a florid ornate style was already becoming a marker of Catholic identity. Over the next few centuries, this would become more pronounced, chiefly due to the remarkable influence of the Jesuits, who were fast becoming the most powerful educational force in the Catholic world.

### **3. Luís António de Verney and the Jesuits (1751)**

By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Society of Jesus had numerous colleges, seminaries and lower schools in Portugal, and Rhetoric, as a discipline, was a staple part of its *curriculum*. However, resentment was now beginning to grow against the order, which had become extraordinarily rich and powerful. Amongst its various critics were the *estrangeirados*, a heterogeneous network of Portuguese intellectuals that lived and studied abroad, but who nevertheless used the knowledge acquired there for the modernization of Portugal (Carneiro *et al.*). One of the most influential of these was Luís António Verney, an Oratorian friar based in Rome, whose *Verdadeiro Método de Estudar* is often credited with providing the theoretical impetus for the educational reforms implemented by the Marquis of Pombal between 1759 and 1772 (Marques 377).

This work, published clandestinely in Lisbon in 1751, and dedicated, ironically, to the Jesuits, consisted of 16 letters, supposedly addressed to a Professor of the University of Coimbra. The letters criticised Portuguese practice in a wide range of areas, including education, the use of Portuguese and Latin, science, medicine, philosophy, law and rhetoric. Not surprisingly, this earned the author the wrath of the Jesuits, to the extent that there were calls for an *auto-de-fé* for him and his works (Ferreira 16-18).

Verney advocated replacing the verbalism of the Scholastics with more modern scientific methods, and often does so in terms not unlike those used by Bacon and the other representatives of the “New Philosophy” in England: “Este é o comum vício dos Aristotélicos: toda a sua Física é mistério; são altíssimas

contemplações, cobertas com o véu de palavras pouco comuns e fora do significado usual.”(173)

As for historiography, this, he claimed, should employ a concise linear style uninterrupted by the kinds of ornamental digressions that so delighted orators of the age.

O estilo da história pede clareza e brevidade: aquela, para explicar todos os acidentes da matéria; esta, para que – sem longas frases, que suspendem a atenção – descreva as coisas que deve, com um fio de discurso continuado e sem ser interrompido com aqueles movimentos que constituem o orador. (123)

However, Verney was not attempting to do away with Rhetoric altogether, as had happened in England. Rather, he wanted to return it to the kind of purity it had had under the early Christian humanists, before it became sullied by the manipulations of the Jesuits. He denounces affectation, insisting that figures and tropes “should be used at the right time and place, when the discourse requires (...)” “Há-de haver proporção, eleição, disposição, ou seja no discurso familiar, ou na história, ou na cadeira. Este é o grande segredo de falar bem...” (100).

Nor does he reject the Ciceronian grand style outright. On the contrary, he devotes a considerable amount of space discussing how it may be used appropriately, so that the orator does not degenerate into a quixotic figure, verbally tilting at windmills (110-118).

Many of Verney’s recommendations concerning the teaching of science were effectively put into practice in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the Marquis of Pombal’s sweeping reforms, when the Jesuits were expelled, their textbooks and teaching methods banned, and the University of Coimbra completely overhauled. However, Portugal’s brief Enlightenment did not last for long. When King Joseph died in 1777, Pombal was deposed and a new group took over the reins of power (Marques 394-5). It would take another couple of centuries before the plain style and the ideology that accompanied it would truly come into the ascendancy again.

#### **4. The Coimbra Question (1865)**

If anything, the tensions that we have been tracing in this article became even more pronounced in the 19th century, as rhetorical style became a way of distinguishing traditionalists

from progressives in the bitter conflicts that swept through Portugal at this time.<sup>3</sup> On the conservative side, classical rhetoric underwent something of a revival in the early part of the century, largely in reaction to the excesses of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic conquests, and represented a manifestation of nostalgia for conservative Catholic values (Timmermans 214). However, Liberalism was also growing in force, attracting forward-looking intellectuals (Marques 453) that generally favoured a style of discourse that was clear, transparent and democratic, in keeping with their ideals, and for which ready-made models were available in the texts that managed to make their way into the country from abroad via the network of *es-trangeirados* (Carneiro *et al.* 2000).

These two rhetorical identities once more came into conflict in 1864-5 in the famous controversy known as the “Coimbra Question”, between the conservative educator, António Feliciano de Castilho, and the group that were to become famous as the “1870 generation” led by Antero de Quental. After Castilho had criticised members of the “Coimbra school” in a postface to the *Poema da Mocidade* by Pinheiro Chagas, Antero de Quental responded vehemently with a leaflet entitled *Bom Senso e Bom Gosto*, which overtly challenged the canonised tastes of his day. Presenting himself as an unknown outsider with nothing to lose (3), Antero accused Castilho of attacking the group because of their intellectual independence and irreverence towards established figures such as himself (5). Like Bacon and Verney before him, he criticised “those that worship *words*, which enthral the masses, and despise *ideas*, which are difficult and do not sparkle” (9); Castilho’s own critical writings, he claimed, “contain no ideas – though enough words to fill a synonym dictionary” (14, translated by me).

Castilho’s pompous style may be illustrated by the following extract from the prologue to his “Method for the Teaching of Reading and Writing”.

Os espíritos elevados, que são, conjuntamente com as circunstâncias e o acaso, a quem se devem em geral, nas artes as invenções; nas ciências, os descobrimentos; os espíritos sublimes, arrojam-se às conquistas longínquas, desdenham as pequenezes subjacentes; só se comprazem nas esferas superiores, para além

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<sup>3</sup> In the first part of the century, this took the form of a struggle between absolutists and liberals, with the protagonists mutating into monarchists and republicans in the second (Marques 446-518).

do experimentado e do conhecido. O génio que pesa e mede os astros quase imperceptíveis pelos abismos do céu, a distâncias que pareciam incomensuráveis, que de vezes não deixa passar sem os perceber os elementos e sucessos da vida trivial, que em torno dele se revolvem. (xlii-xliii)

This passage cannot be rendered meaningfully in English without radical structural reformulation. Not only does it represent a lengthy detour from the main argument, apparently included as a rhetorical flourish rather than for any important information that it might bring to bear, the prose itself breaks all the rules of English academic discourse. The lexis is erudite and abstract, and the syntax (with the exception of the first sentence) is convoluted, complicated by inversions, apposition and subordination. Particularly noteworthy is the last sentence, which does not have a finite verb, but rather four relative clauses piled one on top of the other.

Antero's own style, and the political tendency underpinning it, may be illustrated in a lecture that he presented in the Lisbon Casino in 1871, entitled *Causas da Decadência dos Povos Peninsulares*. This was the first in a series of talks organised by the "1870 generation" known as the "Democratic Conferences", designed to provide a platform for their ideas on social, moral and political change, and raise public awareness of issues that were shaking Europe at the time. The passage in which Antero first expounds his argument concerning the economic, political and cultural decline of Spain and Portugal is interesting not only for its content but for its style of discourse.

Ora esses fenómenos capitais são três, e de três espécies: um moral, outro político, outro económico. O primeiro é a transformação de catolicismo, pelo concílio de Trento. O segundo, o estabelecimento de absolutismo, pela ruína das liberdades locais. O terceiro, o desenvolvimento das conquistas longinhas. (...) esses fenómenos eram exactamente o oposto dos três factos capitais, que se davam nas nações que lá fora cresciam, se moralizavam, se faziam inteligentes, ricas, poderosas, e tomavam a dianteira da civilização. Aqueles três factos civilizadores foram a liberdade moral, conquistada pela Reforma ou pela filosofia; a elevação da classe média, instrumento do progresso nas sociedades modernas, e directora dos reis, até ao dia que os destronou; a indústria, finalmente, verdadeiro fundamento do mundo actual, que veio dar às nações uma concepção nova do Direito, substituindo o trabalho à força, e o comércio à guerra de conquista (30-31).

Despite having been written over 140 years ago, this prose scarcely differs from the kind of the discourse that is today in the English-speaking world: there is a clear topic sentence in which he summarizes his main points, which are then subsequently developed, firstly as simple sentences within the paragraph, and then as entire sections within the text as a whole. His sentences are clear and concise, with no extraneous ornament or elaboration, and the lexis is used denotatively.

This would seem to illustrate better than anything the connection between prose style and political inclination. However, as with Verney, we should beware of drawing any simplistic analogies between the progressive camp in Portugal and the positivistic/utilitarian ideology that was in the ascendancy in England. Antero de Quental was by no means relinquishing the humanistic paradigm for the scientific one. On the contrary, in his later essay, *Tendências Gerais da Filosofia na Segunda Metade do Séc. XIX*<sup>4</sup>, he specifically criticises the “icy fatalism that science breathes into the heart of man” (“o gélido fatalismo soprado pela ciência sobre o coração do homem”), situating himself firmly within the Continental tradition of philosophical idealism in direct opposition to the materialistic or mechanistic worldview perpetrated by Cartesianism and Newtonian science (Saraiva and Lopes 863).

This suggests that the values and ideologies clustering around these rhetorical identities are not quite as polarised as it might seem at first sight. On the contrary, both Verney and Antero seem to be proposing some kind of gentle reform process for Portugal, involving the retention of some aspects of the traditional mindset while changing others. This, however, was not the case in the final situation that I am going to describe, in which the challenge to the conservative camp was issued in terms so intransigent that a radical response was inevitable.

## 5. **Silvio Lima vs. Cardinal Cerejeira (1930)**

After the brief experiment at democracy that was the First Republic in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservative forces once more returned to power in Portugal with the coup that led to the implementation of the dictatorship, known as the *Estado Novo*. The ideology that underpinned this regime was nationalistic,

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<sup>4</sup> First published in 1890 in the *Revista de Portugal*, vol II.

authoritarian and corporatist, and deeply rooted in traditional Catholic values, which had profound consequences upon academic production. Indeed, teachers at all levels of the education system that threatened the Catholic national identity with secular, republican or democratic ideas were subjected to severe controls (Torgal 73), and many opted for voluntary exile rather than face persecution (Marques 656).

The state was also highly critical of modern science, a position that probably emanated from Pope Pius X (1903-14), who suppressed any reconciliation between Catholic teaching and modern knowledge. In Portugal, the most important proponent of these ideas was the priest Manuel Gonçalves Cerejeira, whose famous work, *A Igreja e o Pensamento Contemporâneo*, affirmed the primacy of faith over reason, arguing that science was unable to explain reality in its full immensity or satisfy men's profoundest needs.

The Preface to Cerejeira's text, as might be expected, is a classic example of the "traditional" style of discourse, which, as we have seen, has been consistently associated with conservative Catholic positions since the 16th century. References to Horace and a Latin quotation situate the work within the traditional humanities paradigm; while the elevated diction and complex syntax confer pomp and dignity.

Embora contra o prudente preceito horaciano, que manda durmam nove anos, fechados na discreta gaveta, os mal sazoados produtos do espírito, saem agora à luz da publicidade estes ensaios, que foram há mais de um ano o objecto de algumas conferências por aí realizadas.

Para não desdizer de todo em todo ao velho Horácio, aqui se confessa que contudo sofreram, com alguma demora de publicação, ligeiro trabalho de lima sobre a primeira redacção, consoante aquele seu dito:

«limaelabor et mora» (vii).

Although this pompous tone is not sustained consistently throughout the whole work, there are plenty of convoluted sentences, such as the following, characterised by constant deferral of the main information and a marked use of subordination, realised chiefly through participle phrases (*gerúndios*) and relative clauses:

Examinando os objectos que os sentidos e a consciência nos apresentam, o espírito humano não se limita a determinar as suas propriedades e relações – o que faz a Ciência; mas, reconhecendo

que eles não têm em si a sua razão de ser, por uma necessidade tão viva, ou melhor, mais viva que a primeira, procura explicá-los, determinar a sua origem, natureza e fim, referindo-os às suas razões últimas – objecto da Metafísica; elevando-se assim até Deus, entra em relações com Ele pela Religião, relações que são estabelecidas pelo próprio Deus – na Revelação Cristã (11-12).

This, then, is an excellent example of the conventional association between the “traditional” rhetorical style and the conservative religious-political identity that we have already seen in other periods of Portugal’s history.

The work was a great success, running to various editions. However, in 1930, it was openly challenged by a young lecturer from the Department of Historical and Philosophical Studies, Sílvio Lima, in his *Notas Críticas ao Livro do Sr. Cardeal Cerejeira “A Igreja e o Pensamento Contemporâneo”*. In this controversy, the two epistemologies whose fortunes we have been tracing throughout this article came head to head in a dramatic fashion, revealing the ultimate incommensurability of the two paradigms.

Lima’s critique of Cerejeira was an attempt to apply the kind of reasoning used in modern scientific discourse to a text that was designed primarily to appeal to the “soul”. Asserting the primacy of “facts” over dogma, Lima explains that a laboratory analysis of the host used in the sacrament of the Eucharist would reveal it to be mere unleavened bread and that no transubstantiation had taken place (143), while a historical approach to religion could also show that many aspects of the faith were in fact “false” and “anti-historical” (141). Elsewhere, he accuses Cerejeira of “Catholico-centrism” (26-27) and of failing to produce evidence to support his assertions (17-18) – an interesting echo of Haddon’s criticism of Osorius.<sup>5</sup>

Given the intellectual and political naivety of this assault, the results were hardly surprising. Sílvio Lima lost his job, and though reinstated in 1942 with the help of an influential friend, was systematically refused promotion to a professorship until after 1974. The incident, however, serves as a reminder that the truth claims of any knowledge paradigm – and the virtues of the discourse in which it is couched – are only as solid as the power base that sustains them, and that when major shifts occur in the political and economic infrastructure of a given social

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the terms and consequences of this controversy, see Gregório (36-63).

system, epistemological and rhetorical shifts are likely to follow.

Indeed, this is what seems to have happened in the 35 or so years since Portugal became a liberal democracy. For, although the plain style of discourse has usually been associated with the values of progress and modernity, in opposition to Catholic-based conservatism of the traditional style, there has recently been a distinct shift in perceptions amongst Portuguese academics, as revealed by a survey of humanities and social science researchers carried out in 2002 and 2008 (Bennett 75-116). That is to say, with English firmly ensconced as the lingua franca at the centre of the world system, there are some that now see the plain style as an imperialistic rather than liberating force, the agent of an alien culture that is colonizing insidiously, intent on obliterating traditional approaches to knowledge. Today, both the “traditional” and the “modern” style are produced in roughly equal measure in Portuguese academia, as was shown by a recent corpus study of Portuguese academic writing across different disciplines and genres (Bennett 27-74). But it is unclear how long this balance will remain. Given the pressure on Portuguese academics to publish internationally, and the relentless march of globalization, it is possible that, in a few years’ time, the “traditional” style will have completely disappeared. Irrespective of its virtues or deficiencies as a heuristic tool, or of the values with which it has traditionally been associated, the elimination of this alternative way of construing knowledge will leave the intellectual world immeasurably impoverished.

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