

RECENSÕES CRÍTICAS REVIEWS

LANDEG WHITE: *LETTERS FROM PORTUGAL*.
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Landeg White's new book is full of poetry and poetic epistolography to tell us again some stories about Portugal, *from* Portugal. No one wants letters or poems FROM Portugal these precarious days. We are not good news to anyone in the world anymore and no one wants to hear FROM us. Nonetheless, we could only wish that all good news FROM Portugal could equal Landeg White's news translated into poems and letters.

These are letters from a man of letters and not from a common traveller to this country, so we must expect from these readings not travelling logs or discourses of one occasional journey but a strong reflection from a man of letters that has absorbed Portuguese culture as part of his own life. He teaches literature, he writes literature, he translates literature, and all those instances are summoned into this book, which, from its "Foreword", claims the right place for writing poetry:

Language as metaphor was the original
take, which the linguistics dodged
as too fuzzy for classification, tip-toeing
round the elephant in the classroom
in their hunt for the scientific rigours
of semantics, morphology, syntax, etc.
But I was happy with the imagination
with nouns as names and verbs what
they were doing, anything beyond
(as Aristotle has said) being argument

by analogy, some uses of metaphor outranking others.

These opening lines mark White's poetic strategy without a hesitation. We will need to come back to the classics to understand the form of the poem as the play of meaning and its stylization; we will need to go back to the power of imagination, so that we can understand that poetry is not an academic subject matter to take to the laboratory so that a scientist or a teacher of literature can determine which truth it conceals, or which lines should be examined in order to validate a hypothesis.

This position will close the book, so that the reader will not forget that in poetry the power of indeterminacy is stronger than the power of prediction, or academic prescription of any solution for how to write, how to set up meaning or how to read from an outline already created. Poetry is against all determinacy, and this cry is all over White's book.

The intromission of the narrative into poetic discourse, which is so intense in many contemporary poets, Landeg White included, does not signify the death of lyricism but rather the exploration of new formats for poetic text, which tend to increasingly conform to the orality of everyday discourse. At the same time, contemporary poetry has almost lost its pastoral side to give itself up to the world of the city, civilisation, and urbanity, where every form of language convenes. It is in such a way that we read the poetry of Landeg White, which is marked by the urban acculturation of the poet to Portugal and its habits, as can be examined in previous books like *Where the Angolans are Playing Football: Selected and New Poems* (2003) and *Arab Work* (2006).

In *Letters from Portugal*, we are again reliving the way to transform an experienced life story or just a piece of it into a poem or a poetic letter. These poems/letters are also personal chronicles, because narrative poetry does not have to restrict itself to a unitary form of expression. It also does not necessarily constitute writing as exile in relation to the limits of poetry. I've been calling this tendency of narrative poetry to establish a discourse which requires other discursive forms in order to develop, using techniques from narrative fiction without wishing to adopt the respective fictionality, *narrotics*. In this book, I choose a quite surprising short poem to illustrate the triumph of *narrotics*. Many contemporary poets have been surprising me with unexpected themes, but I think that it is the very first time a poet writes about the result of a student's exam *em branco*, as in the poem "A show of fine words". This brilliant piece about

nothing written and nothing taught (both student and teacher were awarded “zero”) has a new meaning when transformed into a poem: unlike the student and the teacher, a poet cannot be awarded a “zero” in words, even though if a blank page can be read as a masterpiece of literature or anything else, depending on how we see it, and how much imagination we can use to fill in the blank page.

These days, literary theorists like myself will praise books like *Letters from Portugal* as true representatives of a new post-modern self-reflexive discourse. This book epitomizes the post-modern nerve to summon literature up to its own representation, in other words, *Letters from Portugal* is a splendid book of poetry about poetry itself and all its allies and enemies, all its readers and users, all its interpretations and deconstructions. We have it all here and Landeg White is laughing, seriously, and professionally, at all this, standing from above, in his special balcony, as it is illustrated in my favourite picture in this special edition, enriched by the fine art of António Bandeira Araújo. This is the postmodern version of Eça de Queiroz’s dinning group at the Trindade in late nineteenth century, but while Eça laughed at literature at dinner parties amongst friends, White is laughing at literature from the place where it is created, discussed, and interpreted, that is why any academic or writer can be beckoned to poem to participate in this outstanding aesthetic showbiz, as in “Letter 5”:

But I come
to the poetry with a guilty secret, I,
Camões’s impresario to America,
Conjuring his eloquence even in English,
am chilled by Fernando Pessoa. (...)
Eça de Queiroz,
on the other hand, is a writer whose hand
I’d be proud to have shaken. He’s
a device of placing an Englishman
in the restaurant corner, or in a side box
at the *São Carlos*, dispassionately
observing his Portuguese characters
most volubly on display. I have been
that Englishman many time. (...)

This book is a “show of fine words” *from* Portugal, written by that Englishman of the nineteenth century with a postmodern eye, not only to Portuguese eyes but to the world’s. You will find here stories about Lisbon, Camões, Eça de Queiroz, Portuguese

scholars, Portuguese politics, many Portuguese words smoothly entering the discourse at any moment, and of course *bacalhau à Brás* always present. But this is a book of the world as well, where you will find news from Africa, from English Romantic poets, from nightingales, from daises, from literary practitioners and theorists, international literary allusions and many voices known and unknown echoing everywhere. We still need this kind of foreigner poetry made from inside our own culture if we aspire to know our own true identity.