Review Article

Amaral, Ana Luisa. *The Art of Being a Tiger: Poems by Ana Luísa Amaral*, translated by Margaret Jull Costa with an introduction by Paulo de Medeiros, Liverpool UP, 2016.

> "We see ourselves diminished or softened by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of non-universality, of self-centeredness, of sensuality." (Lorde)

There is nothing diminished or softened about *The Art of Being a Tiger*. It is always a rare pleasure to find an anthology of one's favorite poems by one of the towering figures of contemporary Portuguese poetry, Ana Luísa Amaral. To find it in a bilingual edition alongside sensitive, probing, and insightful English translations by Margaret Jull Costa is even better. This edition by Aris and Phillips performs the long overdue task of making Amaral's poetry available to an Anglophone readership, the first full-scale volume dedicated solely to her work, although isolated examples by other translators have appeared on internet sites. As if this were not riches enough, the volume comes with a highly incisive and stimulating critical introduction by Paulo de Medeiros, the renowned Portuguese and Comparative Literature scholar from the University of Warwick.

Amaral was born in Lisbon in 1956 but is very much linked to the city of Porto, where she taught at the University's Faculdade de Letras for most of her professional life, as a prolifically-published academic and teacher in the fields of Anglo-American and Comparative literature. In light of this, she has always maintained spirited political and aesthetic dialogue with the English-speaking literary world. This is evident not only in her poetry but also in her work on Emily Dickinson, as well as research collaborations such as the monumental book project, *Three Marias–40 Years On* and her masterly new annotated edition for Dom Quixote press of *New Portuguese Letters,* by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa (The Three Marias).

As this volume attests, Amaral herself is no small contributor to feminist letters in Portugal. *The Art of Being a Tiger* brings together selections from eleven of her collections, dating from 1990 to 2015: *Minha Senhora de Quê*; *Imagias*; *Coisas de partir*; *Às vezes o paraíso*; A *arte de ser tigre*; *A gênese do amor*; *Entre dois rios e outras noites*; *Se fosse um intervalo*; *Vozes*; *Escuro*; and *E todavia*. The volume concludes with a new, unpublished poem, "Murder is Easy," in which the embodied materiality of a crushed mosquito becomes a form of matter that is somehow analogous with the poem itself. The creature's easily extinguished life traces out, "the tiniest most imperturbable point / on a comet's tail" (219) in such a way that the poem is both physically and metaphysically born from this mark of durability, however miniscule, that the dead mosquito leaves behind on the page. Read as a form of retroactive *ars poetica*, "Murder is Easy" sets the tone for much of what precedes it in this volume. Time, matter, energy, and mortality permeate and connect most of Amaral's poems.

The title of her first collection, *Minha Senhora de Quê* is itself, of course, a wily cross-textual reference to a milestone in Portugal's literary past, to the feminist writer Maria Teresa Horta, and her banned work of 1971, *A Minha Senhora de Mim.* In this collection, Amaral's poem "Past" stands out for its intricate trilingual rendering of consciousness, time and memory through the switching of the Portuguese language with French and English. The poetic subject remembers her high school French grammar lessons, and her childlike belief in the power of the Roman Catholic confessional, only to grow up and lose the infantile enchantment, of which this faith had been a part, learned by rote like a grammar of the subconscious. Going to confess her sins, yet no longer believing in sin itself, she discovers in the confessional that words are of no use there, and "the wooden mesh is useless." Yet, the echoes of the French language, rehearsed in the schoolgirl certainties of foreign language drills, connect to her own personal faith in the magical power of words, a faith that unlike Catholicism, survives childhood. She remembers recounting in French her holidays at the beach. And with an irony that is surely not accidental, she recalls how the French verb for to be (être) always requires "feminine agreement" in the past participle of the perfect tense. In later life, when the past no longer seems so simple, she recalls the words of the song "Clair de lune:" "Prête-moi ta plume, pour écrire un mot" 'Lend me your pen, to write a word.' The "pen" that the French song lends her enables her to write "un mot" or rather "a word / just one in the

moonlight," that is here merely "*a* word," a single word, no longer *The* Word of God that she had been made to read out in school prayers. The single word she writes is, instead, an embodied gesture of love "like a caress requiring agreement in the feminine" (23). The concept of "agreement" (or *concordância* in the Portuguese) is thus liberated from its narrow grammatical meaning of gender agreement. The end of her poem effectively echoes the beginning in a circular, but not total, gesture of return. The seagulls she had started by evoking in her schoolgirl French essay have been released from the pages of the French dictionary, expressed here appropriately enough with a feminine plural agreement, (now a fond caress?) as she concludes: "elles sont parties, les mouettes" 'the seagulls have all departed' (22-23).

Flight is also an important motif in Amaral's poem, "Testament." Here the poetic subject addresses her daughter, a constant interlocutor throughout her work. Rupert Brooke's heroic, "if I should die / think only this of me" in "The Soldier" is here given a humble, filial rather than national turn. Fearing death in a plane crash, Amaral's poetic subject imagines being a "free-floating atom" in the sky, but she does not, from this lofty perspective, aspire to anything as grandiose as Brooke's quintessentially English "pulse in the eternal mind" (501). Instead, she writes, "if I should die / I want my daughter always to remember me" (25). Enumerating the forms this remembering would take, she imagines looking down on a different world order for her daughter, allowed to have no fixed timetable, no well-made bed, no sums completed for homework, nor potatoes peeled, so that she may, in turn, pass on to her own daughter one day, the legacy of what she has (un)learned. This perspective on risk and fear thus becomes not loss or destruction but a contented, disordered, creative chaos, projecting the only ordering that matters as a living, ongoing link between the three generations of women.

If the "maternal" is a central conceit relating to the transmission of cultural memory in Amaral, the paternal relation is also powerfully enshrined in her work. The poem, "Where—That Jacob's Ladder?" dedicated to Amaral's father (who died in December 2002), features a very concrete, rather than feared or imagined, form of loss. Where there exists no Old Testament Jacob's Ladder to reach her departed father, poetically evoked memories of the 1969 lunar landing form the metaphoric first rung on the "Jacob's Ladder" by which he "returns to earth." Recalling how the astronauts descended a ladder to walk on the moon, the

daughter compares these lunar landings that she and her father had watched together while drinking bowls of soup with other personal rites of passage in her life: passing a science exam, the birth of her own child when her father was there with her, and later his death, when she was not there with him. Expressing these moments of life-change through the familiar iconography of the lunar landings, Amaral's astronautical "men in diving suits" become the medical figures who mediate between life and death, as well as the biblical "angels" on Jacob's Ladder, who transmit messages between the two worlds. And her own absence at her father's death reinforces her loss of connection, as she can no longer recall, nor can she now ask him, the flavor of the soup they had shared in 1969. The "Jacob's Ladder" of shared memory has faded.

In other works, Amaral's strategy of appeal is less structured around the "autobiographized" rhetoric of personalization and rather directed towards broader acts of cultural subversion. As Paulo de Medeiros notes, "Amaral's self-insertion into the canon through its subversion (understood in a positive manner) has been carried out in almost all of her books and is not a novelty by now. What is most recent perhaps, is the sheer force through which such an auto-inscription ceases to be personal and claims for itself a collective force" (7). This force is particularly visible in her revisionist poetic dialogues with patriarchs of Western science, such as Einstein and Galileo. Hence, the wit of her turning Einstein himself into a kind of cosmic relativity. His famous "E em cee squared" equation ultimately "equates" to her own poetic endeavor too, such that "Seething through space / energy times a thousand equals mass / (how often have I put just that / in other poems)" (85). She recalls, however, Einstein's "long look / the sad eyelids / able to see beyond us all" to the atomic "mushroom" generated by "unconsciousness squared" that she recognizes as simultaneously also a long look backwards to an *auto-da-fe* (85), albeit a fierce, modern one. The destructive conditions of creativity are the dark side of darkness itself, that "other sinister night […] death's destruction and negation of life" (10) which Medeiros, drawing on Maurice Blanchot, works so powerfully and convincingly through Amaral's poetry in his introductory reading.

The "collective force" in Amaral's work to which Medeiros refers emerges as a specifically concrete form of collective solidarity for women outnumbered by men in "Common Places." The poem is set in a nameless "greasy spoon café" in London (Jull Costa's marvelously evocative translation of "café manhoso").

Here, the poem's Portuguese feminine subject, traveling in the UK, finds herself in the cafe among twenty-three men eating bacon, eggs, and tomato. She tries to domesticate her double sense of Portuguese and female displacement by looking for a comparable experience at home and downplaying Britain's past imperial greatness. In a sudden moment of epiphany, she spots one woman, sitting and reading outside this "tribe of twenty-three men." The woman smiles at her as if she were saying "that's it," and this makes her feel stronger, as if here a wordless moment of epiphany has been expressed by someone else. From this unexpected moment of solidarity and connection with the other woman, she thinks, "it doesn't matter if it's London or us, / that everywhere / you find the same" (53).

In this conclusion to "Common Places," Amaral opens the way for transversal feminist commonalities across place. As the title implies, she argues for an experiential intersectional feminist poetics, not so distant from the radical one that Lorde envisaged for African American women in her classic 1980s essay, "Poetry is not a Luxury." Experience is central to Lorde's African American feminist vision of poetics. As Lorde notes, 'I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience, not the sterile wordplay that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight" (37). Lorde's work is deployed to thought-provoking effect in Medeiros's introduction, reminding us how critically intertwined with the changing history of Anglo-American as well as Portuguese feminist thinking Amaral's poetic work has always been. Her poem "Common Places" is likely to resonate experientially, after all, with any woman who has ever found herself the lone female in a meeting at work, a café, or a railway carriage full of men. As Medeiros notes, Lorde refers to those inner places of possibility that are "there for each of us as women" but remain dark "because ancient and hidden" (9). For Medeiros, Amaral's "places of possibility" are then nurtured in a "dark core that is humanity itself" (9), a dark core that is nonetheless illuminated in some very specific places by Lorde's (and Amaral's) more radical feminist sparks. Medeiros's play of light and shade is tellingly lucid, binding his critique into a poetic statement of its own, in which he concludes that Amaral's poems are like "fire that continuously leaps out from between the hammer and the anvil, now hiding between them, now engulfing them, so one may no longer know what is one and what is the other, form and content, beauty and power, all become magma, a kind of beauty" (11). In this, Medeiros rings

true to his own opening evocation of William Blake, whose "Tiger burning bright" is echoed in the volume title, while Blake's painting of the "The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun" adorns the cover. Sensitively attuned to Amaral's blend of the idiomatic and the erudite (itself a dizzying Jacob's Ladder climb between different registers of oral and literary discourse), Jull Costa's English translations are a *tour de force,* conveying us, as if effortlessly, through the evolution of Amaral's poetics over nearly three decades. We must hope that this excellent translated collection promises much more to come, from both the poet and the translator, as well as further critical engagement with Amaral's poetry from Medeiros. The only thing that might have improved it for practical purposes would have been an index, or a detailed list of the contents to aid navigability.

Works Cited

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