

JOÃO LUÍS BARRETO GUIMARÃES

(1967-)



Poet, translator and plastic and reconstructive surgeon, João Luís Barreto Guimarães was born on 3rd June 1967, in Porto.

He published ten originals, divided in four tempos (Nunes, 2011: 304): *Há Violinos na Tribo* [There Are Violins in the Tribe] (1989), *Rua Trinta e Um de Fevereiro* [Thirty-First February Street] (1991) and *Este Lado para Cima* [This Side Up] (1994), reviewed and assembled in *3. Poesia 1987-1994* [Poetry 1987-1994] (2001), constitutes the first tempo; *Lugares Comuns* [Common Places] (2000), the second tempo; *Rés-do-Chão* [Ground Floor] (2003), *Luz Última* [Last Light] (2006) and *A Parte pelo Todo* [Take a Tree for a Forest] (2009), the third tempo. These seven works, reviewed, integrate *Poesia Reunida* [Collected Poetry] (2011). Since then, there have been three more works, the fourth tempo, where the references to Europe are explicit: *Você Está Aqui* [You Are Here] (2013), *Mediterrâneo* [Mediterranean] (2016; National Poetry Prize António Ramos Rosa, 2017; translated to Spanish) and the recently published *Nómada* [Nomadic] (2018).

João Luís Barreto Guimarães writes “from within life” (2006: 236); the Europe he describes departs from a concrete and referencing physical and political reality, but he surpasses it. It is an inhabitant’s Europe, travelled, felt, experienced, thus remembered, thought, constructed by a subject, himself in formation, a kind of *Bildungspoesie* that combines the identitary injunction of the Delphic Sybil – *know yourself* – to the heritage of the inaugural Odyssey, in pursuit of the European literature and culture, with a special focus on Portugal.

From the first to the fourth tempos, we follow the “serene rituals” (1989: 28) of a speaker who, searching for himself, gradually finds (himself) (in) his “tribe”, recognising himself as the heir of a heritage, while simultaneously assuming himself as free and responsible for its construction. He starts by welding himself to the city (it could be Porto), in a quasi-mythical cosmovision. He experiments streets and sonnets (engaging in a dialogue with Camões, Álvaro de Campos, Concretism); he frequents poems in prose, that better adjust to “decoding games” (2000: 163) and multimode *restlessness* (Bernardo Soares, Baudelaire) from the corner of a café table (“*Café Corcel, Porto, 1994-1995*”, 2000: colophon) [*Café Steed*]. Inhabitant of a ground floor, he reports, in free verse, stories of marital happiness (Egito Gonçalves, Alexandre O’Neill, Cesário Verde); he becomes a father, not ceasing to be a son; however, it will be with the loss of the father (and of God?), in a “lost country” quoting Camilo Pessanha), that he attains the peak of maturity and assumes himself as *the part for the whole*. “[T]hen the [dickinsonian] letting go”, in a sort of intimate (and social) eschatology, the letting himself go travelling to foreign cities, many of which European. A thickening soul is followed by historical, political, cultural, artistic references being condensed.

It is in this inscription in the European humanistic spirit that one finds the explicit and polysemic summons of *Europe*. Right at the beginning of the work, in a reference to Saramago, to a raft, to the Tordesilhas Treaty, to a “country / at risk of extinction” before the coming of “another currency” (1994: 95), we recognise, after Portugal’s entry in the EEC (1986), allusions to the project of the European Union (1992) and to the ensuing geopolitical and socio-economic consequences, such as the circulation of the single currency (2002). Moving forward, it becomes explicit that there is a distancing between Portugal and other countries that, as a synecdoche are described as a Europe in oscillation, both with positive connotations (central location, growth promotor), and negative ones (financially superior centre, but far away from the usurious rich from Northern Europe). In contrast, Portugal is considered “Europe / of tinsel” (2013: 39), apparently included in the group, but, in fact, overlooked for her illusory, deceitful look, of a country incarnated by an atavistic figure, “Mr. Lopes”, who traverses the books since *Luz Última*, and is repeated in “O filho do sr. Lopes” [The Son of Mr. Lopes]. The migrations phenomenon is also convened, so European since the

1400s, and again so real: foreigners, tourists; the emigrant grandfather, the Eastern immigrants; the refugees. The speaker sympathises with the oppressed; consequently, in their voyages (physical and mental), we do not find the names of the winners or of the “cheaters”; he prefers “the nameless heroes to / the name of the great heroes” (2016: 67). Besides these references to the present day, we come across “the very human misery” in “[the] silt of History” (*idem*: 43): be it in the figure of the “errand Jews” (*idem*: 62), or in the poem that crosses the exodus of the Israelis from Egypt with the more recent deportation of Jews to Auschwitz; be it “[in] the / bombed buildings (for example: in the Balkans)” (2018: 26); be it even in terrorism that originated “the last trip / of Icarus”, from high / from the twin towers” (*idem*: 27). In 2013, Barreto Guimarães quotes the five axioms that compose the “idea of Europe” presented in 2004 by George Steiner: “Cafés. Street names (of historians, philosophers, politicians, heroes). To wander (short distances). Judeo-Christian tradition and Greek tradition. Eschatology of Europe (world wars and the Balkans)” (Guimarães, *apud* Ribeiro 2013). With personal detours, the poet complements this synthesis in several books, even in advance – *Lugares Comuns*, from 2000, is “all spent at the café table” (*ibidem*). Steiner himself concludes: “finally, the apprehension of a last chapter, of that famous Hegelian sunset that obscures the idea and the substance of Europe, even in its brightest hours. // And now what?” (2005: 44).

In a political *message* about the country’s situation “in black and white” (2018: 22), the speaker considers the departure: “[if] and at the end of the day you ask / where did the full day go / it is time to leave (not to get stuck in the wreck / waiting for a miracle on the beach / [...])” (*idem*: 22). However, “for example”, the poetic subject’s option is to stay: “nothing against those who left, I / was someone who stayed” (*idem*: 56). Before such opinions, so rationally critic, one would not consider to talk about “Sebastianism” in Barreto Guimarães’ poetry; however, it should be reminded that, at the beginning, the speaker confesses (not without irony): “(I am about to reveal this for many / poems) one the king will return: Sebastião, lad / where have you been?” (1991: 48). And, seizing on the maritime metaphor, he adds, with Pessoaan echoes: “from the balcony one sees the river, but a river: will it be all? no / there are only other oceans to discover: small / disturbed waters days fulfilling a corner”

(*idem*: 60). So, it does not surprise that, in the fourth tempo, believing in the “art of restart” (2016: 63), the poetic subject still exhibits, an ardour, one would say a revolutionary one (“next to / Jean Valjean”, *ibidem*): “I was someone who resisted – / when they think I am dead / I will take the country from them” (2018: 56). Again, the confluence of “two Europes” that have conditioned the Portuguese imaginary: “the Iberian, authentic, mystical and lyric” and “a central and Nordic, of the market, of modernity and science” (Martins 2011a: 83).

This same conciliatory position is found in *Mediterrâneo*, book (and place) that remits to the origins. Initially motivated by a critique “to the attitude of some countries from Northern Europe towards the Southern countries” and thus, considering the Mediterranean and Europe almost disjunctively – “from the place where the olive tree commences until the place where the olive tree does not grow anymore. Where wine is no longer the preferential drink and beer is. Where Catholicism is no longer the main religion and Protestantism is” (Guimarães *apud* Marques 2017) – Barreto Guimarães assumes, after all, a contemporised attitude: “so, the book moves in that geography and has a time spectre of more than two thousand years. And shows [...] that, after all, we all come from a common brew of this History” (*ibidem*). Upon the return from journeys across Europe, “epiphanies” found “in the jacket’s pocket” also appear (2013: 39): tickets or recollections from visits to museums; the admiration for works of art, and even their inter-semiotic transposition to poems of a metaphysic or political nature (intertextuality with *Metamorfoses* [Metamorphoses] by Jorge de Sena or *Movimentos no Escuro* [Movements in the Dark] by José Miguel Silva), or even their transfer to beings, or real situations transposed to the poem: for example, “Modigliani” (*idem*: 53). From the works of art and from the museums, it is not the titles nor the institutional recognition that matter, it is the incipience of the artefacts and the collections, the curiosity, the singular and singularising wonders that elicit and what they result from; “the [subjective] gift of imagination / that enables figuring everything it can disfigure” (2016: 30). (It should be noted that the *cabinets de curiosités* [Cabinet of curiosities] or *cabinets of wonder*, were the museum precursors – cf. “Cabinet de curiosités”, *idem*: 51). In his meanderings, the poetic subject is interested in surprising reality, in “Sicília” [Sicily] (*idem*: 31) (name of an island, that easily evokes a feminine name), with resonances of Cesário

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Verde and Eugénio de Andrade, and of a dense erotic charge (that denotes the poems since the beginning of the work), or in Venice, for example, “where the beauty is symmetry / and time: / duration” (2013: 18), in the natural presence (or literary – cf. Manuel António Pina; or maybe natural and literary) of the cat: “this feline / which fired my soul / [...] / [...] and / gave me back the certainty that the / perishable beauty for once / was palpable” (*ibidem*).

As survival “to our own suicidal inhumanity”, Steiner (2005: 44) argues that the human dignity is found precisely in the “perception of wisdom”, in the “quest for selfless knowledge”, in the “creation of beauty”, and, he adds, that it “[is] perhaps only in Europe that the necessary foundations of literacy and the sense of the tragic vulnerability of human condition could constitute themselves as the base” (*idem*: 53, 55). With a lay vision, the Franco-American thinker suggests that Western Europe put into practice secular humanism, since “[it is] among the frequently tired, divided and confused sons of Athens and Jerusalem that we could return to the conviction that ‘life is not reflected’, it is not effectively worthy of being lived” (*idem*: 55). We find an ecumenic alternative (in a broad sense) in “As Igrejas da Europa” [The Churches of Europe], where one reads the celebration of life in the bells of a Catholic church that “had been / a pagan temple (used / as a barn / theatre / prison and armoury)”, and whose “walls summed / architecture lessons (Gothic / over Romanesque / Baroque over Renaissance) giving life / to the dead language with which these walls / prayed” (2016: 44). Maybe we can extend this *prayer* to all the poetry of Barreto Guimarães, and see in these walls the edified presence of Europe (re)visited and (re)unified in space and time by a *nomadic* poetic subject.

The Europe of João Luís Barreto Guimarães’ poetry results from a very peculiar articulation (exemplary; already consecrated) of all pluralities that converge here, in this last poem as in his work. Using a recurrent game in the initial compositions, we could say that it is about a Europe of the south, of the sun and of the salt. *Europe of the South*, in this metaphoric sense, of Mediterranean origin, not necessarily exclusionary of Northern Europe. *Europe of the sun*, of the solar celebration of life, in spite of the final eschatological and metaphysical density. *Europe of the salt*, “the tong’s salt”, so much to Eugénio de Andrade’s taste, “cum grano

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salis” [with a grain of salt], the irony, the humour, ingredients of so many poems. And love. Maybe the solution that was here proposed for Europe and for life is the love re-connection. Without totalitarianisms, with liberties – also poetic –, all the drifts and meanderings of the subject can find refuge in communicability of a poetry full of confluences and articulations: rhetorical, literary, physical, historic, economic, social, political, cultural, religious, mythical, emotional. Maybe a friendly embrace, the most necessary shelter, be it the acceptance in the difference shown by an *oxymoronic* poetry where the ““metaphor / resists the metonymy”” (2006: 239). In it, it is not the identity logic that prevails, but the world experience through difference. That will be the love the poetic subject searches for since the origins. The filial love, the love for his tribe, the conjugal love, the paternal love, the fraternal and solidary love. *Omnia vincit amor*. [Love overcomes everything]. Keeps on being the truth. “Only love stops time (only / it stops greed)” (2018: 66). Even if it is for just an instant: “love invents a different way to last in life. [...] Because, as we all know, love is a reinvention of life” (Badiou 2016: 42; author’s translation). “[The] love does not choose between two / does not annul: the / love duplicates” (2018: 64). “It is necessary to reinvent love” (Rimbaud). It is necessary to reinvent Europe. “*Eurôpe*” – ‘that which has great eyes’ (Martins 2011b: 492-493). The speaker, in search of himself, of his identity, he relates with the movement of the world(s) that surrounds him, attentive to detail, to failure and the possibilities of a drift, of re-linking. “There he goes”, no “run” (like *the baudelairian painter of modern life*), but “re-pair” (cf. 2006: 240 – vv. 23-34). It is necessary to “re-pair”. Maybe this is de João Luís Barreto Guimarães’ challenge: not the kidnapping of Europe, but the Europe of meaningful love(s).

Brief Anthology

Lost Luggage

And

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when you find in the pocket of the travel jacket
small papers forgotten by your gesture of
retaining them? You do not do it by chance. You invest
in the epiphany of seeing return to your hand
a ticket to the Uffizi (the
magnificence
of Vasa) the colours of
Casa Batlló. In these papers where the date is
lint of what went by
lays the illusion of evading from here –
from this country pretending it does not
let you grow (Europe
of tinsel) fast
levelling down. They came
out of nowhere when you expected nothing
(that it is this country
when you return from a trip:)

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you are in the merry-go-round of days and

it will never be your suitcase

(it will never be your suitcase)

It will never be your suitcase.

in Você Está Aqui (2013: 39)

Sicília

There were olive trees

and figs. Messina had been taken by

Carthaginian boats

like the morning coffee takes up

the space of air.

There were apricots and almonds. Near by

in Syracuse

(using his own body)

Archimedes had demonstrated how water

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is incompressible.

We gave one another hands and feet.

There were lemons and cypresses.

I do not know about vineyards.

in Mediterrâneo (2016: 31)

Igrejas da Europa

to Duarte Morais Soares

The Catholic bells toll to celebrate life-

where the church is erected was once

a pagan temple (used

as a barn

theatre

prison and armoury). The walls summed

architecture lessons (Gothic

over Romanesque

Baroque over Renaissance) giving life

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to the dead language with which these walls
prayed. Today we are back as
pagan tourists (crossing arches so narrow
Charlemagne would not fit)
bringing private gods to the home
of the Christian God—
giving Praise (if there is God) for
the agnostic beauty
of stone.

in Mediterrâneo (2016: 44)

The Streets Are Lit

*to Alexandra and Ricardo
on Gui's arrival*

*We all have credit,
Said the bankers.
A matter of faith.*

HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER

At

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The corner of Deutsche Bank (next to
Jean Valjean) a couple of lovers reunites
in a hug. For some instants they believe in the
art of renewal
in a country where a minister would give up inaugurating
ruins of
our dreams. Far away
in the rivers of Europe runs a common lymph
(like a crack on the wall hesitating moving forward
correcting, mistake-by-mistake,
its own path). While the youth embrace themselves
they ignore usury
the sad days in this peripheric country are suspended
without hope nor remorse where
Europe spends holidays. At the Deutsche Bank's door
only illusion has credit—
soon it will all end up in a deposit

of love.

in Mediterrâneo (2016: 63)

The Missing Walls

In

The bombed buildings (for example: in the Balkans)

It is easy to figure the cells

In which we live. High blocs without façade

(since the war days)

make it more obvious: cubic, tiny

rooms

in which there is a missing wall -

the one that provides an escape

that shows freedom. But that is

in the places

of war. In the places of peace

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the bankers (and the tax collectors)
play with the residents
(depriving them of four walls!)
like someone plays house with
a dollhouse
of those that exist in the rich museums
of Northern Europe.
in Nómada (2018: 26)

Nomads

Only love stops time (only
it stops the greed)
we tear cities in half
(we cross rivers and lakes)
Available for places with
unpronounceable names. It is necessary to know the maps

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randomly

(never avoid borders

never be left behind)

everything should haunt us like

snow

in April. Only love stops the time

in it the enigma endures

(to throw formless stones and the lake

returns circles).

in Nómada (2018: 66)

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