Portugal entre o mar e o sonho: a metamorfose épica de uma nação

Portugal, where the sea meets the dream: an epic national metamorphosis

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Resumo

Este artigo visa repensar uma das mais fascinantes metamorfoses da consciência nacional portuguesa através da tríade fundacional que, ao longo dos séculos, reinventou Portugal pela mediação da palavra: Camões, Vieira e Pessoa. Entre *Os Lusíadas*, que celebram um império marítimo já tocado pela melancolia do declínio, e *Mensagem*, que profetiza um Quinto Império de contornos espirituais, situa-se a arquitetura profética vieiriana da *História do Futuro*, monumento retórico que transforma o messianismo sebastianista em teodiceia imperial. Cada um destes autores autoproclama-se protagonista da sua própria epopeia: Camões como navegador existencial das águas do tempo; Vieira como hermeneuta privilegiado dos desígnios providenciais; Pessoa como Messias cultural de uma pátria por cumprir. Este estudo desvela ainda como o século XIX português buscou romper com o imaginário da grandeza marítima, apostando na laboração telúrica em detrimento da nostalgia oceânica. Entre a "pequena casa lusitana" camoniana, o oceano vieiriano – simultaneamente real e simbólico – e o "nevoeiro" pessoano, emerge o retrato de uma nação dividida entre a memorialização das glórias pretéritas e a ânsia de uma transcendência por advir, numa dialética perene que faz do Portugal literário um laboratório privilegiado do messianismo ocidental.

Palavras-chave: Escrever Portugal; Camões; Pessoa.

Abstract

This article endeavors to reconceptualize one of the most fascinating metamorphoses of Portuguese national consciousness by engaging with the foundational triad that, across centuries, has reinvented Portugal through the medium of the word: Camões, Vieira, and Pessoa. Between *Os Lusíadas* (The Lusiads) – a maritime epic already tinged with the melancholy of imperial twilight – and *Mensagem* (*Message*), which envisions a Fifth Empire of spiritual resonance, stands Vieira's prophetic architecture in *História do Futuro* (History of the Future), a rhetorical monument that transfigures Sebastianist messianism into imperial theodicy. Each of these authors self-stylizes as the protagonist of his own epic: Camões as the existential navigator of the uncharted waters of time; Vieira as the privileged exegete of providential design; Pessoa as the cultural Messiah of an as-yet unfulfilled nation. The study further explores how nineteenth-century Portugal sought to sever ties with the maritime imaginary of past grandeur, investing instead in terrestrial labor that prioritized the land over nostalgia for the ocean. Between Camões' "little Lusitanian house," Vieira's ocean – at once literal and symbolic – and Pessoa's enveloping "fog" emerges the portrait of a nation suspended between the memorialization of bygone glories and a yearning for a still-unrealized transcendence. This enduring dialectic renders literary Portugal a prime laboratory for the Western messianic imagination.

Keywords: Writing Portugal; Camões; Pessoa.

> To celebrate Camões and his Poem is to reexamine, without hardness of mind or heart, "moved only by love of country," the cultural and ideological mythology of which the Poet is a radiant symbol (Lourenço, 2010, p. 155).
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> The Portugal-o'Sebastian o'Pessoa is every-one-and-no-one, just as he, Pessoa-o'Sebastian, is no-one-and-every-one, one and the other the "eternal child who is to come," he who dies as particularly national or personal, to be all things to all people, an example of a world and a personality with no limits or end (Lourenço, 1999, p. 91).

To establish an intertextual reading of *Os Lusíadas* (The Lusiads) and *Mensagem* (Message) – two paradigm-poems of Portuguese literature and culture – I first appropriate two critical hypotheses to guide this text and its thematic focus. The first hypothesis comes from Helder Macedo, who, in *Camões e a viagem iniciática* (Camões and the initiatory journey), emphasizes the following about the Camões epic: "it seems possible to affirm that it is Camões himself, and not Vasco da Gama, who embodies the figure of the hero of the initiatory journey recorded in *Os Lusíadas*" (2012, p. 49). As for the second, it comes from Eduardo Lourenço, who, in "Mitologia da saudade" (Mythology of *saudade*), when discussing the figurations of Sebastianism in the history of Portuguese literature, proposes this reflection on Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem*: "the Fifth Empire that [Pessoa] dreams of is a cultural empire. And it is of that empire and no other that he is perhaps himself King Sebastian" (1999, p. 53).

These two critical propositions converge on a hermeneutic territory of singular importance, as they reveal how two Portuguese literary monuments, transcending mere heroic celebration, raise themselves as prime spaces of authorial self-contemplation. If in Camões we witness the metamorphosis of the epic narrator into the Poet who takes the lead on an existential journey that extends beyond the bounds of maritime enterprise, in Pessoa what we see is the transfiguration of the modern poet into a kind of cultural messiah, whose empire is measured not by the leagues of lands conquered but by the symbolic breadth of the verb. Both authors, each in their own way and in their own time, exercise a singular inversion of traditional epic codes: where one might expect to find a collective hero, what emerges is the individual voice of the creator; where one might expect unqualified exaltation, what appears is a critical consciousness that questions the very foundations of the celebratory discourse.

The thematic approach I adopt here revolves primarily around a reflection on Portuguese messianism, which, after Camões, is etched indelibly on the complementary terms of land and sea. Considering also Eduardo Lourenço's proposal, in "Da literatura como interpretação de Portugal" (Literature as an interpretation of Portugal), to interpret *Mensagem* as a poem that, in its own way, establishes an autognosis of the homeland, I seek to intertwine Camões' and Pessoa's voices as respective models of an *inscription* and *reinterpretation* of the mythical-cultural imaginary of the Portuguese-speaking world. This fundamental dichotomy – land versus sea – does not only epitomize a geographical opposition; it can serve as a symbolic wellspring from which Portugal continuously builds and rebuilds its national identity. In *Mensagem*, for example, the sea is a space of transcendence and adventure, the environment where imperial dreams and utopias of greatness are projected. Land, for its part, appears primarily in relation to the counter-discourse of *Os Lusíadas* as the locus of immanence and reflection, a place where critical assessments are performed and necessary "adjustments" of direction are made. These are two poles between which Portuguese thinking switches in a perennial dialectic whose most fascinating expression is arguably found in the verses of Camões and Pessoa.

To write about Portugal without writing about Camões is utterly unthinkable. From a synonym for the struggle for independence of a country under Spanish rule in the late 16th century to the banner of liberal policies in the 19th, from a republican flag in the early 20th century to a dictatorship's propaganda for almost half a century, Camões' epic has been read in different ways and for different purposes. This interpretative malleability, rather than a hermeneutic weakness, reveals the extraordinary capacity of Camões' text to speak to the most diverse of historical settings, offering itself up as a multifaceted mirror onto which each era can

project its concerns and recognize its dilemmas. Such semantic versatility is rooted in the ambiguous nature of the work itself, woven simultaneously of exaltation and melancholia, triumph and disenchantment, imperial certainty and existential doubt. And it is precisely this internal tension that allows the epic to survive the vicissitudes of time, continually renewing its relevance through readings, however biased they may be, that testify to the vitality of the founding text.

Much has been said about Camões' modernity. Indeed, texts of astonishing contemporary relevance as are found in *Os Lusíadas*, in whose lines we hear the epic narrator and the Poet, the song and the counter-song, the exhortation and the lament, leave room for widely varying interpretations of its meaning, sometimes giving rise to slanted interpretations shaped strategically to bolster a particular ideology. It is no coincidence that, shortly before the celebrations marking the 400th anniversary of its publication, Eduardo Lourenço made the following shrewd remark: "It is impossible to celebrate *Os Lusíadas* innocently" (2010, p. 155). Camoes' modernity lies essentially in this ability to articulate multiple voices within the same discourse, composing a sophisticated polyphonic orchestration that foreshadows, centuries in advance, the intricacies of contemporary literature. The traditional epic narrator, univocal and solemn, gives way to a complex of utterances marked by contradictions, inhabited by doubts, capable of celebrating and questioning in a single movement. This structural modernity also reflects a modernity of consciousness: Camões wrote at a time of transition, when the old medieval paradigms were no longer fit for purpose in a reality undergoing such rapid transformations and yet the new Renaissance models were not fully consolidated. In this historical in-between place, the poet forged a hybrid language

that combines epic grandiloquence with lyrical intimacy, narrative objectivity with reflective subjectivity.

Despite the not infrequent criticisms directed by the Poet (identified as Camões himself) towards his degenerate homeland – surrendered to the greed of a bewildered world – through what have come to be known as excursuses, the epic material of *Os Lusíadas* is unquestionably told by an omniscient narrator keen to proclaim in laudatory song the great deeds of the nation. And it is in the first canto of this sui generis epic, which also sought a new language that might estheticize a "grandiloquent and flowing style" (I, 4) in a time marked by reification, that the multifaceted voice of the Poet-Camões is revealed, opening the epic in a haughty tone, with "great and sonorous fury" (I, 5). It is also this very Poet who ends the first canto of his epic in an absolutely elegiac tone, emphasizing the frailty of the human condition. And it is still this Poet who speaks *with* and *to* his homeland, putting himself forward as the voice of experience, for "since on knowledge so much depends, / More in particular the expert knows" (X, 152).

This oscillation in tone, leading the reader from heroic exaltation to elegiac lament in the space of a few stanzas, is one of the most distinctive hallmarks of Camões' genius. He manages to create a unique epic rhythm, alternating moments of exaltation and meditative pauses, celebration and criticism, enthusiasm and disenchantment. This narrative strategy does not merely obey aesthetic imperatives; it responds to a deeper need: to lend poetic form to a historical reality that is itself contradictory, marked simultaneously by extraordinary feats and manifest signs of decadence. The "grandiloquent and flowing style" that Camões aspires to is not just a matter of technique in versification, but an attempt to forge a language that can take account of the complexity

of reality, combining epic solemnity with narrative fluidity, lyrical elevation with historical precision.

In fact, the theme of experience is a recurring topos of Camões' poetry, both epic and lyrical. In *Os Lusíadas*, from the Old Man of Restelo – who endeavors to bring forth a few hoarse words from his wise chest – to the uncouth mariners "whose long experience is their teacher" (V, 17), from the voice that urges King Sebastian to take advice only from the experienced, "for they know / How, when, and where things doth fit" (X, 149), to the Poet who would himself be such an experienced being – "Nor do I in life lack honest study, / With long experience mixed" (X, 154) – Camões repeatedly makes a point of taking a firm stance before the short-sighted eyes of a homeland that lacks sensitivity, which neither knows nor appreciates art, caught up as it is "in the taste of avarice and rudeness / Of a harsh, dull, and dreadful gloom" (X, 145).

In Camões' universe, experience emerges as the only thing capable of validating knowledge and legitimizing discourse. Yet this is no vulgar empiricism, but existential wisdom amassed through suffering and reflection, tempered by pain, and refined by contemplation. The Old Man of Restelo, who epitomizes this wisdom borne of experience, represents not just the voice of conservative prudence, but also a critical conscience that questions the foundations of imperial exploits. His *hoarse words* contrast eloquently with the fiery rhetoric of the supporters of expansion, suggesting that true wisdom is not to be found in easy eloquence, but in carefully considered words, the outcome of lengthy rumination. The mariners, in turn, embody more immediate, practical experience acquired from dealing directly with the elements and the perils of the sea, thus representing the technical knowledge indispensable to the success of the maritime enterprise. Between these two poles – the contemplative experience of the Old Man and

the practical experience of the navigators – lies the experience of the Poet himself: a superior synthesis that combines critical reflection with first-hand knowledge of reality.

Distinguishing himself, to return to the words of Helder Macedo, as the hero of his poem, Camões inscribes, in the verse and reverse of glory, the collective imagination of a nation already in crisis with its maritime enterprise, weaving an epic song that heightens awareness of the impossibility of maintaining the same tone of a *sonorous and warlike horn* (I, 4) throughout its ten cantos. A "sumptuous and mournful echo, a mix of symphony and requiem" (2010, p. 26), in Eduardo Lourenço's now classic formulation, *Os Lusíadas* is the founding text of a country of sailors, of a nation "where the land ends and the sea begins" (III, 20), and where the shadow of a glorious past ends up spreading throughout a degraded present the extemporaneous echoes of a "hypertrophy of national sentiment" (Lourenço, 2010, p. 154).

Eduardo Lourenço's "sumptuous and mournful echo" deftly sums up the constitutive ambiguity of the Camões epic. The adjective *sumptuous* evokes all the work's formal grandeur, its majestic architecture, its sublime language, its ability to celebrate heroic deeds with a pomp worthy of humanity's greatest literary monuments. Meanwhile, the adjective *mournful* points to an elegiac dimension that pervades the whole work, appearing sometimes explicitly in the excursuses, sometimes subtly through a diffuse melancholy that tinges even the moments of highest exaltation. This mournfulness is not merely circumstantial; it is structural, arising from the awareness that all human glory is fleeting, that every empire is destined to fall, that every heroic exploit bears within itself the seeds of its own ruin. The metaphor of the *symphony and requiem* sharpens this interpretation, suggesting that *Os Lusíadas*

simultaneously celebrates and mourns the destiny of Portugal, erecting a monument that is, paradoxically, also a tomb.

Despite Camões' many criticisms of the time in which he was writing, *Os Lusíadas* ultimately etched Portugal with the mythical imagery of an epic existence of a "country on a journey" –to use the phrase coined by José Cardoso Pires – which awaits salvation from "an eternal out-there or far-away-there" (Lourenço, 2010, p. 51). From the Miracle of Ourique to the Siege of Lisbon, from Sebastianism to the Salazar dictatorship, Portugal, a country that, since its foundation as a state, had written its history as one of trauma by killing its mother, albeit while also expressing immense longing for the figure of the father, reiterating over the centuries the imaginary of a messianic culture which, in the context of the great discoveries, had taken on the air of a maritime crusade, converting the figure of the knight errant into that of the knight navigator.

The notion of a *country on a voyage* offers remarkable conceptual precision in characterizing the specific features of the Portuguese condition. Unlike other European nations, which built their identity on settling their territory, Portugal forged its national being through movement, departure, and maritime exploits. Far from merely circumstantial, this supposed "itinerant vocation" perhaps responds to a deep existential need: to escape the geographical constraints of a land by conquering unlimited space. The "eternal out-there or far-away-there" is thus the permanent horizon envisaged by the Portuguese imagination: the utopian territory onto which all hopes for national redemption are projected. This messianic dimension of Portuguese culture flows from a profoundly Christian wellspring whereby history is conceived as a teleological process oriented toward an ultimate goal of salvation. Sebastianism represents the most complete expression of this mindset, transforming military defeat into eschatological promise, historical trauma into mystical hope.

It is with a crusading spirit that the first maritime adventure of the discoveries is pursued. In the wish to expand *faith and empire*, Portugal takes the stance of a chosen nation; a country executing divine will. In *Os Lusíadas*, emphasis is often given to Portugal's diminutive size and meekness – "small Christianity," "small Lusitanian house," "How much, O Christ, you exalt meekness" – as attributes that, conversely, ennoble the nation, turning it and its entire lineage into "a tree of Christ more beloved / Than any born in the West" (I, 7). From the first verse of the Proposition, Camões' epic portrays Portugal and the Portuguese as *marked for greatness*, an idea that is reiterated in the Dedication to King Sebastian, when the Poet reminds the young king of the divine predilection for his homeland, pointing to the national coat of arms, an iconographic inscription commemorating the Miracle of Ourique.

The ideology of divine choice that runs through *Os Lusíadas* is not just a rhetorical topos but reflects a deep conviction that fueled Portuguese expansionism for centuries. The paradoxical exaltation of the nation's smallness – *small Lusitanian house* – as a source of spiritual greatness effects a typically Christian reversal of values, whereby earthly meekness is seen as a sign of heavenly predestination. This rhetoric of ennobling humility allows Camões to reconcile the geographical and demographic reality of Portugal – a small and sparsely populated country – with its grandiose imperial ambitions. Smallness thus becomes not an obstacle, but a guarantee of divine choice, for it is precisely through the meek (the small) that God manifests his glory. The Miracle of Ourique, the founding episode of this national mythology, represents the primordial moment when Portugal receives divine investiture for its historic mission. The national coat of arms, with its five escutcheons evoking the five wounds of Christ, constitutes the heraldic emblem of this

divine choice and an immanent reminder of a pact between Heaven and Lusitanian Earth.

It is clear that King Sebastian, chaste and beardless, is another of those whom the Poet wishes to advise with his *vast experience and honest study*, which we shall not problematize here. What interests me is that, from the evocation of the Miracle of Ourique to the idea of geographical predestination of a space *where the land ends and the sea begins*, from incitement to undertake a new Crusade to the coming disaster at al-Qasr al-Kabir, Camões writes and etches the imaginary of a messianic culture that he himself problematizes. As Helder Macedo points out, "with possibly some debt to the tradition of Joachimite spiritualism, [...] the value of history, for Camões, seems to have more to do with determining the future than with celebrating the past" (2012, p. 49).

Between Camões and Pessoa, in the genealogy of national prophets who have reinvented Portugal through the word, there emerges the singular figure of Father Antônio Vieira, whose baroque messianism in many ways foreshadows Pessoa's concerns. In *História do Futuro* (History of the future), Vieira erects a rhetorical monument of uncommon ambition, proposing to demonstrate, through a scriptural hermeneutics of mathematical rigor, that Portugal was destined by Providence to exercise hegemony over the Fifth Empire of the world. This prophetic architecture's epicenter lies in the audacious proclamation of the resurrection of King John IV, transforming the first monarch of the Bragantine dynasty into a royal Christ whose parousia would restore Portugal to its imperial mission. Vieira thus constructs a political eschatology of heterodox contours, where the resurrection of the restorer of independence is converted into a prefiguration of the advent of the Lusitanian messianic kingdom. The *trovas* of Bandarra – that popular oracle whom the Jesuit subjects to an exegesis of unprecedented theological sophistication –

are transformed, in the hands of the preacher, into almost canonical scripture, whose encrypted enigmas reveal not only the destiny of Portugal, but the designs for the salvation of humanity itself. Through Vieira's hermeneutic mediation, the shoemaker from Trancoso becomes the unwitting prophet of an imperial teleology that makes Lisbon the new Jerusalem and Portugal the chosen instrument for the consummation of time. More than a political prophecy, Vieira's work takes the form of an imperial theodicy, in which Portugal's small geographical size – Camões' "small house" – takes on eschatological greatness. The Jesuit performs a conceptual alchemy similar to that which Pessoa would carry out centuries later: he transforms Sebastianist messianism from superstitious expectation into a rational system for the interpretation of history, making King Sebastian not the monarch who will return, but the symbol of a transcendent vocation that clamors to be actualized. Like the future Pessoa, Vieira places himself at the center of his prophecy, taking on the role of prime interpreter of divine signs and herald of a Golden Age, which would begin in Portugal.

The "Sermon of St. Anthony to the Fish" reveals another facet of Vieira's messianism: social criticism disguised as allegory. Addressing the fish of the sea – in a parodic inversion of St. Anthony's preaching – Vieira constructs a discourse of masterful rhetorical duplicity, simultaneously praising and reviling, exalting and condemning. The fish become an inverted mirror of colonial society, reflecting a depraved humanity, which, like Camões' land, had surrendered to greed and lost its way in fulfilling its imperial vocation. The baroque preacher thus predates Pessoa in his strategy of the failed hero: he celebrates not the victors, but those who, like small fry devoured by big fish, are engulfed by the voracity of a bewildered world. Vieira's irony resonates prophetically in Pessoa's melancholy: both authors understand that Portugal's greatness is measured not by the extent of

the lands it conquered but by the intensity of the spiritual restlessness that led it to dream of impossible empires. Between Camões' sea – with its promise of adventure and discovery – and Pessoa's fog – inhabited by uncertainty and expectation – lies Vieira's ocean: an element that is both real and symbolic, where an imperial utopia is projected that, unattainable though it may already be, still feeds the urge for transcendence that marks the Portuguese soul.

The prophetic architecture of *História do Futuro* nonetheless reveals itself as a hazardously bold theological edifice, for Vieira's elevation of Bandarra's verses to the status of quasi-sacred scripture comes dangerously close to the limits of Catholic orthodoxy. The shoemaker of Trancoso, an illiterate, rustic figure whose popular verses circulated in the humblest circles of Portuguese society, becomes, through Vieira's hermeneutic mediation, an oracle of eschatological truths that would rival the canonical books themselves in authority. This sacralizing of a popular prophecy did not go unnoticed by the agents of the Inquisition, who saw Vieira's exegesis as a disguised form of millenarian heterodoxy. Aware of the dangerous ground he was walking on, Vieira endeavored to show how his interpretations conformed with the official doctrine, but the very fact that he had to do so reveals how borderline his prophetic enterprise was, straddling as it did the uncertain line between divine inspiration and heretical speculation.

Vieira's imprisonment between 1665 and 1667 under the Inquisition is the most dramatic moment of his intellectual career, when the visionary of the Fifth Empire was put in the dock to answer not only for his ideas but also for the very legitimacy of his prophetic vocation. The *Letters* he wrote at this time reveal a man wounded in his sacerdotal dignity but paradoxically strengthened in his messianic conviction by the very persecution he faces. The silence imposed on him by the Holy Office is transformed, in his

conscience, into a providential sign of the truth of his prophecies, for Christ too had been persecuted by the doctors of the law. This transfiguration of suffering into confirmation of his prophetic status allows him to hold onto his faith in Portugal's imperial destiny, even when he is confronted with growing evidence of the nation's decline. His release from prison in 1667 thanks to the intervention of influential protectors represents not only a legal victory but also the symbolic validation of a vocation that adversity itself had purified and consolidated.

In this context, Vieira's intellectual martyrdom acquires a dimension that far transcends the biographical sphere, becoming a paradigm for the conflict inherent to the relationship between prophetic inspiration and institutional power. Vieira becomes a quintessential incarnation of the misunderstood visionary who foresees truths that his peers are not yet ready to accept, thus prefiguring the fate of all those who would dare combine creative genius with speculative audacity. His *História do futuro* – an unfinished but conceptually revolutionary work – remains a testimony to a hermeneutic ambition that sought to decipher the enigmas of Providence through the instruments of theological reason, predating methods of interpretation that would only gain full academic legitimacy centuries later. Between the fire that consumed Giordano Bruno and the dungeons that imprisoned Galileo, Vieira's inquisitorial trial is part of a constellation of episodes that reveal how innovative thinking often pays the price for its own audacity, transforming persecution into a paradoxical confirmation of its historical importance.

The figure of King Sebastian, as he appears in Camões' epic, embodies all the contradictions of Portuguese messianism. Young, inexperienced, driven by anachronistic ideals, the king simultaneously represents the hope of a nation's renewal and the

risk of imminent catastrophe. It is a historical irony that Camões, in dedicating his epic to the king, was simultaneously celebrating and warning, exalting and cautioning. The geographical predestination of which he speaks – a country located at the western limits of Europe on the threshold of the Atlantic Ocean – takes on a value both providential and factual: providential because it paints Portugal as the gateway of Christendom that leads to new worlds; factual because this same geography implies great risk, forcing the nation to undertake excessive endeavors to justify its existence. The Joachimite tradition, which Helder Macedo identifies as a possible influence on Camões' thinking, introduces an eschatological dimension to the interpretation of history, conceiving it not as a simple succession of events but as a process oriented towards the ultimate goal of spiritual redemption.

The future reread *Os Lusíadas* and remarked the failure of the imperialist model. And more so! It remarked the urgency of taking a concrete look at the land in a Garrett whose *Viagens na minha terra* (Travels in my land) flew in the face of a whole epic tradition that favored departure; it remarked a commitment to the future in a Cesário Verde who dared to *spit with contempt into the great sea*, cinematographically contrasting a port taken over by the English merchant navy with the image of an epic of yesteryear, now set in a public, common enclosure, *with lovers' seats and paltry pepper plants*. In its gradual autognosis of the homeland, 19th-century Portugal problematizes the messianic tradition of the ones marked for greatness as it adopts a policy of concrete action rooted in the *work ethic*.

The 19th-century reinterpretation of *Os Lusíadas* operates a radical reversal of perspective, which deserves to be analyzed at depth. If in the omniscience of the narrator's discourse Camões' epic celebrates the idea of Portugal's maritime vocation as its providential destiny,

19th-century writers see in this vocation one of the roots of the nation's ills. Garrett, in his *Viagens*, undertakes a symbolic journey in the opposite direction to that of the 16th-century navigators: instead of setting sail in search of unknown worlds, this romantic writer travels through the interior of Portugal to find a land abandoned, impoverished, and forgotten by its own descendants. This inversion of the traditional route is highly symbolic: it represents the realization that the nation's greatness cannot be built at the expense of the homeland. Cesário Verde takes this criticism of the maritime myth even further, desacralizing the traditional images of the epic with iconoclastic sarcasm. By *spitting with contempt into the great sea*, he breaks away from whole literary and cultural tradition that idealizes the seafaring element. The cinematic contrast between the contemporary port, dominated by the foreign merchant navy, and the statue of Camões, relegated to a common public space, symbolizes the decline of the epic ideal in a bourgeois, prosaic society.

In fact, in the reformist and revolutionary context of the 19th century, the autognosis of Portugal – a country that lived off the memory of past glories – presupposed reassessing the cultural mythology of a land that had proudly established itself as an *eternal port of departure*. Proclaiming the bankruptcy of the notion of the river-sea-ocean and, above all, of the homeland as a *country of mariners*, Portugal diverged from the movement institutionalized since the age of discovery to turn its gaze in on its own land. In a way, what happened was the emergence of an awareness, or rather, the urge to *write the land*, which had to be reread, plowed, worked, and so forth.

The metaphor of the *eternal port of departure* eloquently sums up the essence of the Portuguese condition as it crystallized over the centuries. Other European countries built their national identities on the value they placed on their own land, their home-grown culture, their local traditions; meanwhile, Portugal

forged its collective imagination on a denial of the national space, conceived not as an end in itself but as a starting point for overseas adventures. This port-of-departure mindset had a profound impact on the structure of Portuguese society: a wayfaring aristocracy that eschewed gainful employment, a rural population left to fend for itself, and an economy dependent on colonial resources. As the 19th century progressed and Portugal faced the progressive loss of its empire and dwindling economic prospects in comparison with its European peers, it was forced to radically rethink this cultural heritage. The imperative to write its land thus reflected a concrete historical necessity: to rediscover and revalue the national territory no longer as a port of departure but as a space of life and work, a homeland to be built and not just celebrated.

Indeed, much of Portugal's 19th-century literature seems to envisage the potential of the workforce as a means of civilization. Garrett decides to travel lucidly through his land, indicating the decline of the sea through his rejection of an economic model that depended on plundering of the riches of others and ultimately fostered a parasitic culture in Portugal; Herculano, delving into the historical past, clearly invests in recuperating the imaginary of a Middle Ages whose labor was still engaged primarily in working the land; Camilo, with all his irony, mocks both the old and the new Portugal, portraying urban life in Lisbon – this would-be metonym for modernity and civilization – as a perverted, anachronistic extension of the medieval fiefdom, which, even in the 19th century, continued to privilege an aristocracy for whom living off rents was worthy of praise and something to which even the working classes aspired; Antero de Quental relates the causes of the decline of the Iberian peoples to Overseas Expansion, Absolutism, and the Counter-Reformation, which, together, prevented the development of a middle class in Portugal or, in other words, a significant workforce;

Cesário Verde seeks to "play down the monumentalization of the past in the present" (Silveira, 2003, p. 162), seeing work as a force for good: from the laborers who worked the land to the *goodly and honest smell of bread in the oven*, from the blacksmith who *wields a red-hot hammer* to the fisherwoman who toils barefoot unloading coal, in Cesário Verde's poetry labor seems to be one big bet on the future; and finally, Eça de Queirós depicts a bourgeois aristocracy that, even with access to all the resources it needs to do its work, refuses to carry it out, bemoaning with a heavy heart that it has *failed in life*.

This convergence of voices around the value of work as a regenerative force for the nation is not just a literary fad, but reflects a fundamental historical awareness. The generations of the 1800s understand that Portugal's decline is essentially rooted in its inability to create a productive economy based on national labor. The imperial model, based on exploiting colonial resources and importing foreign wealth, generated a rentier mentality that contaminated every class of society. Even the emerging bourgeoisie preferred to invest their capital in speculative ventures or government bonds rather than backing industrial or agricultural development, thus perpetuating the parasitic mindset decried by contemporary writers. The irony Camilo employs to ridicule both traditional Portugal and supposedly modern Portugal reveals how old mental structures outlived superficial transformations, keeping the country mired in outdated thinking. Anterian's analysis of the causes of the decline of the Iberian peoples has a sociological value that goes far beyond the literary sphere, pinpointing the structural factors that prevented Portugal's economic and social modernization. Cesário Verde's poetry, in turn, celebrates not only abstract work, but above all concrete, physical, manual labor: the kind of work that can effectively transform a material reality and create real wealth.

However, Fernando Pessoa has a very different position in *Mensagem*, a work in which he reiterates the tradition of Joachimite spiritualism by mythically and mystically reviving the voices of Camões, Bandarra, and Vieira. The intertextual relationship between *Os Lusíadas* and *Mensagem* is one that has been visited and revisited by literary critics. Even the epigraph of Pessoa's poem – *Benedictus Dominus Deus noster qui dedit nobis signum* – points to the exercise of intertextuality by an author who, aspiring to a supra-Camões status, reread the great bard as a model to be assimilated and, above all, surpassed.

The Latin epigraph of *Mensagem* – Blessed be the Lord our God who gave us the sign – immediately establishes a direct connection with the Portuguese messianic tradition, simultaneously evoking the Miracle of Ourique and Sebastianist expectation. By choosing this phrase as the gateway to his work, Pessoa deliberately inscribes his own name in the lineage of the nation's prophets as an interpreter of the divine signs that point to Portugal's exceptional destiny. The reference to the *sign* is particularly symbolic, as it refers not only to the wonders of the past, but also to signs of the future, suggesting that Portuguese history unfolds through a succession of providential signs that only the chosen few can decipher. His wish to raise himself as a supra-Camões is not merely a reflection of personal megalomania, but a response to a concrete historical need: to recreate for the 20th century what Camões had created for the 16th century, that is, a poetic synthesis capable of giving form and meaning to the national experience. Just as Camões wrote the epic of the discoveries, Pessoa aspires to writing the epic-lyrical[1] of the Fifth Empire, transferring Portuguese messianism from the

[1] Concept developed by Cleonice Berardinelli.

material to the spiritual plane, from territorial conquest to cultural conquest.

In his Camõesesque revival of the messianic tradition of those marked for greatness, Pessoa is nevertheless interested in writing a history of failed heroes, of those "who went down in history not for winning, but for enduring, not for glory, but for sacrifice" (Berardinelli, 2000, p. 132). In the poems dedicated to the field of the Castles, this creator of heteronyms reconsecrates a series of victoriously emblematic figures from the Burgundy and Avis dynasties, reinterpreting them under the aegis of mythical transcendentalism. However, it is above all the heroes of the Quinas, heroes of endurance and not of action, that Pessoa seeks to give voice to. It is clear that Pessoa's decision to foreground historical failures is not in any way a case of writing *history against the grain* in the Benjaminian sense. Proclaiming the aristocracy of modern art, he wants to highlight – in the etymological sense of *marking with a sign* – those noblemen who failed in their attempts to realize their radical desire to fulfill a great dream. Of these fallen heroes, he sees King Sebastian as the greatest paradigm to be rethought.

The genealogy of failed heroes that Pessoa constructs in *Mensagem* reveals a profoundly original understanding of Portuguese history. By prioritizing figures who failed –in the conventional sense of not having achieved their immediate goals – he radically reverses the traditional criteria used to judge history. In Pessoa's world, failure becomes a criterion for spiritual greatness, for it is precisely through material failure that the authenticity of the transcendent ambition is revealed. Dom Pedro, who died before seeing his dreams came true; Dom Fernando, who perished in captivity in Morocco; Dom Duarte, who faced the contradictions of a brief and troubled reign: in Pessoa's reinterpretation, all these figures acquire a dignity that surpasses that of the conventional hero. In this way, their failure

becomes a sign of a greatness that transcends earthly measures, bringing them closer to the condition of Christian martyrs whose loss of temporal life earns them eternal life. This appreciation of failure as a mark of spiritual choice is rooted in an aristocratic conception of existence that sees the successful, satisfied masses as an inferior form of humanity, reserving true nobility for those who, driven by absolute ideals, pursue impossible undertakings.

In the poem dedicated to the theme of the Fifth Empire, Pessoa attempts to subvert the nation's smallness by means of the Atlantic grandeur of its designs, which are both transcendental and cosmopolitan. Picking up on the image of the *house*, a word that, despite the grandeur of Camões' epic, over time became embedded in the imagery of a proud and humble provincial country as the *small Lusitanian house*, Pessoa defies this image by associating the house with the opposite of the dream: with a contentment that imprisons.

It should be noted that Pessoa's resignification of the concept of *house* operates a radical subversion of the traditional values of Portuguese culture. If Camões' house represented Christian humility as a source of divine choice, Pessoa's symbolized bourgeois mediocrity as an obstacle to spiritual transcendence. This inversion is not merely rhetorical; it reflects a profound change in the conception of the nation's destiny. For Camões, Portugal's material smallness was an argument in favor of its spiritual greatness; for Pessoa, that same smallness runs the risk of turning into narrow-mindedness and provincial conformism. The *Atlantic grandeur* of Pessoa's designs are not measured by leagues of ocean sailed or lands conquered, but by the breadth of cultural vision and the depth of artistic creation. The Fifth Empire is not a political project in the traditional sense, but an aesthetic utopia that would have Portugal be the radiating hub of a new spiritual civilization. The

transcendental and cosmopolitan nature of this project reveals how Pessoa intended to reconcile national particularism with cultural universalism, making Portugal not just one of many nations, but the actual laboratory for a future humanity.

> Sad is he who lives at home,
> Contented with his lot,
> With no dream, no wing of fancy,
> To light the ruby embers
> Of the forsaken hearth!
>
> Sad is he who is of good cheer!
> He lives because life lasts.
> His soul, no word it speaks
> Beyond the lesson of the root –
> To live life as a grave.
>
> Eras upon eras mount up
> In the time that comes in eras.
> To be discontent is to be human.
> May blind forces be quelled
> By the vision of the soul!
> (Pessoa, 2008, p. 108).

Indeed, the contented home, home sweet home, is the most legitimate definition of the security and comfort of petty bourgeois life, organized according to overly rational parameters, with clearly defined boundaries, envisaging meager achievements and immediate profits. This complacent and unenterprising being, who has no *fever from beyond*, is in Pessoa an oblivious wretch, a being who experiences no creative angst, whose soul is not lit by the flame of desire, who is untouched by the beauty of dreams. Dead in life,

dreamless man is no more than a parasite that just consumes, a simple plant that just drains energy from the earth.

The polarization Pessoa sets up between domestic contentment and creative restlessness echoes the great dichotomies of existential philosophy, foreshadowing themes that would later be developed by thinkers such as Heidegger and Sartre. This is why *home* emerges as a symbol of a false existence, a way of life that does no more than mechanically reproduce set social patterns without questioning the deeper meaning of existence. The *forsaken hearth* epitomizes not only material comfort, but an entire worldview based on security and predictability – values Pessoa considers antithetical to true spiritual life. The figure of the *happy man* – paradoxically characterized as *sad* – embodies the type of human being that Nietzsche would classify as the *last man*: a man who has renounced all lofty ideals in exchange for a comfortable but mediocre existence. The metaphor of the *lesson of the root* suggests a plantlike way of life, with the human being doing no more than extracting from the environment whatever resources they need for their biological survival, without aspiring to any form of transcendence. *To be discontent is to be human* is thus one of the most refined formulations of Pessoa's philosophy, defining perpetual dissatisfaction as the hallmark of authentic humanness.

The flipside of barren complacency is the man driven by restlessness, whose soul harbors the spark of transformative fire, a flame that ignites and rises with the beating of the wings of dreams, catalyzing the metamorphosis of sterile, garrulous reality. Discontented, the dreamer is the epitome of the man who transcends his limits, for all significant figures in history have been those who, anguished, restless, nonconformist, irreverent, and unswayed by obvious common sense, have launched themselves into incredible, larger-than-life enterprises, through which, defying the incredulity

of all the naysayers, they unveiled horizons never before imagined. Guided by the vision of the soul or, one might say, of dreams, the discontented subject manages to overcome what before seemed to him to be only a fog-shrouded distance, discovering on his way symbolic *corals, beaches, and groves* and thus revealing somewhere *where there was seemingly nothing in the distance*.

Pessoa's phenomenology of discontent has ramifications that extend far beyond the merely psychological realm, touching on the ontological roots of the human condition. The transformative fire of which he speaks is not just a poetic metaphor, but points to a concrete spiritual reality: the human capacity to transcend the determinations of the environment through the creative force of imagination. The extraordinary, megalomaniacal enterprises of the great men of history should be understood not only in the literal sense, but also as manifestations of a fundamental metaphysical ambition that drives the human being to constantly surpass the limits of possibility. In Pessoa's system, the vision of the soul constitutes a form of knowledge that is superior to discursive reason, drawing closer to mystical intuition or artistic inspiration. It is through this vision that the dreamer is able to foresee as yet nonexistent realities, discovering symbolic *corals, beaches, and groves* where others see only void or impossibility. The metaphor of the journey, which runs through this entire development, forges a symbolic bridge with the Portuguese epic tradition, but transfigures the meaning of maritime adventure: it is no longer a question of discovering physical lands, but of exploring uncharted spiritual territories.

Cognizant of Portugal's decline, Pessoa attempted to rewrite his homeland through the lens of a critical Sebastianism, albeit through transcendent means. In his *Mensagem* to his compatriots, he questions them in an evocative tone: "Who will come to live the truth / That King Sebastian is dead?" (2008, p. 108). Now, whether or not Pessoa is "a mystical nationalist, a rational Sebastianist" (2005,

p. 93), as he defined himself, the only affirmation contained in his discourse is that the last king of the Avis dynasty is dead and will not return. Pessoa's mystical-utopian nationalism, his declared Sebastianism, consists – in another sense – in valuing the attitude of he who failed as he attempted to give flight to a great dream. A figure touched by the *fever from beyond*, in Pessoa's eyes the king becomes a hero not of action, but of endurance. This is his symbolic Sebastianism. For the author of *Mensagem*, Sebastian is the very metaphor of the dream, representing not passive waiting, not the promise of the return of a Messiah who would miraculously restore the glory of the homeland, but a national myth that needed to be reviewed. In Pessoa's interpretation, the dead king lives on as a collective memory in the heart of Portugal, and it is his dream of greatness, his discontent, his restlessness in the face of an overwhelming reality, that the homeland should take up as an example of a different kind of madness: that of the malcontent, of he who dares dream big.

The dialectic between death and resurrection that presides over Pessoa's Sebastianism reveals a sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms through which national myths are perpetuated and renewed. By stating categorically that King Sebastian is dead and will not return, Pessoa unshackles the Sebastianist myth from its naive literalness and elevates it to the symbolic plane. It is an operation of demystification that is simultaneously an operation of remystification: the myth as a superstitious belief is destroyed so that it can be recreated as an operative symbol. The rational Sebastianism of which the poet speaks consists precisely in this ability to use the psychic energy of the myth without adopting its fantastical dimension. The *fever from beyond* that marks the king is not only an individual biographical trait, but an anthropological constant that defines the specific nature of the Portuguese man.

This fever is manifested historically in different forms – maritime expansionism in the 16th century, Sebastianist messianism in the 17th and 18th centuries, cultural nationalism in the 20th century – but always retains the same essential structure: the rejection of present mediocrity in the name of future greatness. From Pessoa's perspective, the madness of the malcontent is the hallmark of historical creativity: what sets creative nations apart from those that are merely copycats.

It is no coincidence that Pessoa ends his *Mensagem* with "Nevoeiro" (Fog), a poem depicting his contemporary Portugal as a kind of in-between place, a land *without king or law, without peace or war*, where sparks of past glory still flicker, but where a decadent present spreads a dull light that no longer flares up, like a faltering will-o'-the-wisp. The only way this ambivalent situation could be overcome was if a strong wind rose up, scattering the clouds of fog. In other words, it was time to stop waiting for the miraculous return of King Sebastian, to stop just watching ships, and to embark on a new grandiose project, whether artistic or of any other transcendent nature: "And once again let us conquer the Distance - / Of the sea or elsewhere, but let it be ours!" (2008, p. 100), says Pessoa in "Prece" (Prayer). It is, therefore through dreams and what they represent in showing a potential symbolic path of metamorphosis that Pessoa reinterprets the Sebastian myth in his own very personal way.

The final "Fog" of *Mensagem* does not refer only to the Myth of the Hidden One; rather, it refers to an existential category that defines the Portuguese condition at the crossroads of the 20th century. This fog has a particular ontological density, as it obscures not only the physical landscape, but the very foundations of the nation's identity. Portugal appears as a country suspended between memory and expectation, between a glorious past that it can no longer actualize and a promising future that it cannot yet realize. The absence of

king and *law* suggests an institutional and moral void that goes far beyond the political dimension, pointing to a deeper crisis of collective values and references. The *dull light* of Portugal's present evokes the image of a civilization in decline, which still retains some traces of splendor but has lost its capacity for self-renewal. The will-o'-the-wisp – deceptive lights that lead wayfarers astray – symbolizes the illusions that still feed the national consciousness, preventing it from seeing the present reality clearly. The hope for a strong wind reflects the expectation of a radical regeneration capable of dispelling once and for all the mists that surround Portugal's destiny. The imperative *let us conquer Distance* reveals how Pessoa transposes Portugal's ancient expansionist vocation to the cultural and spiritual planes, converting geographical conquest into symbolic conquest.

Faced with the diminished status of Portugal in his day, Camões raises himself as the great hero of his epic; faced with the opacity of a homeland shrouded in fog, Pessoa raises himself as a symbolic King Sebastian, who would be responsible for elevating Portugal through the greatness and brilliance of art. Both poets, each in their own time and their own way, embody the figure of the creator who sets out to recreate the homeland through the poetic word. In Camões, this ambition is manifested through the construction of an epic monument that perpetuates the memory of Portugal's achievements; in Pessoa, it is revealed through the creation of a cultural mythology that reawakens the national imaginary. The parallels between the two figures are not merely circumstantial but respond to a structural need of Portuguese culture: to periodically find poet-prophets capable of reinterpreting the nation's destiny and proposing new horizons of meaning. This prophetic function of *poiesis*, in the etymological sense of the act of creation, is rooted, especially in Pessoa's case, in a sacerdotal conception of art that sees

the poet not only as a craftsman of verse, but as an interpreter of the signs of the times and a visionary of the future. In very different ways, both Camões and Pessoa take on this messianic vocation. The fundamental difference between the two lies in the nature of the project they propose: while Camões – despite his counter-discourse – still dreams of a renewal of maritime and imperial exploits, Pessoa aspires to a spiritual transmutation that will make Portugal the cradle of a new form of planetary consciousness. In both cases, however, poetry emerges as a prime instrument of national transformation, capable of achieving through symbolic means what political action has failed to achieve directly.

Ultimately, what this convergence of the two great monuments of Portuguese literature reveals is the perpetuation of a deep cultural wellspring that spans the centuries without losing its relevance. Far from being a mere historical curiosity, Portuguese messianism is an anthropological constant that is manifested in different forms depending on the times and circumstances. From Camões to Pessoa via the prophetic mediation of Vieira – whose messianic baroque transforms imperial theodicy into a hermeneutic system of interpreting history – as well as multiple 19th-century reinterpretations, the Portuguese collective imagination reveals a surprising capacity for renewal while preserving itself, transforming itself while maintaining its essential identity. Between Camões' epic and Pessoa's lyricism, the 17th-century Jesuit operates a conceptual alchemy that converts Sebastianist expectation into prophetic rationalization, foreshadowing the strategy by which the author of *Mensagem* will make historical melancholy a subject of poetic transcendence. This dialectic between continuity and change, between tradition and innovation, between fidelity to the past and openness to the future, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of Portuguese culture, and what allows it to survive the most serious

crises without losing its essence. *Os Lusíadas* and *Mensagem*, mediated by Vieira's prophetic architecture, offer us not only an overview of the evolution of Portuguese literature, but perhaps a hermeneutic key to understanding the mechanisms through which a small nation managed to create one of the richest and most original cultural traditions on the periphery of Europe.

Vieira's alignment with the Joachimite tradition, while never explicitly assumed, is revealed through a cluster of textual and conceptual clues that bring him closer to the trichotomous view of history elaborated by the Calabrian abbot in the 12th century. Just as Joachim of Fiore had prophesied the arrival of an Age of the Holy Spirit that would succeed the ages of the Father and the Son, Vieira announces the advent of a Fifth Empire, to represent the earthly consummation of the kingdom of God, giving Portugal the role of providential instrument of this final transfiguration of human history. This eschatological perspective, which sees in the succession of earthly empires a gradual unfolding of the divine plan of salvation, builds a conceptual bridge between medieval Joachimite messianism and the messianic nationalisms of modernity, of which Portuguese Sebastianism is one of the most complete examples. Vieira's originality lies in his ability to update this ancient prophetic tradition through a sophisticated scriptural hermeneutics that turns Bandarra's folk verse into a kind of Lusitanian Apocalypse, revealing the ultimate secrets of history. It is precisely this articulation between theological erudition and popular inspiration that makes Vieira a fitting link between the Camões epic – still marked by the ideals of medieval Christian chivalry – and the lyric poetry of Pessoa, already oriented towards a spiritualized conception of the nation's mission.

The hermeneutic triangle formed by Camões, Vieira, and Pessoa thus reveals an unbroken underground source at a far deeper level than all the differences in era, style, and literary genre, manifesting

the continuation of a Joachimite cultural wellspring running secretly throughout the history of Portuguese consciousness. While Camões still celebrates the navigating knights who spread *faith and empire* across *seas never before sailed*, Vieira transfigures these same mariners into unconscious precursors of a spiritual empire that will make Lisbon the new Jerusalem on Earth, while Pessoa finally sublimates both visions into a cultural utopia that converts national messianism into an aesthetic program of planetary scope. This evolution – from Camões' territorial empire to Vieira's spiritual empire and Pessoa's cultural empire – bears witness to a progressive spiritualization of Portugal's messianic ideal, which, retaining its galvanizing force, is gradually transferred from the political/military plane to the mystical/poetic plane. The Joachimite tradition thus provides the theological substrate for us to understand this secular metamorphosis, revealing how the Portuguese dream of an exceptional destiny is nourished by doctrinal sources that are far older and deeper than a superficial analysis might suggest, rooted in a providentialist conception of history that makes each era a preparation for the next and each chosen people an instrument of the progressive revelation of the absolute.

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Short bio

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