Ana Luísa Amaral: *The Art of Being a Tiger: Poems*. Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Introduction by Paulo de Medeiros. Pp. 178. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. Pb. £19.99.

In February 2017, I was fortunate enough to attend a bilingual reading of selected poetry by Ana Luísa Amaral, presented by the author herself and her translator, Margaret Jull Costa. The impression created was one of collaboration and partnership; one feels that translation, in this case, is a two-way street, with Amaral’s creativity informed as much by the process of translation as Costa’s work is by the poetry itself. That sense of creative reciprocity, mutual benefit, and shared process is reflected in this volume under review, the first published anthology of Amaral’s poetry translated from the original Portuguese into English. In addition to providing Amaral’s readership with the long-awaited opportunity to make her work accessible to an anglophone public – it is already available to speakers of Dutch, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish – the anthology stands out as one of very few bilingual Portuguese/English poetry collections widely available in the UK. The decision to publish the edition bilingually is to be commended, and will no doubt make the book a valuable resource for educators in Portuguese language, literature, and translation, as well as for scholars and enthusiasts of literature and women’s writing more broadly.

Included in the volume are the Portuguese originals and English translations of selected poems from throughout Amaral’s literary career, first featured in the collections *Minha senhora de quê* (1990), *Coisas de partir* (1993), *Às vezes o paraíso* (1998), *Imagias* (2001), *A arte de ser tigre* (2003), *A génese do amor* (2005), *Entre dois rios e outras noites* (2007), *Se fosse um intervalo* (2009), *Vozes* (2011), *Escuro* (2014), and *E todavia* (2015), in addition to the hitherto unpublished piece ‘Matar é fácil’ (‘Murder is easy’). Introducing the volume is a rigorous, in-depth foreword by Paulo de Medeiros, which elegantly locates the poems in the complex socio-historical context of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Portugal, while also speaking to the wider diversity of literary and political traditions that have informed Amaral’s career. As de Medeiros himself explains, Amaral ‘constantly addresses, subverts, and continues the hallowed tradition of Portuguese poetry’ but is ‘not confined to it, engaging fully with many forms of poetry, especially from Europe and the Americas’.

This plurality of influences and affinities is perhaps unsurprising, given that Amaral is an accomplished literary critic, translator, and editor herself, most notably of work by fellow women writers; her doctoral studies focused on Emily Dickinson, and she has been a prolific and dedicated translator of Dickinson’s poetry into Portuguese. In 2014 Amaral undertook the mammoth task – and, no doubt, labour of love – of bringing into print a painstakingly annotated new edition of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters*), the groundbreaking 1972 text penned by three Portuguese women writers – Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa, known collectively as the ‘Three Marias’ – under the restrictive grind of right-wing dictatorship. Banned by that regime for its ‘pornographic’ content, the volume was republished after the dictatorship’s collapse, and then left to fall out of print. The influence on Amaral of both Dickinson and the ‘Three Marias’ – very different women tied together by the genealogical threads of feminist literary tradition –is woven throughout her poetry, exemplifying her ability at once to synthesize and create anew. Her subtle but insistent invocation of this long, and all-too-often suppressed, tradition of women’s writing is particularly evident in her frequent use of the delicate details of everyday domesticity as framing devices for her poetic reflections. Consider, for example, one of Amaral’s earliest published poems, ‘Testamento’, in which fear of flying provokes the urgent declaration alluded to by the title:

Se eu morrer

quero que a minha filha não se esqueça de mim

que alguém lhe cante mesmo com voz desafinada

e que lhe ofereçam fantasia

mais que um horário certo

ou uma cama bem feita

Dêem-lhe amor e ver

dentro das coisas

sonhar com sóis azuis e céus brilhantes

em vez de lhe ensinarem contas de somar

e a descascar batatas

If I should die

I want my daughter always to remember me

for someone to sing to her even if they can’t hold a tune

to offer her pure dreams

rather than a fixed timetable

or a well-made bed

To give her love and the ability

to look inside things

to dream of blue suns and brilliant skies

instead of teaching her how to add up

and how to peel potatoes

It is this seamless interweaving of the everyday and the dreamlike, the tangible familiarity of the domestic and the abstract drive toward breaking with it, that grounds Amaral’s work most clearly within feminist poetic tradition, bringing to mind the early work of Adrienne Rich in addition to the above-mentioned literary forebears.

Continuing to draw together disparate poetic threads and latent political meanings, ‘Lugares Comuns’ (‘Common Places’), from the 1993 collection *Coisas de Partir* (*Breakable Things*), also provides a compelling example of Costa’s inspired translation, showcasing her ability to capture the affective feel of a poem in addition to its linguistic nuances. It epitomizes, moreover, the powers of cultural translation possessed both by Costa and by Amaral herself, as the poet describes her parallel feelings of alienation and familiarity upon entering a London café:

Entrei em Londres

num café manhoso, pior ainda que um nosso bar

de praia (isto é só para quem não sabe

fazer uma pequena ideia do que eles por lá têm) era

mesmo muito manhoso,

não é que fosse mal intencionado, era manhoso

na nossa gíria, muito cheio de tapumes e de cozinha

suja. Muito rasca.

Claro que os meus preconceitos todos

de mulher me vieram ao de cima, porque o café

só tinha homens a comer bacon e ovos e tomate

(se fosse em Portugal era sandes de queijo),

mas pensei: Estou em Londres, estou

sozinha, quero lá saber dos homens, os ingleses

até nem se metem com os nossos,

e por aí fora…

In London I went

into a greasy spoon, worse even than one of our

beach bars (I say this for those who cannot even

imagine the things they have there), it was

a proper greasy spoon,

not that it was a spoon, of course, but it was greasy

in the sense that it was full of clutter and greasy

food. Really low class.

Of course, all my female prejudices

came to the fore, because the café

was full of men eating eggs and bacon and tomatoes

(in Portugal it would be cheese sandwiches),

but I thought: I’m in London, I’m

alone, what do I care about men, Englishmen

don’t bother you the way Portuguese men do,

and so on…

The interplay here between Amaral’s ‘café manhoso’ and Costa’s ‘greasy spoon’, between the English ‘eggs and bacon and tomatoes’ and the Portuguese ‘cheese sandwiches’ captures in characteristically unpretentious fashion the skill of author and translator in evoking culturally idiomatic spaces and moods, while at the same time underlining specific moments of encounter and exchange.

While Costa is particularly adept at bringing into English these moments sought by Amaral, of beauty and significance amidst the superficially prosaic, she is no less at home with the more consciously referential pieces taken from volumes such as the eponymous *A arte de ser tigre* (2003), whose poems use the unifying trope of the tiger to invoke classical and modern poetic traditions alike. Here, Costa’s skill is found in her ability to recreate the texture and density of Amaral’s restrained and aphoristic Portuguese, saturating each word and truncated line with meaning. Her rendering of ‘Arte segunda’ (‘Second Art’) succinctly exemplifies this linguistic dexterity:

Há feridas tão ferozes,

tão de nuvem rasante

em tempestade,

que a solução:

voraz

There are wounds so cruel

so like low clouds

in a storm,

that the solution:

all-devouring

Costa’s choice of ‘wounds so cruel’ in the first line of this second stanza both captures the assonance of Amaral’s ‘feridas tão ferozes’, and anticipates the similarly closed sounds of ‘low clouds’, ‘storm’, and ‘all-devouring’ in the following lines, mirroring and reworking the echoes created by Amaral’s use of open ‘e’ and ‘a’ sounds in the original. Costa’s sensitivity to detail is evident throughout the volume, but it is these more minimal poems that allow her meticulousness to shine through most.

Amaral’s poetry possesses an intimacy that grants it a sense of timelessness. Yet there are also several poems included in this volume that speak clearly to the moment we find ourselves in today. Perhaps the most lucid example of this timeliness, particularly for those of us embroiled in current debates around the foundations, value, and legacy of the European Union, are ‘Europa (Poema 1)’, and the subsequent ‘Europa (Poema 2)’. These sister-poems force their reader to acknowledge the people and nations neglected, damaged, or destroyed in the wake of the European project: the ‘mortos | por múltiplos disfarces: química luz, | os lumes tão reais, os nomes amputados | pelos números, mesas de número fartas’ (‘people murdered | by multiple disguises: chemical light, | blazing fires, names amputated | by numbers, tables crammed with numbers’). This sense of bleakness reflects Portugal’s present position in relation to Europe, at the ‘semi-periphery’ as Portuguese critical theory would have it – and yet it also calls into question the humanity of the political establishment as a whole, its moral obligation to the masses on whom it relies. The translation of literature that carries such messages, in order that it might spark and deepen dialogue across geographic and linguistic borders, is today as urgent as ever. There are few examples as compelling as that of this volume.

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