

THE CRITIQUE OF HISTORY
IN LÍDIA JORGE'S
A COSTA DOS MURMÚRIOS,
OR HELEN OF BEIRA MEETS
LUÍS OF TROY

Ronald W. Sousa

Set in the coastal city of Beira in the colonial Mozambique of, likely, the 1960's, Lídia Jorge's novel *A Costa dos Murmúrios* (1988; English: *The Murmuring Coast* [1995]) is presented in the form of first a "logical" narrative, entitled "The Locusts," written by an unnamed author and purporting to relate a series of self-evident events, and then a much longer series of associatively-linked reminiscences engaged in, years after the fact(s), by one of the events' participants, Eva Lopo (at the time of the events, significantly, "Evita"). Those reminiscences are related to author of "The Locusts" after Eva has had the opportunity to read that narrative. The process of reminiscence ends with Eva handing "The Locusts" back to its writer with a negative shake of her head: her process of recollection has in multiple ways problematized not only the content of that narrative but also, quite obviously, the very possibility that such narration might pretend to authoritativeness.

Criticism written on *Costa* has uniformly seen the interaction between its two constituent parts and the gesture of negation in the text's concluding pages as a composite critique of traditional history: critique, that is, of the notion that there somehow is a single "history" to be revealed.¹ Several studies also delve into the implications that this "theoretical reflection on the status of "history" (Ferreira 271) might have for the problematics surrounding the 1974 revolution in Portugal, with its ending of a regime intimately bound up with a specific view of [national] history and its supposed entailments, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical silences that that history itself enforced (Ferreira, Kaufman).

What I shall be doing in the ensuing pages is to approach one aspect that this preliminary overview suggests, one having to do with the operativity and related social power of historical narration. I shall treat the questions there involved as, in my reading of it, *Costa* thematizes them--and shall do so in the form of a combination of allusive reading and analytical meditation, rather than formal criticism. My only major enabling presumption perhaps not readily apparent is that I presume

in *Costa* a coherence in analysis--imaginative though it may be--of the social symbolic of Portuguese culture both in the time to which the novel refers and also in the post-1974 era, up to the date of the novel's composition. For reasons that will, I hope, become clear presently, my efforts will focus on two of the two narratives' principal characters--looked to not for purposes of narrative analysis but rather in connection with the role regarding the functionality of narration itself that they play.

Let us, however, first set the scene by looking at them in something like conventional character terms. Helen of Troy, beautiful wife of Captain Jaime Forza Leal (yes, all the names can have much made of them!), is ironically oblivious to the implications of her nickname--the only name through which the reader knows her. Circumscribed to a great extent within the sphere of consideration of her own appearance, emotions, pleasure-pain reactions, and the immediate conclusions that she can draw from such, she clearly evidences to Evita lack of awareness that she is, within the version of the symbolic system of Portuguese national culture adduced by the apologists for the Colonial Wars, the "face [or, rather, body] that launched a thousand ships." Or, at least, she is unaware of that assignment as regards the discourses from which it comes, ones repeatedly adduced in her world to justify what she sees every day: in the rarified culture of the military, possession of the female body is the ratification of a phallogocentric symbolic economy, with all of the authoritativeness that it arrogates to itself. Helen, however, exhibits a conspicuous lack of understanding of the details and overall goals of the military events surrounding her. For her, the war has largely personal implications: she is emotionally absorbed in the matter of her husband's welfare. Indeed, when he is away in battle she spends great amounts of time thinking in detail about the perils he is facing and about his chances for survival. She even goes through elaborate pseudo-statistical processes, using the army's working estimates of likely casualty rates in what is, mathematically speaking, a "magical" process using numbers, to try to determine his chances. We, as readers, are unaware until toward the end of the book that we are facing an ambiguity in those actions, for it suddenly becomes clear that she is wishing for, even, in her own style, calculating odds on, Jaime's death, not his survival. Helen, then, is un-self-consciously resistant to the logic of the war. "The face that launched a thousand ships" is, then, an ironic (but not self-ironic)

figure, for her actions suggest (literally) *anything but*--perhaps better, *something other than*--agreement with the language justificatory of the armed conflict. Indeed, if the generalizing implications of the Homeric echoes mean anything in this context, they suggest not only that woman has been at one and the same time the symbolic pretext and symbolic prize of Western man's battles--which has been observed often enough--but also that she may, in the process, be seen as having occupied a wholly different space from that of those battles.

Now for her opposite number, Lieutenant Luís Alexandre, or Luís Alex, who stands in stark contrast to Helen. He is Evita's new husband--indeed, "The Locusts" begins with Evita's arrival in Beira and their military wedding and barracks honeymoon. There is a sense, however, in which Luís is Jaime Forza Leal's real "helpmeet," playing in earnest the role of supporter and admirer of his Captain that Helen merely grotesques (functionally speaking) when Jaime is present and then by and large abandons the moment he is away. In effect, Luís Alex plays the role of true believer in, first and foremost, the glory of war itself and, second, specifically the justification of the Portuguese colonial war in Mozambique. In some respects, he is a convert to his role, having entered the army to serve his military obligation after running across an impasse in his university studies. There is the sense that Luís's dedication to his role as a soldier is the newest version of his dedication to mathematics while he was a student, where too a pursuit of personal glory seemed to drive him to overinvestment in a single issue. In his role as true believer, Luís Alex, as Evita gradually finds out to her horror, engages in acts of wanton brutality as a soldier, atrocities that cannot be justified even as combat gone awry, for they are often not strictly combat-related.

Luís Alex is, however, as important for a single event as for his attitude, though the two issues are intimately related. One of the narrative foci is his mysterious death by gunshot wound to the head, not in battle but in barracks at Beira. The death is explained in "The Locusts" in one, linearly "logical" way and demonstrated in a completely different way in Eva's recollections. I say "demonstrated," since in that second instance it cannot be said actually to be "explained." For what is set in motion by the simplest level of demonstration of cause--namely, that Luís loses a "gentleman's" game of Russian roulette with the local man with whom Evita has an affair while the soldiers are away on a combat mission--merely sets in motion a series of questions

that continually raise antecedent questions and point to multiplying lateral lines of potential explanation in a structure of multiple unendable digressions. I might remark, incidentally, that character roles become complex here, since Evita's lover, is, in effect, the Homeric Paris by displacement, for the method of resolving the conflict between Luís Alex and Alvaro Sabino is, like much Luís does, chosen in imitation of Jaime Forza Leal's prior handling of a like incident involving Helen. Thus do the two couples--Evita and Luís, and Jaime and Helen--exist in a complex set of modelling relations with each other, ones with strange Oedipalized implications.

As the foregoing suggests, Evita's contemporary reactions and Eva's later recollections are in multiple senses circumscribed by the positions of Helen of Troy as unanalyzed and unanalytical resistance to the ideology of the war and Luís Alex as one so invested in that ideology that he commits atrocities in an effort to make the outcome into the one that his outlook must have in order to maintain itself. It is not that, in simple character terms, either of them consciously accepts these matters expressed in this simple form (though with Luís the divergences are relatively minor); it is rather that, in different ways in each case, they are what we might call loci within the text of those attitudes, or those positions, with regard to experience.

My interest here is to look at those positions as they relate to the possibilities of what amounts to historical explanation. By that term I mean the narrative sequencing of discourse so as to produce, and then utilize, a representation of supposedly self-identical "events" and/or objectivized analytical terms that pretend to produce authoritative conclusions. A unified, logically-presentable explanation for events is always considered potentially obtainable, should be sought, may have predictive value, and, moreover, once established and accepted, becomes, along with the accumulation of all such explanatory constructs, one of the bases of community--and, through the collective, of individuality as well. For such terms and conclusions in effect invite investment in themselves through the implicit promise of explanatory power, and that investment functions as an identity mechanism for its subject.²

With those purposes established, I should like to return to the complex of questions to which I have referred above about explanation of Luís Alex's death--though they could equally well be questions about several other related problems in historical explanation, since Luis's

case merely models wider issues in that area.

Of the network of potential causal arguments for the death offered in Eva Lopo's associative exposition--among them ones including both, on the one hand, such *events* as Jaime's prior example and Evita's affair and, on the other, such *socio-structural conditions* as the war ideology, attitudes involving racial and cultural superiority, as well as the blatant phallic symbolic economy that many of those attitudes invoke--how much can be accommodated before the very concept of "cause" (in this case, the "cause" of Luís Alex's death) becomes meaningless? Indeed, what is the relationship, as regards explanation, between *events* and *socio-structural conditions*? Or, how far laterally can one go to construe explanation? For example, we might ask how much weight should be allotted to such possible factors as psycho-symbolic displacements. One might, after all, argue that Luís chooses Russian roulette not only to model his Captain's prior example but also to try to overcome--if only psychologically--the randomness that haunts him as the result of the recent battle outcome (it having been, in fact, precisely the absence of outcome). Or, how far back may one go in explanation--say into the antecedents of such elements as the pervasive presence of a blatantly phallic symbolic economy--before the issues brought forth are no longer deemed to be "causal" of the phenomenon in question?

What *Costa* ends up suggesting, through the device of its staging of interplay between the two narratives, is that there *are* answers to such questions--ones exemplified in "The Locusts." Those answers are, however, themselves conventional--the results of culture-bound rules of narrative explanation caught up in the very network that engenders the questions. Such quandaries as the foregoing, and the many others suggested by *Costa* as well, contradictory/competitive among themselves as far as narrative logic is concerned, clearly stand as a composite questioning of explanation. Just as, structurally, *Costa* has no core narrative, so, it is thereby suggested, explanation can maintain linearity only through the arbitrary delimitation of narrative terms and processes such as is seen in "The Locusts." Moreover, one of the issues implicitly involved is "definition" of Portugal and of Portuguese-ness. Indeed, as I have observed elsewhere, *Costa* must be read as a dismantling of Portuguese identity discourses of the time referred to, discourses whose demise continues to pose a symbolic-level problem for Portuguese culture down to today.³

Let us focus for a moment on just the last of the quandaries posed above--that of potentially infinite regress that might arise in an attempt to find an authoritative stopping-place for historical explanation. *Costa* stages a kind of conflict in which the working of the rules for stopping such a process is demonstrated--and shown to be inadequate even in its own terms. It does so by presenting an overwhelming number of possibilities, such as is suggested above, and then contrasting to them examples of Luís's language seeking closure, or his Captain's to similar ends--examples in which stopping-places are overtly prescribed. One instance can stand for all:

I [Evita] thought that . . . appearance derived naturally from . . . essence. "No," [Luís] said. "Ideas like that lead people to assume weak attitudes, confident in their integrity! But those who are spiteful watch for the slight cracks where a careless integrity leaves slight cracks open. . . . This is a struggle against complexity in the search for unity." (Jorge, 1995, 77 [Jorge (1988), 79-80])

The "this" refers to the immediate issue of Luís's attempt to control Evita's activities, but it also refers to the goals of the war and, of course, ultimately to unified explanation in general, which here Luís seeks, paranoically.

Seen in this light, the Luís Alex-Helen of Troy contrast takes on further value: within the economy of the text he is the locus of arbitrary and willful limitation to halt the potential endlessness that problematizes explanatory narration, while she is the locus of resistance to limitation--or, at least, to the kinds and modes of limitation available in the world of *Costa*.

Let us explore this implication of Helen's "position." She evidences it most clearly in her proposal to Evita that the two of them "take revenge on them"--the full phrase in Portuguese is "vamos vingar-nos deles?" (Jorge (1995), 236 [Jorge (1988), 225])--by engaging in sexual relations. The "*eles*" (masculine) are their husbands in particular and the soldiery in general. The proposition in effect links gender to war ideology. Moreover, like the case of Luís's call for "unity," in the logic of the conversation in which it is used, "*eles*" clearly responds to the entire network of potential connections that produces . . . "*eles*." The proposal, as the very words in which it is uttered make clear, comes not

primarily in a sexual or even individual-psychological mode but rather as the symbolic-level initiative for a kind of solidarity against the immediate implications for the two women of the set of delimiting discursive gestures, including the phallic "defining" of explanatory constructs, that seek to locate them. "Revenge"--an act of opposition--is clearly the primary sense of the verb in context, but, unlike its English cognate, '*vingar-se*' also means 'to vindicate oneself,' 'to affirm oneself'--acts potentially of self-constitution in any mode, not necessarily in a mode of opposition. And, of course, opposition itself is being rejected here, since, in the economy of objects of drive, the general equivalent and arbiter of opposition itself, namely the phallus, is precisely what is not being sought by the proposal. The *vingança*, then, ends up being a contestation of all "delimiting" discursive gestures in one action that may be not so much one in opposition as one in otherness--as befits Helen's "position."

Thus the "body" that is the anchor, by displacement, of Luís Alex's world "embodies," by its very location within a logic such as Luis', the potential for subversion of that logic, if not its overthrow. Helen "embodies," then, not merely unanalyzed resistance to the ideology of the Portuguese Colonial War but also, and more importantly, "unanalysis" itself--to the extent that analysis is seen as ultimately grounded in "delimited" narrative explanation. In character terms, Helen doesn't seem to have attended consistently to the interpellation of the explanatory: she sometimes goes along without seeming to interiorize explanations; at other times--when it is possible--she simply does not go along at all; she does not embrace the identity that her nickname offers her; and projection is, for her, a transparent act of wish fulfillment. In effect, she resists delimitation by the phallic economy on which the operative mode of delimitation rests. Thus, from her position at the core of the symbolic system,⁴ Helen constitutes an obstacle to the possibility of narrative explanation and, in her alternate proposal for her "body," stands as an open sign of, as I have said before, *something other* that must come to serve the function that historical explanation has served.

Given that I presume a symbolic-level coherence in *Costa*, I shall now simply speculate, using the terms of the text's own economy, about the *something else* that might be understood from the figure of Helen of Troy--though, of course, I fall into a contradiction here (actually, one of several that dot the preceding pages) in that I need to

invoke a strong concept of opposition to do so. Nonetheless . . . a social symbolic that would respond to the challenge that Helen embodies would involve not terms of discourse and discursive processes made "objective" through the convention of categorical delimitation, or universal investment in such terms and processes, but instead *something other* less univocal and thus more accommodating of a variety, if not of a multiplicity, that historical explanation precisely seeks to preclude.

In *Costa*, then, Helen is Helen not of Troy but of where she--i.e., her body--is; she is thus Helen of Beira. Luís, for all his apparent "local" investment is, in the final analysis, really only universally invested. He is, then, in terms of the social symbolic, Luís of Troy.

University of Illinois

NOTES

¹ E.g., Ana Paula Ferreira, "Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*: History and the Postmodern She-Wolf"; Helena Kaufman, "Reclaiming the Margins of History in Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*"; Maria Irene de Sousa Santos, "Bondoso caos: *A Costa dos Murmúrios* de Lídia Jorge."

² In ground my precis--and subsequent analysis--in such diverse titles as Richard Harvey Brown, "The Position of the Narrative in Contemporary Society"; Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*; Luiz Costa Lima, *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*; and Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*.

³ In Jorge (1995), vii-viii.

⁴ Here I differ--perhaps only in a matter of emphasis--from the readings of Ferreira and, especially, Kaufman. While in *Costa* the female undoubtedly is, as they argue, marginalized by the force of self-referential phallic definition and is therefore denied subject status within the economy thus principled (I try, in fact, to signal that phenomenon in my use of the word "B[b]eira"), in my view Helen's presence as object (body) locates her crucially within that economy, or at very least in a determinant relationship to it. Her resistance to that economy can, then, have subject-position implications--indeed, subject-

position power--within a system to which she is simultaneously inapposite.

WORKS CITED

- Brown, Richard Harvey. "The Position of the Narrative in Contemporary Society," *New Literary History* 11.3 (1980): 545-550.
- Costa Lima, Luiz. *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times*. Trans. and intro. Ronald W. Sousa, afterword Jochen Schulte-Sasse. *Theory and History of Lit.* 50. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- De Certeau, Michel. *L'écriture de l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- Goux, Jean-Joseph. *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*. Trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.
- Ferreira, Ana Paula. "Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*: History and the Postmodern She-Wolf." *Revista Hispánica Moderna* 45 (1992): 268-278.
- Jorge, Lídia. *A Costa dos Murmúrios*. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1988.
- . *The Murmuring Coast*. Trans. Natália Costa and Ronald W. Sousa. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995.
- Kaufman, Helena. "Reclaiming the Margins of History in Lídia Jorge's *A Costa dos Murmúrios*." *Luso-Brazilian Review* 29 (1992): 41-49.
- Sousa Santos, Maria Irene de. "Bondoso caos: *A Costa dos Murmúrios* de Lídia Jorge." *Colóquio/Letras* 107 (1989): 64-67.