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**Futurism in Coimbra**

**Rita Marnoto, ed.: *As artes do colégio. Vol. 2. Vanguardas. Coimbra: Colégio das Artes da Universidade de Coimbra, 2016. ISBN: 978-989-99425-5-4. 229 pp. No price indicated.***

The study of the avant-garde in Portugal is a field in which there is still plenty of scope for research and for new discoveries, as the recent volume on the subject, edited by Rita Marnoto, shows. In fact, this Professor of Italian Studies at the University of Coimbra has already produced several pioneering studies of a lesser-known side of Futurism in Portugal: the Futurist group of Coimbra,<sup>1</sup> who produced manifestos and literary texts directly related to other Portuguese and European groups with a Futurist inclination. The volume reviewed here, which results from a cycle of lectures given at the University of Coimbra, is of particular importance in as much as it resurrects some of these little-known works and reprints them in their entirety. It is, therefore, a book that can be warmly recommended to Futurism scholars.

The first essay in this collection, “Notas sobre a vanguarda” (Notes on the Avant-garde), by Fernando Cabral Martins, is a short but dense text, filled with ideas that result from a life devoted to a reflection on the avant-garde and how it relates to Modernism, especially in its Portuguese configuration.<sup>2</sup> His starting point is Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), whose essays “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) and “Modernist Painting” (1961) declared that the avant-garde should be independent from all extrinsic factors and who advocated a ‘pure art’ that stood in marked contrast to the fusion of art and life propagated by the Dadaists and Futurists.

Cabral Martins’s text offers a pithy and well-structured elaboration of six intertwining issues: “The poetics of the words”, “The primary forms”, “Greenberg 1939 and 1960”, “The art of intersectionism” and “The performative”. He discusses the dialectics of avant-garde vs Modernism, how both experimented with words, developed a taste for Primitivism and pursued an obsession with performance. Cabral Martins relates his discussion to the Portuguese context,

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<sup>1</sup> See the bibliography at the end of this review.

<sup>2</sup> Cabral Martins prepared editions of literary works by Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Fernando Pessoa, Almada Negreiros and other modern Portuguese poets and is the editor of the *Dicionário de Fernando Pessoa e do modernismo português* (Dictionary of Fernando Pessoa and of Portuguese Modernism, 2008).

comparing international with Portuguese Modernism and illustrating his arguments with examples taken from various Portuguese writers. We are offered, for example on p. 13, a comparison between Pessoa's *sensacionismo* (Sensationism) and Malevich's *suprematizm* (Suprematism) as examples of the avant-garde notion of synthesis. On p. 9 he discusses Pessoa's heteronym Alberto Caeiro as a literary paradigm of what in today's art world is conceived as Primitivism, pictorially related to Gauguin, Duchamp and Picasso, a raw and naïve way of perceiving the reality of things in this world. He then links Clement Greenberg to another canonical study of 1960, Eduardo Lourenço's essay on *Presença* and the counter-revolution in Portuguese Modernism,<sup>3</sup> in which two moments of Portuguese Modernism are set against each other: the first in the 1910s, the second starting in 1927 with the creation of magazine *Presença*. With this magazine, we can no longer speak of an unmitigated avant-garde, but of a notion of Modernism that entertains an "umbilical cord of gold" with the State (which Greenberg talked about in 1939), or that verges on the side of academism and kitsch (which Greenberg described in 1960).

In a final note, Cabral Martins cites Mallarmé's oscillation between pure and engaged art, highlighted in the adage, "L'action n'est pas la sœur du rêve" (action is not the sister of dreams)<sup>4</sup>, and relates it to the work of Mário de Sá-Carneiro, "certainly the most avant-garde of the Portuguese poets" (p. 15). Several of the following essays in the volume take up again this dialectic link between dream and action.

The next section of the book focusses on international Futurism and contains four essays (pp. 7–91), followed by three on Portugal (pp. 93–193) and two on the period after the Second World War (pp. 195–226). Giusi Baldissone's "Simultaneidade e teatralidade da poesia futurista" (Simultaneity and Theatricality in Futurist Poetry) directs our attention to poetry as a performative and not just a literary medium. The key idea of the essay is summed up in the subheading, "Simultaneity: All is theatre". Baldissone argues that the Futurists took the original conception of the word 'poetry' very seriously and organized poetry reading in which "poetry becomes the gesture of composing, an event in its making, something that must be put into action, ephemeral and unrepeatable, as a theatrical event. It is a future with an old heart, and it is from here that we begin to understand the meaning of the Futurist revo-

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<sup>3</sup> Lourenço: " 'Presença', ou A contra-revolução no modernismo português?"

<sup>4</sup> Mallarmé in a letter to Henri Cazalis of 3 June 1863, quoting a phrase from "Le Reniement de Saint Pierre" in Charles Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*.

lution.”<sup>5</sup> Simultaneity, then, at first announced by Marinetti in his *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature, 1912) as ‘simultaneità lirica’ and, at a later stage, elaborated in his preface to *La simultaneità in letteratura* (Simultaneity in Literature, 1930), is the ‘transformation of the forms of communication’ and genres so that theatricality becomes a core element of the literary message. Baldissone presents a long list of artists, ranging from Futurism to Dadaism and Surrealism, who fed on the aesthetic principles contained in Futurist manifestos. Her concise overview arrives at the conclusion that in theatre and poetry the Futurist influence was so strong that its impact could be felt for many generations.

Cesary Bronowski’s essay on Polish Futurism (a topic that has been addressed repeatedly in the *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies*) offers a brief characterization of its debt to Italian and Russian Futurism, noting that, in essence, Polish Futurism of the years 1919–1923 made a major contribution to the renewal of the country’s poetic tradition. Although Bronowski’s article is short, it summarizes well the changes, divisions and developments in this country and provides a succinct introduction to a topic more amply discussed in Przemysław Strożek’s *Marinetti i futurizm w Polsce, 1909–1939: Obecność – kontakty – wydarzenia* (Marinetti and Futurism in Poland, 1909–1939: Presence – Contacts – Events).<sup>6</sup>

The *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* has published numerous studies that investigate the links between various branches of Futurism and their relation to the Italian and Russian stem. Most investigations in this field are written in the *linguae francae* of the Western World – English, French and German – or in the language of the country explored. This is why José Manuel Vasconcelos’s contribution “Budetliane e futurismo: Os futuristas russos e o futurismo italiano” (People of the Future and Futurism: The Russian and Italian Futurists) is an important introduction to the topic for a Portuguese readership. Vasconcelos is not only a poet but also a competent translator. The passages he cites from works by Sergio Corazzini, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov, for example, have never been printed before in Portuguese. Vasconcelos looks at what separates the two movements, and how they evolved their distinct

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5 “A poesia torna-se o gesto de compôr, evento no seu fazer-se, algo que deve ser posto em acção, efêmero e irrepitível, como uma representação teatral. Trata-se de um futuro que tem um coração antigo, e esta é a chave, da qual há que partir para compreender o significado da revolução futurista.” Baldissone: “Simultaneidade e teatralidade da poesia futurista”, p. 21.

6 See also the review by Luigi Marinelli: “Marinetti i futurizm w Polsce” in *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* 2 (2012).

and often highly dissimilar characteristics. His examination is complemented by Stefania Stefanelli's "Léxicos do futurismo nas vanguardas ibéricas" (Lexicons of Futurism in the Iberian Avant-garde), which offers a linguistic analysis of Futurist texts written in Castilian, Catalan and Portuguese.<sup>7</sup> The author, with the help of the Hispanist Valentina Nider and Lusitanist Valeria Tocco, explores a linguistic database of sixty-six Iberian Futurist texts and shows to what a degree the movement contributed, mainly through the translation of manifestos, to the renewal of the Iberian vocabulary.

The third and equally substantial section of this volume is dedicated to the so-called 'Futurist group of Coimbra'. The first contribution, by Clelia Bettini, has an intertextual title, "A imaginação sem fios dos futuristas de Coimbra" (The Untrammelled Imagination of the Coimbra Futurists). It alludes to Marinetti's manifesto, *Distruzione della sintassi – Immaginazione senza fili – Parole in libertà* (Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom, 1913) and offers a detailed history of this group of five young students who found together through a common interest in Futurism. Bettini carefully analyses the lexical units that are prominent in the key texts of this group, such as "colour and light", as opposed to "life and art" in the texts by Futurists from Lisbon (see also Marnoto's explanations on p. 192). This feature is an important alignment with the visual nature of Marinetti's poetry and can be explained by the fact that one member of the Coimbra Group, Celestino Gomes, was a painter and illustrator. He also contributed to a topical debate concerning the Portuguese emblematic feeling of *saudade*. Normally understood as an emotional state of nostalgia or profound melancholic longing, either for an absent something or someone (a previous state of affairs, a situation, a lost lover, a family member who moved away or died), and thus combining sadness with the joy of having once had the privilege of experiencing the something or someone gone missing. However, in the 1910s, there existed also a political notion of *saudade*. Saudosism was an early-twentieth century movement that defended a looking back at Portuguese history and taking the achievements of the past as a yardstick for contemporary cultural initiatives. Almada Negreiros deplored this nostalgic sentimentalism in his *Manifesto Anti-Dantas e por extenso* (Manifesto Against Dantas, Without Abbreviations, 1916),<sup>8</sup> and the *Coimbra Manifesto* of 1925 declared: "We do not

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<sup>7</sup> An Italian version, "Lessici del futurismo nelle avanguardie iberiche", was published in Pietro Frassica, ed.: *Shades of Futurism*. Atti del convegno internazionale, Princeton University, 8–9 ottobre 2009. Novara: Interlinea, 2011. 105–129.

<sup>8</sup> This was exemplified in his attack on the play *Soror Mariana*, by Júlio Dantas, and the condemnation he voiced about conservative society in Lisbon in this *Anti-Dantas* manifesto.

want a longing that feels like masturbating; we want a longing that feels like painlessly stretching out our arms.”<sup>9</sup> Celestino Gomes developed a Futurist concept of *saudade* and defended an approach to Portuguese culture that was not based on melancholic feelings that stifle action and development, but a state of mind that can propel Portugal into the future.

Manuel Ferro, an expert on Portuguese-Italian cultural and literary relations, investigates one of the five members of the Coimbra group in “O caso Óscar (Mário Coutinho) e os reflexos da vanguarda futurista na Coimbra dos anos de 1920” (The Case of Óscar [Mário Coutinho] and the Repercussions of the Futurist Avant-garde in 1920s Coimbra). The essay uses a biographical approach and compiles the limited amount of information that is available on this figure during his Futurist phase (later he became an esteemed medic in Coimbra), supplemented by documents in facsimile and transliteration. This includes, amongst others, a literary review of works by his Futurist colleagues Carlos Queirós and António de Navarro, and an essay published in the *Diário de Lisboa* in March 1925, in which he talks about the Futurist movement in Coimbra. We can take from these texts that João Carlos and Celestino Gomes were associated with the group, as well as José Régio, who two years later founded the magazine *Presença* as a conservative antipode to the avant-garde, a kind of “anti-*Orpheu*”, to use the words of Eduardo Lourenço.

Rita Marnoto focusses on another figure from the Coimbra circle, Humberto Silveira Fernandes. She underlines the fact that he was “one of the few poets (if not the only one) to cultivate in the Portugal of those years the Futurist Words-in-Freedom and Synoptic Tables” (p. 151). Indeed, one of the highlights of this volume is the facsimile reproduction of a book that has been unavailable for nearly 100 years, *Guarda-sol: Exortação à mocidade futurista, precedida dum prefácio às frontarias. Abaixo a cor! Bendita a lua! Fora!* (The Parasol: Admonition to the Futurist Youth. Preceded by a Preface to the Frontispiece. Down with Colour! Blessed Be the Moon! Out!, 1925). This sixteen-page brochure by the pseudonymous “Humsilfer” – an amalgamation of the name initials of Humberto Silveira Fernandes – was issued the same year as *Coimbra manifesto 1925*, following a number of other texts which Marnoto enumerates. Silveira Fernandes’s booklet has an unusual octagonal shape and arranges the *tavole sinottiche* in a circular structure. The publication is dedicated to Almada Negreiros and thus forms a bridge to the herald of Portuguese Futurism, Francisco Levita, author of a pamphlet, *Negreiros – Dantas: Uma página para a história da literatura nacional*

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9 “[...] não queremos saudade que nos masturbe antes saudade que sentimos alongando os braços sem fazer doer”. Óscar et al.: “Coimbra manifesto 1925”, p. 109.

(Negreiros – Dantas: A Page in the History of National Literature, 1916)<sup>10</sup> and *I assim: Poemas seguidos do Elogio do I e da tragédia em 1 acto Amor! Amor! (Even so: Poems, Followed by “In Praise of Myself” and the Tragedy in One Act, “Love! Love!”*, 1916).

It should be noted that the Coimbra branch of Portuguese Futurism only became active when, in Italy, Marinetti proposed the movement’s official alignment with Fascism, first in *I diritti artistici propugnati dai futuristi italiani* (Artistic Rights Defended by the Italian Futurists, 1923), and then by signing the *Manifesto degli intellettuali del fascismo* (Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals, 1925). There was no sign of such a move to the political Right amongst the Coimbra group, who very much stuck to literature and followed Marinetti’s theory of visual poetry, as Clelia Bettini underlines in her contribution to this volume.

The final part of this book contemplates the postwar fate of the avant-garde in Italy and Portugal, especially in the Gruppo 63 and in Ana Hatherly’s *Tisanas* (Decoctions, 1969– 2006). As is well known, the neo-avant-gardes in the 1960s and 70s came to reaffirm and to canonize the rôle played by the avant-gardes half a century earlier. Hatherly explores the essentially indeterminate nature of the avant-garde in general and Futurism in particular, saying that both arose as a reaction to academism, just like the neo-avant-garde reacted to the industrial and economic boom of the 1950s. María Antonia Martínez argues in her essay that such was the case in Italy, where members of the *intelligentsia* felt the need to create new literary forms, to rebel against Neorealism that had many supporters all over the country, and to renew literature. Two events were crucial in this process: the publication of Umberto Eco’s *Opera aperta* (The Open Work, 1962), still a fundamental text in literary criticism, and, secondly, the creation of *Gruppo 63*, very much influenced by Eco. A new way of looking at the past was suggested by *Arte povera*, a ‘poor art’ in as much as it took a minimalist approach to organic, everyday materials, organized them in a conceptual way in order to fight the intense commercialization of art. Created in a post-war welfare society, this type of neo-avant-garde seems to have been influenced by a taste for a more primitive look of things (as mentioned in the first essay in this volume), and thus closely connected with Futurism as well.

Ana Hatherly was a peculiar neo-avant-gardist, as Ana Marques Gastão’s analysis of her *magnum opus* demonstrates. *Tisanas* was work-in-progress for more than five decades (there are six ever-expanding editions between 1969 and

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<sup>10</sup> He considered Almada’s polemical *Manifesto anti-Dantas* to be insufficiently Futurist and called him ‘a second Dantas’. A facsimile reprint can be found in Marnoto: *Negreiros – Dantas & Manifesto Coimbra 1925*, pp. 9–18.

2006). Although she was open to influences from Futurism and Dadaism (especially the *parole in libertà* and the poem-collage), she asserted that experimentalism with words had a long history and predates the early-twentieth century avant-garde. For her, vanguardism began with the Egyptian hieroglyphs and continued with the Ptolemaic poet Simmias of Rhodes (fl. 325 B.C.), Taoism, the riddles and puzzles in Buddhist *kōan* literature, and in particular the Portuguese/Iberian Baroque (cryptograms, ideograms and other playful conceptual exercises). Ana Hatherly was a pioneering scholar, and her *Tisanas* reveals the unexpected ways in which Futurism extended its influence on the Iberian Peninsula.

In conclusion, the essays that make up this book, although disparate at first sight, offer a new perspective on Portuguese Futurism and demonstrate that, next to Lisbon and the Algarve, there existed a third strand of Portuguese Futurism in Coimbra, a strand that tried particularly hard to adapt the Futurist aesthetics to Portuguese culture. The readers of the *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies* will find this collection of essays a useful contribution to the current research on Italian Futurism and its international ramifications.

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