

***L'Africain's* savage pleasures: Operatic listening and the Portuguese historical imagination**

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Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* (1865) was premiered in Lisbon in 1869. The opera became a man's affair in the Portuguese capital for the next thirty years, weaving together the ambitions of the local impresario Campos Valdez, the charisma of famous baritones like Mérly, Cotogni, and Alighieri, the lyrical experience of countless dandies, the judgement of influential critics, the occasional vicissitudes of politics and, ultimately, the intellectual aspirations of Lisbon's foremost cultural critic and novelist Eça de Queirós. The work, an account of Vasco da Gama's sea voyage to India, had been expected to do well at the São Carlos. It was one of the rare pieces of the repertory to delve into Portuguese History, with the potential to serve as an operatic symbol for the nation. On occasion the opera did assist in the cause of nationalism, most famously in a 1896 performance in celebration of the military defeat of a Vátua uprising in Mozambique.

But in the early 1870s, *L'Africaine's* reception evaded the obvious traps of national chauvinism. In the theater, audiences were oddly indifferent to the historicist script of the plot and the hero Vasco da Gama, performed by the acclaimed Meyerbeerian tenor Naudin, failed to capture their imagination. Instead they fell prey to the villain Nélusko, a rather secondary character who was created in the São Carlos by the (now forgotten) baritone Jean Baptiste Mérly. The audiences' enchantment with Nélusko – the ferocious opponent of Da Gama's imperial designs who resists interrogation in the first act, nearly murders the hero in the second, and shipwrecks the Portuguese fleet in the third – was rather unexpected, strangely at odds with operatic convention and national and

imperial self-interest. But at the São Carlos, he appeared phenomenally charismatic, no mere operatic thrill to be forgotten by the end of the show. This Nélusko inspired fresh musings on the nation's foremost literary symbol, Luis de Camões' *Os Lusíadas* (1572), setting anew the terms of a public debate on opera and the Portuguese historical imagination. In due time, he also became part of the theater's lore memorialized in musical criticism as well as in the most influential Portuguese novel of the *fin de siècle*, Eça de Queirós' *The Maias. Scenes of Romantic Life* (1888). To us, he opens a new critical avenue into the Portuguese late-Romantic operatic experience. Mérly's (and later Cotogni's and Alighieri's) acclaim as Nélusko reminds us that while in today's text-bound scholarship musicologists rely primarily on libretti and musical scores for their own critical work, nineteenth-century individuals enjoyed and understood opera primarily as a performed art. In other words, they thought of the 'scene of performance' as the operatic text. This historical difference is a tantalizing one, begging reconsideration of our own critical methods. In keeping with the 1870s' performance-centered experience of *L'Africaine*, my essay will consider the opera's reception in Lisbon from the viewpoint of the staged body and the rich hermeneutic promise of the performing voice. Nélusko, in his various stage embodiments, is at the center of my exploration of the generation and uses of operatic fantasy in late-Romantic Lisbon. This essay follows Nélusko along a jagged trajectory, taking us from the printed press to the stage, from the throat of the baritone to the ear of the listener, and from the theater itself to the literary work of the most notable of late-Romantic dandies and cultural critics, José Maria Eça de Queirós. It ends back in the theater, in 1896, for a final disappearing act.

***L'Africaine* at the São Carlos**

The Critics

L'Africaine arrived late in Lisbon, four years after the Paris premiere and following those of nearly every European theater. Nevertheless, Portuguese audiences expressed unusual delight at Meyerbeer's final opera. In the absence of a national repertory, the work produced an unusual nationalistic *frisson*. Eagerly, critics peered into the fanciful

operatic reflection even before the opera's premiere. But like someone looking into a cracked mirror they found the experience disconcerting. *L'Africaine's* plot offered them a dubious version of national narratives of Vasco da Gama's expedition to India. In 1869, every historical detail of the plot – from royal expansionist policy, to biography, navigational history and colonial geography seemed hopelessly distorted to the Portuguese. Even Vasco da Gama – then as now a foremost and ubiquitous national symbol – appeared dangerously light in his garb of sentimental tenor, sublimating his love for nation and desire for conquest in a disreputable wavering between two women – Inez and Sélíka, the Portuguese and Indian love interests. Like a beloved but slightly damaged heirloom, *L'Africaine* could not be discarded but was not entirely presentable, prompting inevitable fixings, operatic rewrites that wrestled the authority over the work from its deceased creators so as to bestow it upon its new public.

The first revisionist gesture came from the Lisbon impresario Campos Valdez. For the 1869 premiere he moved the action from Portugal and Madagascar to Spain and India, and gave Vasco da Gama the whimsical name of Guido d'Arezzo, after the inventor of the medieval solmization system. Under this radically de-historicized form, the opera was staged in a brilliant fashion.¹ Following Valdez' lead, the city's critics also attempted some textual correction. In 1869 Lisbon newspapers often prefaced their reviews of the opera with remarks on Eugène Scribe's historical ignorance, and as late as 1873 foreign and national press still occupied themselves with light banter over the ridiculousness of the original plot and its Lisbon changes.²

¹ «Registe-se, e já, nos faustos theatrais, o exito solemnissimo da primeira representação da Africana. Que nas chronicas do theatro lyrico possam os de amanhã achar notícia de tal sucedimento, nas paginas consagradas aos mais brilhantes. Á illustrada administração queremos nós, e entendemos dever, tributar as primeiras páginas de louvor. Não poupemos elogios a quem deu mostras de tamanha bisarria, apresentando em scena uma opera com tanta riqueza e tão apurado bom gosto – ostentando-nos um espectáculo rarissimo em Portugal, digno de hombrar, e venceno talvez em parte, o que de melhor se mostra nas primeiras scenas da Europa.» («Chronica», *Revolução de Setembro*, 4 February 1869).

² «Em data de 30 do ultimo mez nos conta o nosso correspondente de Lisboa o seguinte interessante caso com relação á susceptibilidade dos portuguezes respeitante ao seu grande navegador Vasco da Gama: – 'Inaugurou-se em Lisboa a épica lyrica com a partitura de Meyerbeer – A Africana, e por deferencia aos sentimentos e bom senso do publico portuguez, o nome de Vasco da Gama foi substituído nos cartazes pelo de Guido d'Arezzo(!)' ... A adopção do nome de Guido d'Arezzo é a suprema zombaria (joke). Se não fora o inventor da pauta musical, o monge beneditino seria reputado ao menos como um dos músicos mais extraordinários. De nautica é que elle com toda a certeza não tratou.» (*Arte Musical*, 1 December, 1874).

Despite its historical inaccuracies, *L'Africaine* remained an irresistible attraction for the Portuguese. It opened the operatic season of 1874 with great pomp (in a performance attended by the royal family and *tout Lisbonne*). In 1896, it famously served as an official imperial emblem, in commemoration of the successful military campaigns against the Vátua nation in Mozambique.³ For the most part, the press sustained national fantasy. Thus, for instance, the critics of the *Jornal do Comércio* and the *Diário Ilustrado* acknowledged 'historical inconsistencies' in the plot but systematically wrote them off as irrelevant details. Elsewhere, the critic of the *Chronica dos Theatros* ignored the issue altogether in describing *L'Africaine's* Lisbon production by means of a colonial *bon mot*: *L'Africaine* in Lisbon was 'a spear set in Africa'.⁴

There were some easy critical paths. The 'opera as mirror of the nation' offered an obvious venue for journalistic commentary. Echoing grand opera's own aesthetics of excess, the *Ecco Musical* published its own over-the-top call for audiences to sing through numbers of the opera in patriotic agitation. In this rare moment of national-operatic jingoism, *L'Africaine* was set on a par with older and much revered national monuments – a lofty sign of an intangible national identity.⁵ Parody also had its place. Júlio César Machado, well-known dandy and life-style commentator to whom we owe much of the contemporary satirical literature on the São Carlos' social scene, chose two easy targets, Vasco da Gama and the politics of operatic grandeur, in his indictment of operatic fantasy.

What we know about our Vasco da Gama tells us that he is no relation to all that [we see on stage]. Few creatures have been more favored by man and fortune. The Portuguese might take offense with the nonsensical libretto, which in the first act reduces [Vasco da Gama] to disastrous circumstances comparable only to the precarious situation of a grade school teacher after tax season. They might even argue that the libretto, which stuck this next-of-kin of

³ The personalities present at the São Carlos gala are listed by the *Diario de Noticias*, 30 October 1874.

⁴ *Chronica dos Theatros*, 11 February 1869.

⁵ «Para nós, os portugueses, é um dever sagrado o popularizar os mais bellos trechos da Africana, como o decorar as strophes mais profundas dos Luziadas, ou contemplar na sua magestade o Mosteiro de Belém. É por onde mostraremos que não somos um povo morto.» (*Ecco Musical*, 1 September 1873).

Christopher Columbus and Galileo between two women, going like Farblás from the white to the dark and back to the white, was pure nonsense!

Furthermore, the man appears before the court assembly asking for subsidy to arm a ship. Subsidy! How charming! In today's crisis, such a word is sufficient to raise an argument. Vasco da Gama's mania for a subsidy contradicts all efforts of economic austerity, exposing *L'Africaine* to condemnation. From the ministers' loathe terrible frowns were directed at the stage, leaving the public fearful as to the continuation of the first act assembly!⁶

More interesting than the liberal politics underlying Machado's argument, is the manner in which he denounces the opera as a false mirror, offering political and historical delusions, fake promises of national grandeur. The rhetorical power of the review derives from its purposeful forgetting of *L'Africaine* as opera that is, as sung and acted-out musical drama. Only in such artificial deafness to musical performance is *L'Africaine* neutralized, shown to be a senseless play offering ludicrous amorous and political visions. Machado's tongue-in-cheek strategy to disqualify *L'Africaine* as national self-image should prompt us to ask why, despite his and others' informed denunciations of the plot, the work remained so irresistible to his contemporaries.

This question plagued the critical reviews of the opera in 1869. Those defending *L'Africaine* normally fell back on general aesthetic statements. For instance, a review published in the *Jornal do Comércio* addresses the problematic allure of *L'Africaine* in broad Schopenhauerean terms. The critic argues that the attractiveness of operatic illusion derives not from the poetic but from the musical text. Music, he writes,

⁶ «O que a gente sabe do nosso Vasco da Gama é o que ha de mais diferente de tudo aquillo, e poucas creaturas terão existido mais favorecidas dos homens e da fortuna; ve-lo reduzido a proporções tão desastrosas, encontral-o no primeiro acto n'uma posição perçaria apenas comparável á de professor de instrucção primária depois das décimas, vêr este parente do Cristovão Colombo e de Galileu mettido entre duas mulheres, a andar n'uma dobadoura da branca para a fusca e da fusca para a branca, feito Farblás, era perigoso para com os portuguezes que podiam quizilar-se de que o libretto não sabia o que diz!

De mais a mais, no primeiro acto, o homem aparece nos paços do concelho a pedir subsídio ao governo para afretar o navio. Subsídio! Esta graça!... Palavra tal na crise que atravessamos é o suficiente para levantar celeuma nos arraiaes. Quando toda a gente não pensa senão em economias, o Vasco da Gama com a sua mania de querer subsídio expunha a Africana a ser suprimida, e do camarote dos ministros já vinha para o palco cada olhar de metter medo, ao ponto de cuidar o público que aquella camara do primeiro acto estava alli dissolvida!...» («Revista da Semana», *Revolução de Setembro*, 3 February 1869).

makes serious the unbelievable situations of the drama, and raises them to the sublime. Its grandeur makes the plot also grand. One forgets all [frivolous and inconsequent turns of the plot] in the fascination produced by the master's eloquence, his harmony, his melody, his new and unexpected orchestration.⁷

This excerpt from the critic's much longer mystifying rhapsody on the opera labors over the common romantic cliché that music is a foremost expressive vehicle for the creative subject. Against Machado, the anonymous critic displaces operatic meaning to the music text, but he defines it loosely as a fold of sonorous elements and events containing Meyerbeer's musical voice. Urging the audience to listen for a musical subjectivity, the critic ultimately joins his more exalted or scorning colleagues from an unexpected angle. Grand opera, all recognize, is about excess, fantasy, and the attractions of a hard-to-pin down musical subjectivity. But here critical discourse parts with operatic experience. The journalists' text- and author-centered critical strategies are silent about the moment of performance and its force in shaping operatic perception and understanding. Rather they protect *L'Africaine* from the work of the singers who literally breath it into life in the theater. Leaving temporarily aside the specific ideological and philosophical underpinnings of such disciplinary gestures, we should note what they obscure – the thrills of live performance and its centrality to operatic interpretation.

The Audience

Though Lisbon audiences were also tantalized by the notion of opera as mirror of the nation, on stage *L'Africaine* became an altogether different experience than that promised by the newspapers. We may imagine listeners came to the São Carlos aware of local critical efforts to come to terms with the opera, but their behavior was strikingly unaffected by it. During the show, listeners did what opera audiences always do: they

⁷ «Seja, porém como fôr, sem embargo de todas as leviandades e inconsequencias, e inverosimilhanças do libretto, a musica como que torna seria as situações inverosimeis, levanta-as e sublima-as; a grandeza da musica torna grande o enredo; tudo se esquece pela fascinação que produz a eloquencia do mestre, a sua harmonia, a sua melodia, os effeitos desusados e inesperados da instrumentação, os cantos vehementes, apaixonados e patheticos.» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 4 February 1869).

listened, reveling on the pleasures of live performance.⁸ In this context, perceptions of the work's significance as national fantasy took a new turn, leading audiences through exegetic paths far removed from those charted in the articles discussed above. Thus, the great Vasco da Gama – disguised as Guido d'Arezzo – did not move the audience with his acts of heroic virtuosity. Critics were appreciative of the fact that Naudin, the Italian tenor who created Da Gama in Lisbon, had been Meyerbeer's handpicked choice for the role. But, the audience was only lukewarm about the singer and his performance. Furthermore, the sentimental plight of the musically exquisite Sélika, the Indian queen sung in Lisbon by the equally Meyerbeerian Rey-Balla, did not interest audiences much. In an unexpected turn of fate, it was Nélusko – the plot's villainous baritone, also a secondary character – who became the catalyst for auditory pleasure in the opera, prompting the public's loud acclaim and subsequently the press' vigorous exegetic agitation. So exceptional was this sudden public interest in the baritone that the *Chronica dos Theatros* felt compelled to address it in print:

Let us first commemorate [the success], placing it before the analysis. As I have mentioned, Merly was interrupted by applause in the first act in each of *L'Africain's* eleven performances. He was [always] applauded and called to the theater's proscenium at the end of the aria in the second act. He was enthusiastically acclaimed in the ballad of the third, and in the magnificent scene of the fourth act the orchestra had to interrupt its playing as he was [again] applauded and called to the proscenium. More than once, he was forced to show himself already in plain clothes at the end of the opera in order to thank the enthusiastic applause and praise of the public.⁹

⁸ «Naudin foi o protagonista. Todos sabem que Meyerbeer o escolheu para crear o papel de *Vasco*, na grande opera de Paris, e Meyerbeer levava estas escolhas até ao escrupulo. Nisto vemos nós uma das maiores glórias de Naudin. E de facto a sua voz consegue os mais brilhantes effeitos. Tanto nos pontos delicades como nos que requerem vehemencia sae ella espontanea e firme, e a execução é sempre admirável.» (*Chronica dos Theatros*, 11 February 1869).

⁹ «Commemore-se já, para que não distraia da nossa analyse. Em onze representações que tem tido a Africana, Merly é como dissemos, interrompido pelos applausos no primeiro acto, applaudido e chamado ao proscenio no fim da aria do segundo acto, aclamado com enthusiasmo na ballada do terceiro, applaudido e chamado ao proscenio, interrompendo-se a orchestra para dar logar aos applausos, na magnifica scena do quarto acto. Mais de uma vez, depois de terminada a opera, o illustre baritono tem sido obrigado a vir ao proscenio, já em traje commum, para agradecer os entusiasticos applausos com que o publico victoria o seu nome.» (*Chronica dos Theatros*, 26 February 1869).

The critic's evocative description of an entire audience abandoning itself to the power of the baritone's voice in reckless disregard for the character's proper 'place' in the plot suggests interpretation gone awry, or a generalized moment of misreading. Moments such as this seemingly confirm the worst fears regarding the hermeneutic competence of Lisbon's romantic audiences, supporting the established consensus in Portuguese scholarship that nineteenth-century Lisbon opera-goers were in general not very good or attentive listeners. In fact, recent literature on the São Carlos tends to treat romantic publics as if afflicted by deafness, emphasizing more readily the theater's social function than the operatic practices it contained. José-Augusto França, for instance, has famously referred to the theater of the 1870s as 'the salon, the meeting point and even the show-case of the capital', a space that 'allows us to situate the Portuguese grand bourgeoisie, its tastes and its culture in the decline of romanticism'.¹⁰ His vision of the theater as the space in which pretty new fashions were shown, business conducted, political appearances made, prima donnas appraised and polite conversation took place is remarkably unmusical. Similarly, Mário Vieira de Carvalho's provocative social history of the São Carlos in *Pensar é morrer ou o Teatro de São Carlos na mudança dos sistemas sociocomunicativos...*, explores at length the exhibitionist components of public behavior in the theater, offering the vacuous dandy as the protagonist of local operatic culture.¹¹ Carvalho reads the dilettante's love of operatic singing as a symptom of a local cultural atavism, the belated product of an *ancien régime* mentality that stubbornly rejected romantic opera's enlightenment function. His analysis, opposing the audience's irresponsible enjoyment of vocal performance to the critic's responsible (and text-centered) decoding of operatic semiosis, unfolds a pedigreed rationalist dichotomy between body and mind, the pleasure of the listener and the will of the author. Within this conceptual frame Lisbon 19th century audiences, headed by the dandy, appear hopelessly at odds with the values of high-minded romanticism, locked in a sensual vacuum, paying homage to the wrong gods.

¹⁰ José-Augusto FRANÇA, *O Romantismo em Portugal*, Lisbon, Horizonte, 1993, p. 395.

¹¹ Mário Vieira de CARVALHO, *Pensar é morrer ou o Teatro de São Carlos na mudança dos sistemas sociocomunicativos desde fins do séc. XVIII aos nossos dias*, Lisbon, Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1993, pp. 65-95. See also from the same author, *Eça de Queirós e Offenbach. A ácida gargalhada de Mefistófeles*, Lisbon, Colibri, 1999, pp. 50-60.

But was Lisbon audience's enchantment with Nélusko's vocal persona truly Philistine? The fact that romantic listeners applauded spiritedly between numbers, even within specific numbers, calling a favorite singer to the proscenium over and over again, is no news. Such shows of enthusiasm merely dwindled throughout the century, in the São Carlos as in other European theaters.¹² More striking is the public's explicit preference for the baritone. This preference, unthinkable in Bel Canto repertory where the soprano and the tenor always carry the day, was in part a response to the new lyrical experience afforded by Meyerbeerian grand opera to romantic audiences. After all, the powerful voices of baritones and basses are among the radical innovations of grand operatic dramaturgy. They are the good and evil voices of authority in the genre's staple political dramas that attune the listener to the vocal pleasures of power and its manipulations. In Lisbon, the symbolic force and import of these low voices was apparently well understood by the 1870s. A fragment from Eça de Queirós's *Os Maias* is exemplary in this regard. In one of the novel's many moments at the São Carlos we are offered a glimpse into the local scene of listening. Here, the Count of Gouvarinho – the novel's politician – stands in the theater's corridor, chatting mindlessly with the protagonist Carlos da Maia as the fourth Act of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* unfolds on stage. Suddenly,

a burst of instruments and voices, in tones sublime, broke through the half-open door of the box and cut off his final remarks regarding the insufficiency of photographers. He listened with a hand raised in the air.

'It's the 'Dagger Chorus', isn't it? Ah! Let's listen to it – it always does one good to listen to. There is philosophy in this music – it's a pity that it so vividly recalls the times of religious intolerance, but it's certainly got philosophy!¹³

¹² França hints at such changes in local operatic behavior when considering the agitation of Lisbon *dilettanti* over two divas in 1854-55. Tellingly, he ends his portrayal of the operatic affair with a mention to the castigating word of the critic Lopes de Mendonça. The critic's call for a toned down male behavior in things operatic is of course part of a new understanding of the role of the audience in the theater, favoring contemplative silence over emotional outburst. See J.-A. FRANÇA, *op. cit.*, p. 336. For the same phenomenon at the Paris *Opéra* see James H. JOHNSON, *Listening in Paris*, Berkeley, California University Press, 1995, pp. 228-236.

¹³ «Um cheio de instrumentos e vozes de um tom sublime passando pela porta da frisa entreaberta, cortou-lhe uma ultimas palavras sobre a deficiência dos fotografos... Escutou com a mão no ar: – É o 'coro os punhais', não? Ah! Vamos a ouvir...Ouve-se sempre isto com proveito. Há filosofia

The excerpt is a brilliant inside joke crafted for an opera-literate readership. Not a mere chorus, the Dagger scene so admired by Gouvarinho is a full-fledged scene in which the bass role St Bris – the eminent (if criminal) politician in the opera – gives an extraordinary vocal performance, leading a catholic mob to commit the infamous and now historically distant massacre of St Barthélemy. In a distinctly Queirosoian fashion, the excerpt functions on two narrative levels, each reflecting a different critical stance on grand operatic vocal symbolism. On the one hand, the excerpt indexes contemporary operatic taste, recording in the realm of fiction the listening pleasure male audiences in Lisbon derived from the vocal performance of grand operatic bass-baritone roles. In this sense, Gouvarinho stands in the novel for all men who in the 1870s enjoyed grand opera's male voices of authority. On the other hand, it functions as a narrative device, shedding moral light on the novel's only character-politician. Gouvarinho's love for the mob scene prefigures and indirectly unveils his own penchant for demagoguery as it anticipates later revelations of his own mediocre political ambitions and his 'operatic' understanding of the art of public oratory. The Count listens to opera not so much as an amateur but as a politician fashioning his professional ethics and aesthetics after Saint Bris' performance.

Queirós's masterful understanding of grand opera's dramaturgical conventions as well as his literary description of a shared taste for low male roles among 1870s listeners provide us with an historical context that partially explains Nélusko's operatic success in 1869. But any attempt at explaining the phenomenal Lisbon success of *L'Africain's* dark villain with reference only to the role of Saint Bris is also reductive at best. While the 'Bénédiction des poignards' was a universal success by the 1870s, the most famous of Meyerbeer's operatic pages, the role of Nélusko never received the same international acclaim. Its Lisbon success remained a local phenomenon.

nesta música... É pena que lembre tão vivamente os tempos da intolerância religiosa, mas há ali incontestavelmente filosofia!» (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *Os Maias*, Lisbon, 1888, pp. 144.) English translation of this and other excerpts from *Os Maias* by Patricia McGowan Picheiro and Ann Stevens (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *The Maias*, Manchester, Carcanet Press, 1993).

Musicology and the Baritone

At this point we should briefly consider the broader historical implications of the baritone's unusual acclaim in Lisbon. Tributes of admiration conflating character and singer are the bread and butter of operatic reception. Yet, they are not usually directed at the low male voices. In the nineteenth-century as today the typical recipients of such emotional outbursts are the Diva and the *Primo Uomo*, the legendary sopranos and tenors who by virtue of their exceptional operatic abilities become the objects of devotion and/or obsession. These singers' auras extend even beyond the stage in the many objects of operatic lore: biographies, portraits, anecdotes, nostalgic memories of fabled performances and resonant encounters, or literary mythologizings of the operatic voice. Thus singers, more often than composers, are the stuff from which operatic fantasy and myth is made. To the opera lover they often take precedence over the operatic text, establishing a vivid link with the elusive moment of live performance. Opera enthusiasts have long paid these operatic male and female sirens their due, speaking and writing at length about the notes and gestures on which our desire floats unfettered. More recently musicology too has shown an interest in the moment of performance, remembering how the remarkable vocal and dramatic abilities of particular singers have often suggested to listeners ways of listening beyond plot and character. In this context, the Diva and more recently the Tenor have become the heroes of a new operatic historiography concerned with performance as a catalyst for operatic pleasure and the articulation of often subversive modes of self-imagining, frequently at odds with the plot's conservative social order. Wayne Kostenbaum, for instance, has convincingly argued that Divas, whether in or out of the stage, often become explosive signifiers, doubling as objects of heterosexual desire in line with the conservative gender order of opera's plots and (more rebelliously) as imaginative folds for the experience of gay sexuality.¹⁴ Karen Henson's recent study of the once famous *tenor lyrique* Victor Capoul, on the other hand, has given us a richly textured picture of the romantic tenor and of the means by which his voice and stage presence activated female desire in turn-of-the-century France.¹⁵

¹⁴ Wayne KOSTENBAUM, *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, New York, Poseidon Press, 1993.

¹⁵ Karen HENSON, «Victor Capoul, Marguerite Olagnier's *Les Saïs* and the Arousing of Female Desire», *JAMS* 52 (Fall, 1999), pp. 419-164.

Low male voices have been strangely excluded from these recent efforts to bring interpretation closer to the moment and the agents of operatic performance. Basses and baritones, of course, rarely muster the type of sex appeal opera aficionados find so attractive in the sopranos and tenors of their preference. Furthermore, the roles played by male low voices are often too disturbing to encourage open tributes of admiration. Men like Don Giovanni, Saint Bris, Phillipe, or Boris are all disquieting figures, forbidden fruits enjoyed in the darker recesses of personal fantasy. As operatic embodiments of male subjectivity and power, they have also been strangely exempted from critical inquiry. The unexamined baritone goes hand in hand with the silence that still surrounds the concept and praxis of maleness in the romantic imagination. Exemplary in this regard is *The Verdi Baritone*, a recent book that discusses Giuseppe Verdi's roles for low-male voices as a

voyage of self-discovery [providing us] great insight into the essence of personal identity, into the suffering and delight of existence, into the struggle of the individual in a universe that is often beyond control and even comprehension...¹⁶

The voyage of 'self-discovery' Geoffrey and Ryan Edwards propose is ultimately a short path that leads us from the character to the composer as the unqualified subjectivity that stands beyond the text. Here, to know Verdi's baritones is to know Verdi at his most intellectual and most masculine – a category transcending cultural analysis. Actual baritones and their histories play little role in this strategy. They are sensitive collaborators, obedient disciples, more or less adequate vessels for the master's creativity. They serve, so to speak, higher (but tellingly unexamined) values.

And then again, against the traditional critical practice exemplified here by Edwards, we have baritones such as Mérly, whose presence on stage as effective as potentially troubling, prompted a visceral response from their listeners. Under the spell of Mérly playing Nélusko the composer nearly recedes into a critical blind spot, and the singer, conveniently located before us within the frame of representation offers both more tangible and complex 'in the flesh' venues for the historical

¹⁶ Geoffrey and Ryan EDWARDS, *The Verdi Baritone*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997.

examination of the male subject and its operatic manifestations. Mérly-as-Nélusko shows us (yet again) that the realities of operatic performance – in the romantic São Carlos as elsewhere – are strangely at odds with musicology's obstinate author- and/or text-oriented position towards the phenomenology of performed arts. Thus, we begin with a reconsideration of the baritone from the neglected viewpoint of the opera house, considering both the scene and pleasures of performance.

Jean Baptiste Mérly

Perhaps we may begin addressing Jean Baptiste Mérly's Lisbon success by taking seriously Eça de Queirós' suggestion that the low male voice was once the province of the male romantic imagination. A brief overview of the *Chronica dos Theatros* reporting on Mérly's performance of Nélusko suggests an overwhelming male response. Mob behavior in the theater is after all always a masculine affair, and like all other theaters of the time, São Carlos had its fair share of dandies and dilettantes forever willing to exert their critical muscle. The question is, what did this male applause signify? It would be simplistic to think of the Lisbon response to Mérly as Nélusko as denoting mere approval at the singer's voice. Before *L'Africaine*, Mérly sang Macbeth, William Tell, and Rigoletto in the São Carlos. And even though he was well received in Rossini's and Verdi's roles, none of these successes could have foretold his phenomenal triumph as Nélusko. Also, although a Frenchman, Mérly did not connect the listeners directly to the famous 1865 premiere of the work in Paris. And in reality, his relation to the *Opéra* was a difficult one, which in an ironic parallel to the character Nélusko, posited him as an institutional outsider.

The singer, once a gifted student of the Paris Conservatoire, debuted at the *Académie Impériale de Musique* in 1850. Alas, his successes in the French capital were cut short in 1852 when, according to Guillaume Ibos, he sang the aria 'mort aux tyrans' in Halévy's *Charles VI* holding his dagger pointed in the direction of the loge of Napoléon III.¹⁷ The gesture was deemed scandalously akin to treason and he was banned from performing in the theater. After the incident, Mérly saw his career restricted to French provincial theaters and foreign venues in Belgium,

¹⁷ Georges LOISEAU, *Notes sur le chant*, 1947, cited in Jean GOURRET, *Dictionnaire des chanteurs de l'Opéra de Paris*, Paris, Albatros, 1982, p. 61.

Spain, Portugal, Germany and Russia, where he nevertheless enjoyed a solid career. Towards the end of his life, the strength of his voice had become legendary and the event at the Opéra was retained in biographical sketches as an example of the singer's instinctual and all-powerful vocal empathy with the roles he sang. J. M. Mayan addressed this issue specifically when discussing the singer in *Les guèpes du théâtre* (1906). To him, the singer's colossal voice was the key to understanding its effect on the audience as well as on himself. To Mayan, Mèrly's vocal and theatrical embodiment of the characters he played was purely motivated by the effect of his vocal emissions on his own brain and nervous system.

His original interpretations probably came about as the consequence of sudden cerebral congestions, caused by the timbre and vibrations of his own large, warm and beautiful voice. This voice resonated in his ears, agitated his auditory strings, shocked his nerves, perturbed his blood and led to the congestion. But there was nothing there due to cerebral effort or serious work.¹⁸

Written in 1906, this is an ambivalent look back at a vanished operatic world, a time shortly before the rationalizing mania of naturalism took hold of the operatic imagination. As a memory of this forlorn past, Mèrly appears unlike any modern baritone; he is not a studious artist purposefully voicing and gesturing his interpretation of a given text into life, but an individual constantly submerged by the overpowering force of his own vocal organs. Mayan's recollection is tantalizing because it is fantastic. He suggests a *sui generis* dramatic embodiment, generated by purely acoustic means – physical resonance – which seemingly pushes operatic performance into the psychological blackhole of the irrational. To Mayan, Mèrly did not 'work and create' he simply had 'cerebral strokes' provoked by the enormous resonance of his own voice. Sound, emanating from the inner organs of the singer – the abdomen, thorax, larynx, vocal chords, mouth and skull – is a resonance that provokes a drastic forgetfulness of language and its meaning.

¹⁸ «Ses trouvailles furent sûrement le résultat d'une congestion momentanée de son cerveau, causée elle-même par les vibrations et le timbre de cette grande, chaude et belle voix, qui, résonnant à ses oreilles, agitaient ses cordes auditives, secouaient ses nerfs, influèrent sur le sang et amenaient cette congestion. Mais il n'y avait là aucun effort cérébral dû à un travail sérieux.» (J. M. MAYAN, *Les Guèpes du théâtre*, Paris, Bonvalot-Jouve, 1906, pp. 131-132).

Opera, of course, always works around this moment of verbal oblivion, but Mayan's assertion is more radical: he posits a reversal of standard operatic phenomenology. To him, Mérly did not play a character who sang but emitted a sound that provoked physical action. Here the singer appears in a whole new light, not as the expressive vehicle for the creative thought of the composer but as the source of operatic text. Voice and the bodily consequences of vocal resonance substitute for the authority of composer and text. Thus, Mayan's memory of Mérly's operatic talent echoes, thirty-odd years later, the reactions of those Portuguese critics who in the 1870s reported on his rendition of Nélusko. The deeper one delves into Mérly's success as Nélusko, the more complex the scene of performance becomes and the richer the intersections between the singer, the operatic role, and the audience appear.

Mérly's Voice

Spectators at the São Carlos rewarded Mérly night after night by stopping dramatic action and demanding that he break out of character and breach the proscenium to accept their applause. Their vehement tributes of admiration resonated even in the critical zeal with which journalists wrote about the character. The similarity of the critics' accounts and the unanimity of their praise translate into textual form the force of the impression left by the singer on the collective imagination. In a single 'voice', critics at the *Revolução de Setembro*, the *Chronica dos Theatros* and the *Jornal do Comércio* justified the attractiveness of the baritone's performance in a nutshell: 'Merly was Nélusko!' Voice and gesture intertwined in their appraisals of the performance:

Mr. Mérly embodies the character Nélusko with admirable property: when threatening and ferocious or when submissive he is always a highly meritorious actor-singer; in his solo in the first act, in the second act, in the ballad of the third, and the aria of the fourth he was always equal.¹⁹

¹⁹ «O sr. Merly caracteriza o personagem de Nelusko com uma propriedade admirável: ou quando ameaçador e fero ou quando submisso é sempre um actor-cantor de alto mérito; no seu canto a solo do primeiro acto, no segundo acto na ballada do terceiro, na aria do quarto esteve sempre à mesma altura.» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 4 February 1869).

Mérly is simply extraordinary, unbeatable, superb and terrible in his slave's passion; he is distrustful, sinister, grandiose, befitting any primitive race, a truly thorough creation of the artist accompanied by all the resources of a great baritone.²⁰

Mérly was Nélusko; that is, he was a ferocious Indian, either jealous or humble in his immense love. These two axes, on which his figure turns, were the pivots which supported the incomparable baritone. His voice and gesture had all gradations and quick and rapid transitions. There was no shadowy hesitation, but the firm step of the one who knows his ground. The role of Nélusko could not be realized with more absolute propriety.²¹

The critics' vision of a sublime Nélusko pushing the operatic limits of emotional expression dispenses almost entirely with the intricacies of the plot. Succinctly, our writers have all but forgotten the character's verbal expressions of resistance in Act I and II, his plans to destroy Guido d'Arezzo and D. Pedro's conquering fleet and calculating narratives in Act III, and his measured gestures of political obeisance towards his queen in Acts IV and V. Denied 'the word' by Mérly, Lisbon's 1869 Nélusko was first and foremost a 'gradation of the voice and gesture' or the expression of a primordial subjectivity.

Truth be said, there was a *complot* behind this radical foregrounding of the character's vocal persona. The performing score used in the São Carlos from 1869 to the 1890s reveals a strong editorial practice that drastically redressed the balance between the character's dramatic and vocal personae. Remarkably, the scene preceding Nélusko's *récit* and ballad in the third act was never performed in Lisbon. Thus, audiences were not made privy to Nélusko's exchanges with D. Pédro and D. Alvar, his lying

²⁰ «Merly é simplesmente extraordinario, incedível, soberbo e terrível na paixão do escravo, desconfiado, sinistro, pathético, digno do que quer que seja das raças primitivas, uma verdadeiramente completa criação de artista acompanhada de todos os recursos de um grande baritono. Merly foi Nelusko! Foi Nelusko, isto quer dizer, foi o índio feroz com os estremecimentos do ciúme e com a humildade do seu imenso amor. Estes dois eixos sobre que gira aquella figura, foram os que realmente apoiaram Merly. A voz como o gesto, teve todas as gradações e todas as transições rápidas e seccas. Não havia allí o tentear na sombra, havia o passo firme de quem conhece o terreno onde se move. O papel de Nelusko não pode ser encarnado com uma propriedade mais absoluta.» (*Revolução de Setembro*, 3 February 1869).

²¹ *Chronica dos Theatros*, 11 February 1869.

professions of good faith and promises of loyalty that convince the two officers along with the other sailors, to entrust him with the helm of the ship.²² As such, voice came before plot, and with it the re-shaping of Nélusko as a primitive creature, marked by a pendular alternation between fury and love, the cry and the murmur. In the press this Nélusko appears as a figure of cultural and biological regression, speaking his body in ‘furies and love tremors’. Thus the conflation of singer and character – celebrated by the operatic cliché ‘Merly is Nélusko!’ – came at a price. Mérly’s Nélusko is a poorer dramatic being, lacking words and suave dramatic gestures. But even as this new embodiment of the character evades compositional intention and scorns textual authority, it becomes an even more powerful operatic statement. In other words, Mérly’s (and the Valdez company’s) ‘disrespectful’ editing of Meyerbeer’s text – which we shall see extended even to details of the score – produced a convincing savage for the Lisbon audiences.

To the critic writing for the *Chronica dos Theatros* the baritone’s singing came closest to pure sound and the verbally unintelligible – noise and babble. His was a vocal discourse opposite to that of civilization, devoid of formal continuity (it is marked by ‘rapid and dry transitions’ or moments of discontinuity), and of a redemptive musical and emotional trajectory (it simply oscillates between two emotional poles). It is easy to imagine how the critic and others found that these gestures gave theatrical substance to a time-honored Western stereotype of racial Otherness: the Other as the negative dialectics of civilization, described as irrational, noisy, barely intelligible and bound to the body. But in a twist of faith, it was this stereotypical portrayal of a purely fictional character – Nélusko is at best a distant operatic resonance of Camões’ Muslim pilot from Mombaça, a very minor historical figure – that became the catalyst for historical readings of the drama.

Epic resonances

Historical readings of Mérly’s performance of Nélusko concerned the character’s vocal persona rather than his plot persona and referred specially to act three. In Lisbon, where the first part of the act was

²² *L’Africana/Musica del Maestro/G. Meyerbeer/Partitura/Att./Milano, proprietà di Francesco Lucca*, Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional.

excised, Nélusko made an unusually drastic appearance right after the initial chorus of the third act. In an unaccompanied recitative he called for a change of course. He sang alone, mastering a tortuous tonal line with a surprising ‘muscular’ voice – the controlled, loud, assured virtuosity of a macho show. Frightened or taken in by his vocal prowess, the sailors obey him. Then, as he was about to lead D. Pedro’s fleet to certain destruction, Nélusko paused to sing a ballad. He told the story of Adamastor, the giant of the Cape who destroys all ships.

The ballad functions in the plot as a moment of narrative *mise en abîme*, a gesture that foretells the impending doom of the ship and its crew. But it also provides a brief insight into the identity of Nélusko, establishing a narrative link between the character and the epic giant, the classical image of Otherness in Portuguese culture. Like the fabulous Adamastor, who in Camões’ epic narrative impresses Vasco da Gama with the disarranging strength and timbral quality of his voice,²³ Nélusko’s vocal performance in the ballad offers a sonorous image of musical chaos. And again like Adamastor, who remains a rather incoherent storyteller in the epic poem, capable only of primitive narrative efforts, Nélusko sings a preposterously chaotic story, evading all established patterns of musical and poetic clarity and articulation. His song is musically segmented, enriched by a percussive instrumentation, evoking in form and substance the loud emotional, yet disjointed, speech of the epic giant. This conflation of character and narrative implied in Meyerbeer’s text was also further reinforced in Mérly’s performances. In Meyerbeer’s original text, the ballad is only a tale – a suggested interpretation – dismissed by Nélusko’s laughter. Adamastor is Nélusko’s mask, and the character puts it on and takes it off ostensibly for the entertainment of the sailors, perhaps as a teasing admission of betrayal, perhaps in naive innocence.

In Lisbon, Mérly was not credited with these ambiguities. He did not laugh, and thus left no doubt in the minds of his listeners about his true identity – he was Adamastor! Exemplary, the critic writing for the

²³ Adamastor’s curse is anticipated in: «C’um tom de voz nos falla horrendo e grosso/ Que parece sair do mar profundo: / Arrepiam-se as carnes e o cabelo / A mi e a todos, só de ouvi-lo e ve-lo (V:40, 5-8)»; the giant’s narrative is prefaced by: «A boca e os olhos retorcendo, / E dando um espantoso e grande brado, / Me respondeu, com voz pesada e amara, / Com quem da pergunta lhe pesara (V: 49, 5-8)»; and the episode concludes with: «Assi contava e c’um medonho choro / Subito d’ante os olhos se apartou: / Desfez-se a nuvem negra, e c’um sonoro / Bramido muito longe o mar soou (V: 60, 1-4)».

Chronica dos Theatros made it the kernel of his discussion of Mérly's performance.

The continuous interruption of motives gives a somber coloring to the third act ballad, and Mérly brightens the savage colors to such an extent that the spectator believes he sees that figure, described by Camões:

Robust and vigorous;
 Enormous, and of stature very tall
 The visage frowning, and with squalid beard;
 The eyes were hollow; and the gesture
 Threatening and bad; the color seared and pale;
 The hair full of earth and grizzly;
 The mouth was black, the teeth all yellow.²⁴

Sensitive to the text-in-performance, the critic offers his own literary *mise en abîme*: Mérly opens a window into the figure of Adamastor. This critical reading duly notes the disruptive musical form of the ballad and the overwhelming power of Mérly's voice, but it also posits a mode of listening that exceeds the individual elements of text and performance. Envoiced by Mérly, Nélusko is imaginatively metamorphosed into the figure of the giant. Of course, the operatic illusion depends on one critical inversion of the literary text. In Camões' epic, Adamastor's physical presence is felt first and his frightful voice emerges naturally from the body as a secondary, albeit powerful, sign of difference. In the essay published in *Chronica dos Theatros* the voice is the primordial element, giving rise to the physical image. The traditional hierarchy of body and voice has been reversed to accommodate operatic perception: the voice has become the focal point of operatic representation and the element from which interpretation arises. In the process, operatic perception itself acquired epic proportions. And thus the attractiveness of the ballad to the Lisbon critic and, we may imagine, the rest of the audience. In the theater, listeners are imaginatively relocated within the frame of

²⁴ «Á ballada do terceiro acto dá colorido sombrio a continua interrupção de motivos, e Merly aviva-lhe as cores selváticas a tal ponto que o espectador julga ver aquella figura, descripta por Camões: Robusta e válida/ De disforme e grandiosa estatura/ O rosto carregado, a barba esqualida/ Os olhos encovados, e a postura/ Medonha e má, e a cor terrena e pálida,/ Cheios de terra, e crespos os cabellos,/ A bocca negra, os dentes amarelllos.» («A Africana», *Chronica dos Theatros*, 15 January 1870, 2-3).

representation, inhabiting historical memory as they conjure the presence of the fabled epic giant in operatic sound. These listeners become *a posteriori* companions of Da Gama, sharing in his awe before an impossible difference.

Mérly sang Nélusko in the São Carlos more often than any other baritone: in the seasons of 1869, 1870, and 1874. (Antonio Cotogni and Luigi Pandolfini sang the role in 1871 and 1872 respectively). The French baritone left a tradition of performance that, while briefly challenged by Cotogni, remained the standard through which other singers were judged well into the 1880s.²⁵ In other words, the impact of his rendition on the audience's perception of the opera was formative. *The Chronica dos Theatros'* reading of Mérly's own brand of vocally-induced epic illusion was reprinted verbatim the following year and it became a fixed (almost official) memory of the deep aural impression caused by the performance of the ballad. This aural fascination with the opera's most radical venue for the representation of Otherness – combined with a disregard for the text's Imperial themes – imaginatively attuned the listeners to the most troublesome, and more often repressed, moment of the colonial enterprise: the encounter with human difference. Unlike Parisian critics, who actively disliked Nélusko overwhelming vocal dominance in the ballad,²⁶ Lisbon listeners embraced the moment. Significantly, they also zestfully enjoyed their own sense of aural subjugation by the performing savage. (Pandolfini, for instance, was praised in 1872 for a performance that 'dominates the public').²⁷ This is a pleasure strangely at odds with Portuguese official lip-service to modern Imperial ideology, dependent on the philosophical and psychological tenets of unambiguous and unwavering dominance of the European subject over others even in the theater of the imagination.

²⁵ «Nelusko é Cotogni. Se alguém esperava do distinto baritono a força vocal, a aspereza, os excessos de vocalização de Mérly, enganava-se redondamente. Mérly executa a parte de Nélusko por um modo admirável; dá-lhe um tom selvático e rude: pode ser assim; mas se analysarmos a letra d'est parte os sentimentos que o disparatado selvagem expressa, a não ser na canção do terceiro acto e ainda o allegro do quarto havemos de concordar que a interpretação de Cotogni é mais racional.» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 13 January 1871); «O sr. Pandolfini caracteriza Nélusko como Mérly, um selvagem; e não sabemos se faz esquecer este excelente artista; o que sabemos é que é admirável, e que domina o publico.» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 5 November 1872).

²⁶ The text was first published by the *Chronica dos Theatros* in 26 February 1869 and reprinted in 15 January 1870.

²⁷ See footnote 26.

From Opera to Literature

While nationalist appropriations of Meyerbeer's final opera remained focused on its motifs of 'civilization' – historical progress, intellectual inquisitiveness, a spirit of conquest – audiences were hearing for something other. From a psychological perspective, their perception of the gesture emerging from the voice implies a regression to the first order of human perception. Before the intervention of sight and the rational order of the symbolic, the perception of the voice is what connects the subject (the newborn) with the Other (the Mother).²⁸ In other words, the pleasure of listening to the voice in ignorance of its verbal content is a prelapsarian one, evading the strict semiotic order of civilized communication. Which is to say that in enjoying Nélusko-Mérly's vocal antics, male listeners were subversively indulging a primal aural pleasure. (Were they not lulled into an epic vision by the sheer force of auralty?) But how did this unexpected encounter with the primitive by means of the voice bear on the perception of a specific Portuguese (male) identity?

Here we turn from the analysis of performance practice in the São Carlos and operatic criticism in the Lisbon papers to the realm of literature. Although essentially unnoticed in Portuguese literary studies, Nélusko is an important motif of cultural critique in Eça de Queirós' portrayal of Lisbon of the early 1870s in *Os Maias* (1888). The role is recalled in the novel in connection with a masked ball hosted by the banker Cohen for which *tout Lisbonne* – including naturally the regulars at the São Carlos's fictional lyrical season of 1872 – have been invited.²⁹

It all begins in pleasurable civilized conversation at the Ramalhete. In friendly innocence, João da Ega, Carlos da Maia, his grand father Afonso, and Dâmaso Salcedo discuss appropriate masks for the anticipated soirée. João da Ega refuses to divulge his disguise, but Dâmaso eagerly discloses his own:

²⁸ Marie France CASTAREDE, *La Voix et ses sortilèges*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1991, pp. 134-135.

²⁹ Eça de Queirós references the season of 1872 indirectly during a conversation sustained by Carlos da Maia and the Countess of Gouvarinho in which Carlos declares the tenor Nicollini «already a degeneration» and praises the baritone Pandolli. The real Nicollini was briefly in Lisbon in 1871 for a few benefit performances in 1871 and the fictional Pandolli is most probably an indirect reference to the baritone Pandolfini who was engaged for the season of 1872-73. Later in the novel, Dâmaso Salcedo's list of the recipients of his own slanderous article on the subject of Carlos affair with Maria Eduarda, includes the prima donna Fancelli. This is also a veiled reference to the season of 1872, when the tenor Fancelli was engaged to sing in the theater.

'As for me, I'm making no secret of it,' said Dâmaso noisily. 'I'm going as a savage!'

'Naked?'

'No. As Nelusko in *L'Africaine*. Senhor Afonso da Maia, what d'you think? D'you think it'll be chic?'

'Perhaps *chic* is not quite the expression,' said Afonso, smiling, 'but impressive, certainly.'³⁰

Later, the day of the ball he sees Carlos da Maia again only to inform:

'Are you still going to the Cohens' in a domino? My savage's costume has turned out marvelously. I'm going to show it off tonight to the Brazilian woman. I'll enter the hotel wrapped in a clock, and then I'll suddenly appear in the drawing room as a savage, as Nélusko, singing:

Alerta Marinari,

Il vento cangia.

Terribly *chic!* Good-bye!³¹

On a fundamental level, Salcede's pride in his own operatic mask tethers the narrative to Lisbon's cultural environment of the early 1870s, and the contemporary popularity of *L'Africainé's* baritone role. Nélusko, performed by Mérly, Cotogni or Pandolfini, appears in Queirós' pen as a success of the populace, enjoyed by even the most vulgar and reprehensible of fictional operatic dandies: Dâmaso Salcede.³²

³⁰ «- Eu cá não faço segredo – disse ruidosamente Dâmaso. – Eu cá vou de selvagem. – Nu? – Não. De Nelusko na 'Africana'. O sr. Afonso da Maia, que lhe parece? Acha chique? – Chique não exprime bem – disse Afonso sorrindo. – Mas grandioso, é, decerto.» (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *op. cit.*, p. 199).

³¹ «- Tu sempre vais à noite, aos Cohens, de dominó? O meu fato de selvagem ficou divino. Eu venho mostrá-lo à noite à brasileira... Entro no hotel embrulhado num capote, e apareço-lhes de repente na sala, de selvagem, de Nelusko, a cantar:
Alerta, marinari,
Il vento cangia...
Chique a valer!... Good bye!» (*Ibid*, 268).

³² Eça de QUEIRÓS describes the inattentive and thus inappropriate behavior of Salcede in the São Carlos in the passage: «Se Carlos aparecia no teatro, Dâmaso imediatamente arrancava-se da sua cadeira, às vezes na solenidade de uma bela ária, e pisando os botins dos cavalheiros, amarrotando a compostura das damas, abalava, abria de estalo a claque, vinha-se instalar na frisa, ao lado de Carlos.» (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *op. cit.*, p. 189).

But the operatic nod is also more than an historical clue; it advances insight into the human nature of Salcede. Through it, we have access to critical information concerning the character long before any of the characters in the novel become aware of it. (Carlos da Maia, for instance, realizes only too late the extent of the vulgarity and treacherousness of his 'friend'. And João da Ega, made privy to the tragedy of the Maia family, will lament towards the end of the novel: 'Ah! If it weren't for Dâmaso's letter... Everything stemmed from Dâmaso's cursed letter!») .³³

The key to understanding Dâmaso's true self and the potential threat he represents to the civilized harmony of the Maia's world, lies in operatic observation, that is in listening to his voice. In the novel, Salcede is first introduced in disguise, displaying all trappings of civilization. We first read of him as the constant companion of the intelligent and promising João da Ega.³⁴ And soon, at the dinner of the Café Central, he is formally introduced to Carlos da Maia sporting a series of promising facts: his uncle is an 'intimate' friend of Gambetta,³⁵ he has just returned from Paris, and he is on intimate terms with the elegant family of Castro Gomes.³⁶ Despite all these credentials, his voice betrays him: he is always too loud and his speech often without semiotic substance, approaching mere babble. Thus, his most important pronouncement about Paris is: 'Those Boulevards, hem!';³⁷ and later in the dinner his presence will be made noticeable only through the noise he produces, that is 'the thundering bravos'³⁸ he emits in support of Alencar's reminiscences of Pedro da Maia. Throughout the novel, the formulaic inquiry 'Do you find it chic? [Achas Chique?]' and exclamation 'Terribly chic! [Chique a valer!]' are Dâmaso's empty, yet noisy verbal leitmotifs.

The examples of Salcede's oblivious trappings over the codes of gentlemanly conduct multiply after his first introduction in the text. Significantly, they all point to a sense of self that, like Nélusko's, is entirely fixed in the body. Thus, he lets Carlos know that with women 'my theory is this: you have to grab them! I immediately grab them!'³⁹

³³ «Se não fosse a carta do Dâmaso... Tudo provinha do maldito Dâmaso!» (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *op. cit.*, p. 625).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁷ «Aquele Boulevarzinho, hem!» (*Ibid.*, p. 158).

³⁸ «bravos estrondosos» (*Ibid.*, p. 161.).

³⁹ «a minha teoria é esta: atracão! Eu cá, é logo atracão» (*Ibid.*, p. 177).

And his body, envoiced by a loud throat and mouth, is noisily heard throughout the narrative ('[overflowing] with noise', in an 'outcry',⁴⁰ 'snarling',⁴¹ 'babbling',⁴² 'feigning to laugh loud'⁴³). Finally, the sudden confluence of Nélusko and Salcede will bring all his bodily nonsense into a meaningful textual frame.

The operatic moment Dâmaso has chosen to surprise other Lisbon dandies is the greatest vocal moment of the character: 'Alerta marinari.' It is the unaccompanied recitative that precedes the ballad in Act III and the *pièce de resistance* for the baritone, extending from the high E flat to a sustained low B natural. Here musical articulation and projection takes precedent over the word. In performance this is a tremendous vocal gesture that unexpectedly projects the singer out of the grand operatic tableau. Significantly, this vocal breach of the proscenium moved Lisbon audiences to wild ecstasies of admiration in the early 1870s and it served as a critical point of comparison between Mérly's and Cotogni's performing styles in the press.⁴⁴

Salcede's vocalization repeats Nélusko's gesture, reenacting the infantile listening pleasure of 'allowing to resonate in the self, silently, the word of the other'.⁴⁵ As Marie-France Castarède has remarked 'this means that one is as sensitive to the voice as to the content of the message, since it is [the voice] that expresses the said, the profound hidden sense, unpronounceable and unconscious'.⁴⁶ In this sense Salcede, possessed by the voice of the baritone, prompts a narrative revelation. He, like the real audiences of the São Carlos who through applause aligned themselves with the Other of the operatic narrative, is oblivious to the Imperial

⁴⁰ «[transbordando] ruidosamente», com «alarido» (*Ibid.*, p. 373).

⁴¹ «rugindo» (*Ibid.*, p. 387).

⁴² «tagarelado» (*Ibid.*, pp. 407, 422).

⁴³ «ostentando rir alto» (*Ibid.*, p. 426).

⁴⁴ «Chegamos ao terceiro acto: ouvimos os famoso recitativo All'erta marinar que Merly omittia, dizendo apenas um ou dois versos. O recitativo não tem acompanhamento: é um prasear largo, notas sustentadas; é de difficilima execução e o sr. Cotogni accentua-o com uma firmeza, com uma intonação tão certa, que nos surprehendeu, e ao publico, que respondeu ao magnifico la sustentado, com que finda o recitativo, com uma salva geral e prolongada de palmas. Porque omittia Merly, com a sua potente voz, este famoso recitativo?» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 13 January, 1872).

⁴⁵ «laisser résonner en soi, dans le silence, la parole de l'autre» (M. F. CASTAREDE, *op. cit.*, p. 136).

⁴⁶ «cela signifie que l'on est autant sensible à la voix qu'au contenu du message, car c'est par elle qui se livre le non-dit, le sens profond, le caché, l'indicible, l'inconscient.» (*Ibid.*).

message of the plot. Rather, he sets for himself a cruel parallel: like Nélusko, the excluded character in the opera's colonial logic, he reveals himself an outsider to the fastidious bourgeois civility of the Maias.

Mimicry

Dâmaso, fat, loud, a liar and a coward, intimately acquainted with the most criminal and insalubrious corners of the city – those Carlos would like to see treated in naturalist narrative – is a literary portrayal of the capital's 'degenerate' male.⁴⁷ Together with Eusébio and some other minor characters in the novel he gives literary substance to the theme of Portuguese degeneracy theorized by the generation of 1870 and so often reproduced in Queirós' fictional output. As António Machado Pires has shown us, to the positivist minds of Queirós' intellectual generation, racial degeneracy was the product of a deficient (romantic) education and unhealthy urban life conditions.⁴⁸ Thus, while João da Ega's young servant ('a boy with horribly vicious features'⁴⁹) runs away perverted by the cook, Eusébiozinho, raised by his aunts in religious fear, protected by flannels, without habits of physical and mental hygiene, ends up in Lisbon a character of no moral or physical strength, abused by his own wife.

Yet, the types of degeneracy are not all alike. By comparison with Eusébio, Salcede is healthy and physically active and sports his inferiority in the vulgar voluminousness of his voice and bodily shape. Rather unlike the degenerate who disappears in the modern subtypes of the ill and weak – the vanishing body – his regression is aligned with the primitive. Queirós develops this parallel throughout the novel, depicting Salcede as an early mimic man who imports wholesale (and systematically misunderstands) the ticks of civilization. In him, refined attitudes and elegant attire are revealed grotesquely inappropriate by an unfitting voice and body. Like that of a stereotypical colonial subject of the European imperial imagination – endlessly experimenting with the fragments of his master's formal attire – his physical essence remains visibly inadequate through all trappings of culture.

⁴⁷ Eça de QUEIRÓS, *op. cit.*, p. 162; see António Machado PIRES, *A ideia de decadência na Geração de 70*, Lisbon, Vega, 1992, pp. 174-5.

⁴⁸ A. M. PIRES, *op. cit.*, pp. 153- 170.

⁴⁹ «um garoto de feições horrivelmente viciosas» (Eça de QUEIRÓS, *op. cit.*, p.146).

Yet, Queirós' critique of the Lisbon native extends further. Like the dark Other of the European colonial imagination, the grotesque visual and aural dissonance embodied by Salcede is ultimately the fore-sign of the threat he represents to the Maias. Here, the fact that Salcede chooses to make 'Allerta marinari' the central element of his (revealing) mask is also telling. Nélusko's call for a change of navigational course is a deceitful gesture. Famously, it will lead to a destructive shipwreck and a bloody massacre. In following the Indian pilot, the sailors have mistaken his ignorant and fantastic modes – notably his propensity for amusing storytelling – for inoffensiveness. They underestimate the native's mental determination and capacity for intellectual calculation. This is the aspect of Nélusko's plot persona admired (and thus mimicked) by the equally underestimated Salcede. The parallel between the two is obvious: Nélusko (in the opera) and Dâmaso (in the novel) have only one talent others are eager to explore. The first knows the Indian waters, the second knows the art of calligraphy. Thus their poetic justice: the first leads the ship into dangerous reefs, the second writes a defamatory letter and newspaper article. Queirós' ironic touch consists in anticipating the betrayal of Salcede with a reference to that of Nélusko. Here operatic quotation offers a sure clue for plot unfolding.

The Dandy in the Text

Queirós' imaginative intersection between narrative and operatic impression, or more broadly between literary realism and operatic romanticism, has been often read as a means to his own rigorous realist portrayal of Portuguese decadence. In fact, the novelist's well known commitment to the ideology of realism has made of him a most trusted period informant. His word – even his literary word – is often taken as truth in cultural studies. His intellectual influence is still felt in two areas of our historiography: his ideological condemnation of opera as a furthering of national decadence has remained a defining theme in the cultural critique of the Portuguese *fin de siècle*,⁵⁰ and his literary characters have been commonly taken for historical types. Whenever they are made

⁵⁰ A. M. PIRES, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-5.

to enter a theater or listen to music they become 'the average listener' in the Portuguese historiographical imagination.⁵¹

But what is Queirós really up to by endowing his most artistically insensitive, operatically challenged dandy with a grand operatic mask? Salcedo's lyrical calculations naively deconstruct operatic illusion, exposing the machinery of representation. His gesture collects all that goes into the making of opera: the costume, the *mise en scène*, a gesticulating body and a singing head. We don't even miss the support of the orchestra. This perfect instant of operatic mimesis to be reproduced out of context in a fashionable Lisbon hotel upholds a mirror to literary representation. Put differently, Salcedo's self-inclusion within the frame of representation prompts a meditation on Queirós's position within his own text. In fact, an earlier Eça de Queirós, habitué at the São Carlos in the 1870s, looms behind the gesture of Salcedo. The sudden eruption of 'Allerta marinari' in the literary text springs from the young Queirós's operatic ear as much as from the older Queirós's memory of the (by 1888 antique) operatic impression. In this sense, Dâmaso's self-performance in the novel hits the knowing reader almost in the manner of a Proustian recollection. Dermis's lyrical flight has to be sung to be fully read and thus it activates in the body of the reader a sudden and emotional memory of a particular pleasure felt by the dandy in the São Carlos in the 1870s. This is as much a moment of intelligence as of feeling, which tells us that the unthinking dandy who had once abandoned himself to the vocal pleasures of the baritone's voice, subversively enjoying an overpowering operatic savagery, is still there. Put differently, Queirós is teasingly both 'in' and 'out of' the decadent picture he paints.

And so is the reader. The ultimate (but great) irony about *Os Maias* and its purposeful realist critique of romantic mores is that despite all its textual assurances of verisimilitude, or all the details pushing us to read the text as life, it courts the reader in a grand romantic fashion. Here, again, Salcedo's lyrical flight is exemplary. The dandy's self-fashioned parallel with Nélusko, his display of operatic voice as a mask that unmasks his treachery-to-be reproduces in the novel the pleasure mechanisms of grand opera. The fun of reading for the character Salcedo lies in this

⁵¹ Mário Vieira de Carvalho's discussion of São Carlos in the 1870s takes particularly seriously Queirós's descriptions of operatic reception, adopting the novelist's fictional characters as exemplary historical listeners. See for instance, his analysis of Artur Curvelo's listening to Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*. (*Eça de Queirós e Offenbach, cit.*, pp. 33-34).

equivocal pleasure, as we both join the novel's narrator and the Maias' circle in despising Salcede and exult on having caught on to his (operatically foretold) betrayal. We too are caught in the pleasures of Meyerberian melodrama even as we profess allegiance to the practices of literary realism. But what are we to think of Queirós' reliance on the operatic practices and pleasures he so publicly scorned?

Behind Nélusko, and the fictional dandy who willfully uses him as a mask, there is a third mimic man: Eça de Queirós, the dandy turned writer pleasurably experimenting with the pieces of a cultural attire he has found in the opera theater. This should give us pause to reconsider Queirós' own identity – as man, critic and artist. Salcede's gesture, we have seen, falls less under the category of realism, or Queirós' well advertised commitments to literary verisimilitude, than under his love for the theatrical, the excesses of melodramatic expression brilliantly cultivated in grand opera. It has been argued that the author's rejection of the romantic loves of his youth (read his departure from cultural mimicry) was abrupt and radical. Mário Vieira de Carvalho, for instance, sees Queirós' renunciation of the 'romantic tone' occurring in 1868 or 1869, twenty years before *Os Maias*. And significantly, he also argues that this ideological *volte face* coincides with the author's sudden acquaintance with Offenbach's operettas and their powers of caricature. Carvalho's argument, crediting Offenbach for Queirós' new found narrative modes of ironic distancing in the 1870s, is both compelling and enlightening, and yet it falls short of explaining the writer's late flirtation with Meyerbeer. But here we should perhaps return to the image of the dandy, and reconsider the ideological commitments and cultural polemics of our favorite fin-de-siècle writer from the point of view of his pleasures.

***L'Africaine* under the aegis of colonialism**

Nélusko's fall

Back in the theater, audiences' pleasurable fixation on Nélusko came to a clear end in the early 1880s. In 1879, Pandolfini performed the role again in Lisbon, but with considerably less success. In the *Revolução de Setembro* Cristovão de Sá complained of his vocal decay and added a significant observation:

The best drawn type in the opera is Nélusko, and this is why the music for the baritone is the most logical, grandiose and characteristic, even though it *does not delight all aural sensibilities*.⁵²
[my emphasis]

Nélusko himself was falling out of favor. Significantly, critics lost interest in grandiloquent renditions of the role. In Lisbon, as elsewhere, the new dramatic baritonal style – more focused on the projection of the ‘natural’ male voice, emphasizing verbal enunciation and musical nuance – was winning over the energetic vocal accents and explosions of strength of the older school. Thus, Alighieri’s and Dufriche’s Mérly-like vocal interpretations of Nélusko were chastised in 1882 and 1886 as in bad taste,⁵³ and Kaschmann, who Benevides later recalled as having only a small voice, was hailed as the new great interpreter of the role, giving the critics:

A civilized barbarian, a gentleman savage who sings his adagios with the tenderness of a Romeo, and in his Othello-like roars displays the mild furor of a modern jealousy.⁵⁴

Lisbon was reforming Nélusko: domesticating his voice through the word, rejecting his old preeminent vocal attractiveness. Ultimately, as is well known, the character was to recede into a secondary dramatic status and, returning to a level zero of operatic exegesis, *L’Africaine* was to be read exclusively for plot.

⁵² «O typo mais bem desenhado [da opera] é o de Nélusko, e por isso também é que a musica do barytono é a mais logica, a mais grandiosa, a mais caracteristica, embora nem a todos deleite igualmente a sensibilidade auditiva.» (*Revolução de Setembro*, 1 November 1879).

⁵³ «Se [Alighieri] perdesse o continuado desejo que o persegue de armar ao effeito, de certo que conseguiria agradar, isto tanto pelas sympathias que possui, como pelo desempenho que dá à sua parte. São de mau gosto os seguintes detalhes de execução: allegro na aria do segundo acto, demasiado esforço; septimino no mesmo acto, voz com exagero; recitativo do terceiro, terminação que não existe na partitura e que é deplorável; ballada, voracidade pelas notas, appetite formidável...» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 3 December 1882); «Dufriche, no papel de Nélusko, despresa a sua consciência de artista para visar unicamente o effeito. Vê-se que, ha bastante tempo, vive em Itália e se vae esquecendo do seu pais natal. O sol agudo, com que substitui o trillo na oitava baixa, em que se deve terminar o recitativo do terceiro acto, alerta marinar, e o lá destacado com que remata a ballada, não nos agrada, nem produzem effeito. O movimento d’est ultimo trecho, que seja dito, não se dá muito bem com a garganta do distincto barytono, é muito rallentado.» (*Jornal do Comércio*, 28 December, 1886).

⁵⁴ «um barbaro civilizado, um selvagem gentleman, tendo nos seus adagios a ternura d’um romeu, tendo nos seus rugidos à Othello, o furor ameno de um ciume moderno.» (*Diario de Noticias*, 11 October 1881).

Imperial deafness

The performance of the opera in the São Carlos in celebration of Gungunhana's capture and the end of the Mozambique campaigns on January 20, 1896 marked with great political aplomb the return to a reading of the opera-as-tale. That evening, amidst a chosen audience including the royal family and court, the opera's plot was unambiguously adopted as an official historical text. The first loges were ornamented with Indian silk covers, the orchestra played the royal anthem several times during performance and, in a final chauvinistic touch, the *mise en scène* for the third act was changed:

In the third act, the scene of the ship, many soldiers who participated in the [African] expedition were brought on stage. One carried a Portuguese flag, provoking much applause.⁵⁵

The ship's altered *mise en scène*, commented widely in the press, was the highest moment of the performance, an obvious symbol of new colonialist historicism. But this aestheticized conflation of the opera's troubled rendition of long-past Portuguese nautical glories with the official rendition of current colonial events was significantly a deaf one, ignoring Nélusko's sonorities of defiance and destruction just as official policy condemned Gungunhana – the new colonial subject often photographed but never heard – to remain enclosed within a wall of silence. *L'Africaine's* reception history in Lisbon, despite later unmemorable performances, ended at this moment with the frozen gesture of the tableau. In the new Lisbon of the 1890s, steaming with post-Ultimatum nationalist aspirations and finally geared for its own *mission civilisatrice*, no dandy remained to enjoy the savage.

⁵⁵ «No terceiro acto, na scena do navio, appareceram sobre o palco muitos expedicionários, trazendo um soldado a bandeira portugueza, os que provocou muitos aplausos.» (Francisco da Fonseca BENEVIDES, *O Real Theatro de S. Carlos de Lisboa*, Lisbon, 1902, vol. 2, p. 110).