

# *Notes on Four Texts by Ana Cristina Cesar\**

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**Abstract:** *The objective of this article is to comment on four texts by Ana Cristina Cesar: a sequence of fictional letters and three poems. They appear in the posthumous volume *Antigos e soltos* [Old and Loose] (2008), made up of poems, letters, diary entries and other texts, contained in a file of drafts kept by the author. The poems chosen are, in a way, about the dilemmas of poetic writing and the relationship between life and art.*

The poet Ana Cristina Cesar, born in Rio de Janeiro, published little in her short lifetime (1952-1983): her work was included in some newspaper and magazine anthologies, and, for the first time in a book, *26 poetas hoje* [26 Poets Today] (1976), edited by Heloísa Buarque de Holanda, who also wrote the preface. This was the publication that established the label “marginal generation” for an offbeat group of young poets who were then becoming known, principally in Rio de Janeiro. Though not entirely subscribing to the ideas of the group, Ana Cristina shared with them a preference for handmade editions produced and distributed by their own authors, outside the circuit of the publishing houses. In this way she produced the little books *Cenas de abril* (1979), [April Scenes], *Correspondência completa* (1979) [Complete Correspondence] and *Luvás de pelica* (1980) [Kid Gloves]. In 1982, for the first time, a commercial publishing house published one of her books: *A teus pés* [At Your Feet], which also included her earlier work.

Having graduated in Modern Languages, she went on to take an MA in England, on the translation of Katherine Mansfield’s short story “Bliss”, and another MA in Brazil on documentary cinema. She was especially keen on the work of Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath and Walt Whitman, and translated several of their poems. She was also a journalist, contributing pieces on literature, theatre and the arts in general.

She died tragically, leaving many unpublished texts, including poems, diary entries, letters and critical essays, which were published posthumously in the volumes *Inéditos e dispersos* (1985) [Unpublished and Scattered] and *Crítica e tradução* (1999) [Criticism and Translation] – both edited by Armando Freitas Filho; *Correspondência*

*incompleta* (1999) [Incomplete Correspondence], edited by Armando Freitas Filho and Heloísa Buarque de Holanda; and *Antigos e soltos* (2008), [Old and Loose], edited by Viviana Bosi.

I shall now comment on four poetic texts taken from a file of drafts that Ana Cristina Cesar kept for many years. She used to rewrite each poem several times. The versions chosen to feature in this article were those that the poet typed or of which she made a fair copy – though we cannot be sure that they were “definitive”. Most of the material found in this file was published in the book *Antigos e soltos*, [Old and Loose], in which the texts presented here may be found.

#### THREE LETTERS TO NAVARRO

Navarro,

I am leaving you my posthumous texts. I ask only this of you: do not let them say they are products of a sick mind!  
I can cope with anything except this biographilic obscurantism. These literary psychologists are enormous rats – they gnaw what they find with the thread and the rancidity of their cheap analogies. As though what they did to Pessoa were not enough. Yet again we need a new generation that knows how to listen to the chatter of the signs.

R.

Navarro,

The animality of the signs disturbs me. Lines of verse come galloping down tree-fringed avenues to trample on my soul or beat their wings amongst the dark pigeons of the night. They fill the bathroom, disturb the tenants, escape through the chinks as worms. Oh, the melancholic impertinence of metaphors! I feel sorry for myself, the clumsy sorrow of wounded animals. Whilst comforting them I double up over my own sorrow and weep. My ears vomit rhythms, tears, I obey. I'm frightened to say that the form of the letters hides love, desire, and you flinching around me. At the next try (and there are five thorns) I shall manage nothing more than a babble.

R.

Navarro,

Today I produced a character who's already freed me from the anxieties of silence. I'm still not sure about the sex and age that I'm going to give him or her. But there's no need to worry: these questions have already been duly resolved by Orlando. I'm only fearful about his or her future: he or she dreams of creating immortal pages but is tortured by a lack of productivity. I fear that this problem may also have been overcome by the great Woolf. Who'd have thought it, here I go committing the crime of exalting Personalities! Since I read Pessoa however he never lets my shots backfire. Quiet, I hear the door! It was the old folk coming back to the celestial tent. Without them God would feel that he was an orphan, but with them I'm sure he feels that he's divine. I was telling you about the relegated

character to whom I have already given a family. Since it seems to me that he or she likes the sea and the coves, above all the molluscs, writhing in their shelters. He or she believes they can be imitated on paper, but can find no bridge between such beings and such forms. Like being like form, as my beloved aunt used to say, but caring mirrors contradicted me in the blink of an eye. However, the figure of a loved aunt is larger than the despair of the evidence... Let the collages and their deliria come to me. Or the little children, whose gaze moves my exhausted eardrums. I was talking to you about innards. Keep this secret; this secretion. No,  
R.

#### TRÊS CARTAS A NAVARRO

Navarro,  
Te deixo meus textos póstumos. Só te peço isto: não permitas que digam que são produtos de uma mente doentia! Posso tolerar tudo menos esse obscurantismo biografílico. Ratazanas esses psicólogos da literatura - roem o que encontram com o fio e o ranço de suas analogias baratas. Já basta o que fizeram ao Pessoa. É preciso mais uma vez uma nova geração que saiba escutar o palrar os signos.

R.

Navarro,  
A animalidade dos signos me inquieta. Versos a galope descem alamedas a pisotear-me a alma ou batem asas entre pombos pardos de noite. Enchem o banheiro, perturbam os inquilinos, escapam pelas frestas em forma de lombri-gas. Ó melancólica impertinência das metáforas! Tenho pena de mim mesmo, pena torpe de animais aflitos. Ao animá-los me dobro sobre a pena e choro. Meus ouvidos vomitam ritmos, lágrimas, obedeço. Tenho medo de dizer que a forma das letras oculta amor, desejo, e a tua esquiva pessoa ao meu redor. Na próxima tentativa (e cinco espinhos são) não soltarei mais que balbucios.

R.

Navarro,  
Hoje produzi um personagem que já me alivia as ansiedades do silêncio. Hesito ainda sobre o sexo e a idade que lhe darei. Mas não há porque preocupar-me: essas questões já foram devidamente resolvidas por Orlando. Temo apenas por seu futuro: sonha criar páginas imortais mas tortura-se na improdutividade. Receio que também este problema tenha sido superado pela grande Woolf. Quem diria, aqui

vou eu incorrendo no delito de exaltação de Personalidades! Desde que li Pessoa porém não me deixa o tiro de sair pela culatra. Caluda, que ouço a porta! Eram os velhos que voltavam à tenda celeste. Sem eles Deus se sentiria órfão, com eles tenho a certeza sente-se divino. Falava-te da personagem relegada, a quem já conferi família. Pois me parece que aprecia o mar e as covas, mormente os moluscos retorcendo-se nos seus abrigos. Crê imitá-los em papéis, mas não encontra ponte entre tais seres e tais formas. Tal ser tal forma, já dizia minha tia a quem amava mas espelhos solícitos desmentiram-me num piscar de olhos. A figura de uma tia amada é porém ainda maior que o desespero das evidências... Que venham a mim as colagens e seus delírios. Ou as criancinhas, cujos olhares me enternecem os tímpanos exaustos. Falava-te de vísceras. Guarda este segredo; esta secreção. Não,

R.

The famous *boutade* of Mallarmé (“It is absolutely not with ideas, my dear Degas, that verses are made, but with words.”) is usually interpreted in an elegantly clinical way, as proof that poetry is such an autonomous art that it can rise above every impurity, whether ideological, historical or biographical.

In a certain mysterious way, “*Três cartas a Navarro*” [Three Letters to Navarro], texts found amongst Ana Cristina Cesar’s papers, return to the question of the writing statute in its complex overlapping with life, and infuse new blood into the phrase of the refined French poet, encountering the crisis of modern verse from an entirely different angle. From a certain point of view, we might say that the phrase is here baptised and confirmed in the belief that the poet in art is free from empirical injunctions, and, through words, breathes life into the “rhythmic wing.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, this does not mean a sweet detachment from real life, since the sign is reached from within, from the wrong side of the garment as it were. Sartre considers poetic language to be wild, arising from things as yet unnamed: in Ana Cristina’s text, the engagement is deep because the internal and external animals sprout from the wilder root of the senses, grabbing author and reader alike at the threshold of consciousness.

In the first letter, the initial request already places us – indiscrete readers of someone else’s correspondence – in the position of accomplices of the executor, an unknown person disguised under the pseudonym of Navarro. Unpublished, the letters are written for posterity. “R.”, the equally enigmatic signatory, vehemently requests “literary” distance and respect. Always utilising the second person singular and a slightly pompous and somewhat antiquated vocabulary (is it perhaps an echo of the Portuguese style, recalling the reference to Fernando Pessoa?), the writer’s tone underscores the appeal that his or her privacy should be preserved, that the reader should be freed from his or her “biophilic” vice so

that he or she may “listen to the chatter of the signs”. The whole appeal is based on the separation between the empirical “I”, who can be “gnawed” by critics with a psychological bent and thus destroyed, and the literary construction, which should retain the capacity to continue to speak.

And what are these signs like? Does it so happen that they come to dance harmoniously around the letter-writer, revealing themselves for his or her delight? On the contrary, they are described in the second letter as “wounded animals” which torment the writer like a voodoo demon, lines of verse that “trample on [the writer’s] soul”. Swept away by their convulsive strength, “R.” is trampled underfoot, disturbed, pricked by thorns (each one representing a successive attempt at communication), until he or she is doubled up in tears and is reduced to “a babble”. They gallop, beat their wings, slip away like worms, taking over the rooms of the house. They pass through locked doors to torture the reluctant “I” with their unwanted visits. These tormenting and dominating invaders address the interlocutor, against the will of the author, who is defenceless against the alterity of the language slipping by. It is not the mouth but the ears that “vomit rhythms, tears”, it is up to them to obey the voices assaulting the poet. “I is another” but the other is an “I” – both caught up in a war of love and desire, repulsion and disquiet. If the writer feels sorry for them, he or she is really feeling self-pity. The writer’s innermost feelings are the animals, which reveal their wish to be the only reader (“singular and anonymous”, in Silviano Santiago’s appropriate expression). Mallarmé stated ironically that a poem is composed of words and words alone, as if they did not contain all unconscious matter, much denser than mere ideas – readymade, explicit, clean, already tamed and obedient.

Pessoa and Woolf appear in the third fragment precisely as examples of heteronomy – whether in the androgynous, ubiquitous figure of Orlando, or in the aversion to the exaltation of the personality of Pessoa’s poetic “I”. It makes no difference whether the character,<sup>2</sup> or alter-ego, that the poet wishes to create, inspired by them, is male or female (by the way, “R.” always refers to himself in the masculine gender), nor what his or her age is, nor whether his or her style would reflect his or her personality (problems already solved by the two model writers, masters of variability): what is important is to discover whether it will be possible to break through the barrier of time with an everlasting piece of writing.

Paradoxically, “R.” ends up exalting the very character that he wishes to obliterate: in literature, this is a shot that always backfires, as Eliot recognised when he described poetry as an “escape from emotion”, arguing that only those possessed of personality and emotions can know what it means to wish to escape from them.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he attributes a family and a house to the character, whether male or female. Several generations are present: the old folk, the beloved aunt, the little children. The old folk take care of everything, even of the Creator Himself: “Without them God would feel that he was an orphan, but with them I’m sure he feels that he’s divine.” But the correspondence remains secret, even in the “celestial tent,” since the poet is insulated, and sees askew, hidden like the molluscs in coves beside the sea. Once again, the letter-writer merges with the character: which

of the two has a family? As Jakobson perceptively noted, the sudden flow of poetry in life is its own no less sudden ebb.

One of the character's preferences is already known: "he or she likes the sea and the coves, above all the molluscs, writhing in their shelters." Both are moving forms and difficult to comprehend: both sea and molluscs are undulating and retractable in the rhythm and sonority of the written thought, but immeasurably different in reality – immense and minute, infinite and insignificant, powerful and slow... The character seeks to enclose opposites, identifying with both of them.

The character "believes they can be imitated on paper, but can find no bridge between such beings and such forms." Just as the incompatibility between representation and life creates an impassable moat of frustration in literature, so it is with the mimesis of the mirror, in which one does not recognize oneself. The impossibility of a true copy, the dichotomy between appearance and essence, and the irreducibility of signified to signifier – "the despair of the evidence"; these have been problems since the time of the Ancient Greeks which only Eros and Poiesis, who were relatives, have been able to overcome. Inadequate metaphors replace truth. "R." believes only in the collage, which has no need of the realism of the façade, and the gaze of the child (which, dislocated, – in a juxtaposition of sound and image characteristic of montage – "moves [the] exhausted eardrums") – both of which are forms of art; only in these does "R." believe, since they might just possibly reach the innards: "this secret, this secretion."

In *Cenas de abril*, [April Scenes] possibly contemporary with these letters,<sup>4</sup> the correspondence is also composed of a montage of disconnected phrases. Indeed, the idea of "correspondence" is certainly reminiscent of Baudelaire's theories on poetical creation, whether of verse or prose poetry, which reject the workmanlike copy of reality in favour of a more imaginative construction where fragments of the serpent-text can be recomposed in different permutations. Since it is impossible to know the complete context surrounding the words of such intimate letters, we have to make a patchwork of allusions, in an attempt to conjecture at meanings, like gossips eavesdropping on a conversation outside a closed door.

And what about the ending? Why is there this abrupt "No" by way of closure? In every version, whether handwritten or typed (and Ana Cristina rewrote her texts many times), these letters end in this intentionally interrupted way. Could it be an emphatic request to Navarro not to reveal the content to anybody? And furthermore, by avoiding a well-finished closure, is the sender not stressing the inconclusive sense of his thoughts, which are necessarily fragmentary? And those "literary psychologists" who confuse life and work, cheapening the writer's efforts, should they not be firmly expelled from the "celestial tent" where the writer battles with his animal-words? And in this case, we, as furtive readers, are we not betraying the secrets behind the scenes of the creative process? "Have you brought the key?" – to which we reply: "No"...

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The three following poems were written at different times. At first sight, there seem to be no similarities between them, neither in terms of form nor of theme, but it is possible to discern a thread of progressive tension in the point of view of the poetic “I” linking them to each other. The first of them, probably the earliest, strikes the attitude of a song, with circular returns echoing the integration of the “I” and the world:<sup>5</sup>

Wales after springtime

I saw a sea sighing at twilight  
it was a sea sighing  
at twilight a sea

nothing cried and  
every guitar was asleep tired out

I saw a sea at twilight  
it was sighing as if it sighed  
at the dampening twilight

it stirred the new-blown air  
re-blown by the sighs of the sea

I saw at twilight a mystery with no enigma  
It was a sea stretching itself out on the sand.

Rhose 30.08.69

País de Gales depois da primavera

Vi um mar suspirando à tardinha  
era um mar suspirando  
à tardinha um mar

nada chorava e  
todo violão adormecia só de cansaço

vi um mar à tardinha  
suspirava como se suspirasse  
à tardinha marejando

se remexia o ar recém-ventado  
re-inventado pelos suspiros do mar

vi à tardinha um mistério sem nenhum enigma  
era um mar se espreguiçando por cima da areia

Rhose 30.08.69





a thousand times in secret in arduous rehearsals (as Valéry observed). The exercise has to be so perfect that the presentation gives the impression of having been born there and then, just for that sole occasion of splendid communion between performers and audience. A mystical moment of consecration of the sparkling and inimitable light for which the disenchanted world yearns so nostalgically.

So, the movement of desiring announces what has been lost. Innocence had already been destroyed by the separation between pure entrancement and its construction: between the “machine à emouvoir” and the backstage area there is a gap, attested to by the line “I want/to write with violence to comfort you”. The utopia of complete communion with oneself and with the original pantheistic forces has been fractured by the power of consciousness divided from itself.

The third poem, in a gradual sequence, tends to distanced reflection and recognizes limitations:

strange craft this  
cohabited by  
steel and sargasso.

the poet becomes imprisoned  
in the unkempt meshes  
of hair  
beyond reach

desire  
is transfixed  
on the wall ahead

outlining its extreme  
wings on the windowpane

ofício esquisito este  
onde convivem  
aços e sargaços.

o poeta se deixa prender  
nas malhas mal traçadas  
de cabelos  
fora do alcance

o desejo  
se fixa imóvel  
na parede em frente

desenha suas asas  
extremas na vidraça

Here, there is neither harmonious contemplation nor passionate rapture: there are no sublimations arising from an encounter with nature or art, as in the preceding poems. The wide landscape of the beach and the transcendent horizon of the dancer have been suppressed.

In their place, there is the merely sonorous association of “steel and sargasso” (“*aços e sargaços*”, in the original) – materials equally disagreeable in the excess of their opposite nature. After this first stanza, which ends in a full stop, the remainder of the poem continues uninterrupted as a single sentence. The poetic “I” is bound, unable to move, hemmed in by the boundary of the window pane, stuck there with “extreme wings” since there is no way to penetrate it. The confinement seems to heighten the consciousness of the space available for the “strange craft” of the poet, who is aware of the permissible perimeter for manoeuvre, imprisoned by the hair, squeezed in by the wall. In the tiny area of the bedroom (and of life itself, to recall Drummond), the subject stretches him or herself out as much as possible, aware of the physical restriction, of the unfinished poem, which, despite the impossibility of reaching beyond, breaks free from the very place that delimits its end.

## Notes

- \* The publication of the fictional letters and poems reproduced here was kindly authorised by Waldo Cesar and Armando Freitas Filho. The material was first published in the magazine *Poesia Sempre* [Poetry Forever], n. 19, Rio de Janeiro: *Biblioteca Nacional*, December 2004. At that time, these texts had not previously been published, being part of the so-called “*Pasta rosa*” [Pink File], an item of the Ana Cristina Cesar papers held in the *Instituto Moreira Salles*.
- \*\* Viviana Bosi’s original text has been translated into English by Peter James Harris (UNESP) and Lúcia Biojone do Nascimento.
- 1 I am referring to the line “*tem sangue eterno a asa ritmada*” [“the rhythmic wing has eternal blood”] in Cecília Meireles’s poem “*Motivo*”, [Theme].
- 2 It should be noted that in this passage the author prefers to refer to the *character* in the masculine and, further on in the same letter, uses the *word* “character” in the feminine, a common oscillation in Portuguese that she exploits, whether intentionally or not.
- 3 “Tradition and the individual talent”, in *Selected Essays, 1917-1932*. London: Faber and Faber, 1932.
- 4 Armando Freitas Filho observes that the same typewriter was used, which seems to point to a proximity in time.
- 5 I am referring to Kayser’s classification of the three poetical attitudes: song, apostrophe and sentence (corresponding respectively to the tone of the pure lyric, the dramatic and the epic).