

200 years of Camilo Castelo Branco: a conversation about Camilian literature with Tânia Furtado Moreira

Tânia Furtado Moreira (Universidade do Porto)

Interviewers:

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In the international interview for the “Miscelânea” issue, *Palimpsesto* – a magazine for the student body of the UERJ Graduate Program in Literature – had the honor of talking to the Portuguese professor, researcher and entrepreneur Tânia Furtado Moreira. A music and literature professor at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto, Tânia is a recognized expert on the works of the Portuguese writer Camilo Castelo Branco and wrote *The Sublime in “Amor de Perdição”, by Camilo Castelo Branco*.

In this interview, given to Bruna Sales, Carla Oliveira, Marina Otero and Tatiane Ludegards, we had the opportunity to talk about Camilo Castelo Branco from different perspectives: the aesthetics of ugliness, the dialogues that Camilo establishes with contemporaneity, tips on academic life, among other subjects.

With infinite joy, we are immensely grateful to the professor for her willingness to grant us this interview. To our readers, we hope that this material will have a great impact on your research and studies!

PALIMPSESTO

1) In September 2023, you were in Brazil for a series of classes. Returning to the themes developed at the time, how can we think about the creation of an aesthetics of ugliness based on the work of Camilo Castelo Branco?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

A great starting point for our conversation! (smile) This is, in fact, an essential point for understanding Camilo Castelo Branco's distinctive contribution to Romanticism and Portuguese-language literature since the 19th century.

In order to clarify this contribution, we necessarily need to go back in time, to the matrix of aesthetic reflection within the formation of Greek Philosophy. It was the Socrates-Plato duo who, reluctantly, created the foundations of sensory knowledge, which would only come to be philosophically recognized in the 18th century, ironically at the hands of a Leibnizian, the German Baumgarten, with the sponsorship of intensive research by the Empiricists, mainly Anglo-Saxon (but also by some important Frenchmen, such as Condillac). This philosophical recognition is anchored in poetics, as is the case with Plato. However, it is still an insufficient recognition, since Baumgarten, despite the merit of having coined the term aesthetics and having opened a new philosophical area with it, nevertheless considers it an inferior type of gnoseology. The truth is that, even today, we are heirs of this metaphysical and rationalist DNA, even in the field of arts. From the 18th century onwards, with the change in the perception of the ontology of the work and the creator, a progressive change was noted which, without disregarding previous authors, can be established between 1712, with the essays by Joseph Addison published in *The Spectator*, and 1790, with the publication of the *Critique of Judgment* by Immanuel Kant, a central monument for the legitimization of aesthetics, which was, from Kant onwards, conceived as a phenomenology.

Now, when, in 1827, Victor Hugo published the play *Cromwell*, its preface instantly became an aesthetic manifesto of French Romanticism, a reference for Portuguese culture at the time. In this, Victor Hugo worked with the categories of the grotesque and the sublime, that is, he was moving away from the tradition that had prevailed until the decline of Classicism. This is the swan song of the monism of Beauty, which had predominated until the 18th century, when it began to be seen in contrast to other categories: the grandiose and the unusual, in Addison; and especially the sublime, in Burke, in his *Investigations* of 1757, and later in Kant, in the first systematic aesthetics. In fact, the binomial beautiful-sublime was dynamited by the author of *Les Misérables* and we began to have a proliferation of aesthetic categories that are derivatives of the

legitimization of the Ugly. And it is not only in France. Throughout Europe there is a zeitgeist that confirms this: see Karl Ferdinand Solger's Lectures on Aesthetics, from 1829, or Karl Rosenkranz's capital study, Aesthetics of the Ugly, from 1853. The consecration of a series of aesthetic categories that unfold the Ugly is manifested in nineteenth-century literature. Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* are, 100 years after Burke's essay, the greatest manifestation of this experience made into expression.

I devoted a brief but very significant part of my PhD Thesis to this subject, because the Ugly, based precisely on our Platonic heritage, is considered an aesthetic correlative of Evil. It is said that "Camille has some beautiful pages" — but, in assumptions like these, beauty should not be understood as a concept tout court, since, in truth, it is a rare category in Camilian aesthetics, where categories of the material, the organic and the disruptive are much more widespread, even in cases that we commonly associate with idealization. See, for example, the grotesque description of Teresa at the moment of her death. Camilian aesthetics is closely linked to the phenomenology of grief, in the sense of Carole Talon Hugon, and this is undoubtedly one of the marks of its modernity. The awareness of death in this fictional universe is such that there is no place for the idealized Beauty, which is, in its ontological matrix, incorruptible. This can be seen very clearly in Camilo's female portraits, but not only. Even categories such as the rogue or the picturesque derive from this materialistic view of the world. Therefore, nothing is more averse to this Work than an aesthetic of pulchritude. There is no serenity in the Camilian worldview for this.

PALIMPSESTO

2) As an author who has endured in the literary canon, how can we think about the dialogues that Camilo Castelo Branco's work establishes with contemporary times and with the discussions that our time promotes?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

Excellent question! The dialogues between Camilo Castelo Branco's work and the themes of our time are so evident that it is surprising that there is not even greater productivity in this regard, although a clear trend of interest has been noted, especially here in Brazil. Because the relevance of Camilian causes, let's call them that, is truly

extraordinary. Ecology, feminism, colonialism, social marginalization, the dignity of institutions, individual freedom, religious tolerance, and respect for difference are pressing themes within Camillian production, and I am not just referring to the genre that most appeals to Camillian readers: fiction. Also the letters, the plays, the chronicles, the biographies, in short, all of Camillian's writing is permeated by these causes which, in truth, are manifestations of the strong critical impulse that permeates this work.

PALIMPSESTO

3) Professor Tânia, we know that your academic career has been deeply marked by the analysis of Camilo Castelo Branco's works, especially with regard to the application of literary semiotics and aesthetics. Your work has provided new perspectives and understandings of the narrative and symbolic dynamics present in Camilo's works. Within this context, we would like to ask how semiotic analysis applied to Camilo's criminal accounts contributes to a deeper understanding of the characters' motivations and the dynamics of crime? How can narrative semiotics reveal the patterns, inconsistencies and symbolic elements in the testimonies of victims or witness accounts, providing insights into the nature of the crime and the characters' motivations?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

Semiotics, and in particular Narrative Semiotics, allows us to discern invisible threads that are found in the literary fabric and that implicitly call upon our sensitivity. In this sense, Poetics, Semiotics and Aesthetics come together in a very fruitful triad in the approach to Literary Studies that I have advocated. When we read Camilo's fiction from start to finish, we notice that Camilo is particularly interested in mystery. But this interest is revealed much more in the critical impulse I mentioned earlier, which has to do with a permanent stance of inquiry into living conditions, at once practical and at once speculative. Camilo is, therefore, an eminent philosophical writer, a fact that remains to be explored. Behind his thousand and one plots and characters — which countless scholars, with a very varied set of arguments, consider schematic or repetitive — what Camilo Castelo Branco does is penetrate human nature in depth.

Therefore, when he talks to me about the motivations and dynamics of crime that are open to semiotic analysis, I immediately think of Camilo's critical, inquiring stance. In the intimacy of his writing, we find many more questions than answers — hence the prevalence of mystery. And mercy, too. That is why he is absolutely right to mention the “inconsistencies”. The actions of Camilian characters — mediated, of course, by the narrator through which they are presented to us — are full of inconsistencies. Therefore, if there are to be any judgments, they must necessarily be precarious. Semiotic analysis thus proves to be very effective in the moral perception of the actors involved.

PALIMPSESTO

4) Your dedication to the work of Camilo Castelo Branco has been inspiring to many scholars of Portuguese Literature. Your semiotic and aesthetic approach has not only enriched the understanding of Camilo's works, but has also opened up new avenues of research for contemporary literary criticism. Therefore, we ask if there is any work by Camilo Castelo Branco that has a special personal meaning for you? Can you tell us why and how this work has impacted your academic and personal trajectory? We are curious to know if there is a specific moment or work that has shaped your career in a significant way.

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

This question seeks a biographical reason, which certainly exists. But before giving it, allow me to highlight that dimension permeated by human astonishment, which is the same astonishment we experience when faced with an unexpected evil: “Why?”. Camilo is a writer of whys. And this profound critical, speculative vocation of his has yet to be studied. Which, to a certain extent, is related to unfounded prejudices that still haunt Camilo's work. On this point, I share Maria Alzira Seixo's acuity when she points out a wide range of Portuguese intellectuals who, without having read Camilo or barely knowing him, have a very firm perception of him, both in ideological and literary terms. The role of researchers who dedicate themselves to studying his work should also be to seek, to a large extent, to mitigate these voluntary and unconscious distortions. For pedagogical reasons? Yes, that too. But above all for reasons of fairness and justice, given that constant biases signed by specialists then bring to Literary History — which should

be distinguished from the History of Literature — harmful consequences for the perception of the real value that the novelist had for the tradition of rupture, in the exact terms of Octavio Paz.

By fate or chance, this was the main reason why I became an assiduous researcher of Camilo Castelo Branco's Literature. It all begins as a reader. When we are talking about works of art, it is through affection that the bond begins. I read *Amor de Perdição* when I was a high school student (your university entrance exam), at a time when, as a young piano student, I was obsessed with the romantic repertoire: Chopin, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, Beethoven,... At that moment, Camilo's novel caught my attention! Later, when I arrived at university, the academic programs did not include the study of Camilo Castelo Branco, even though, here and there, the Literature and Culture teachers made reference to him. There was, in fact, a contradiction: the reference to Camilo Castelo Branco seemed unavoidable, but it was almost always done with prejudice. By an overt statement or simply by means of a suggestive comment, an image was presented of a reactionary, ultra-romantic, superficial Camilo Castelo Branco, who, for these reasons and a few more, certainly did not deserve to be studied, although he deserved the unavoidable reference. Appreciating Camilo Castelo Branco seemed wrong, it was seen as anachronistic. It so happens that, as a loose and irresponsible reader in my own selection of readings, I ended up coming across Camillian novels, one after the other, in a captivating reading that continually disproved all the clichés that came out of the mouths of academia. I then became a researcher of Camillian Literature very early on. Now, twenty years have passed, and I am still absolutely fascinated by this author's work, which I never tire of studying, not because it is so extensive — the most extensive after that of António Vieira, of which a substantial part has been lost — but because it is highly productive in its quality.

And here we return once again to the dimension of mystery. For me, this work continues to challenge me immensely. It questions me. I remain before it with an unarmed gaze before the enigmas it poses to me, first as a reader; and then, as a researcher. I immediately think, among many other examples, of a novel like *A Brasileira* by Prazins. That really disturbs me. A protagonist who gives the book its title and who goes practically unscathed throughout the entire narrative. Not because the novelist has

forgotten about her — her presence is constant — but because he seems to have decided to shield her from our voyeuristic impulses. It is very disconcerting, and moving at the same time. The truth is that we don't really know who Marta de Prazins is... What we do know about her is that she is a mystery. And that makes me want to revisit her, always with extra care. It is a huge novel. Óscar Lopes describes it as “unseparately excellent”. And Camilo is full of these stories. So full...

PALIMPSESTO

5) Professor, your academic career is an example of dedication to both teaching and research. We would like to better understand how you see the relationship between teaching and research in your academic career? How does your research influence your teaching practices, and vice versa?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

Every professor carries within him or herself the student that he or she is. Therefore, every good professor is, by necessity, an incessant researcher. In the case of university teaching, the need for research is imperative in the sense that the professor is expected to contribute, through his or her work, to the production of knowledge. Therefore, research and teaching, as I see them, are not parallel paths, but activities that feed off each other. If research feeds teaching, teaching also feeds research.

I would even go so far as to say that sometimes the two activities are confused. The classroom is a place for problematizing and experimenting with knowledge, in a dialogic way, and its potential to germinate knowledge is constant. Teaching is in itself an investigation. I have taught at a wide range of levels of education, which is an enormous wealth that I bring with me, and at all levels I have witnessed moments of knowledge creation with students, even at very young ages.

I see teaching and learning as an effervescent collaboration in which the teacher, if he or she is truly capable, assumes the role of inducing this collaboration. Therefore, the classroom space is sacred, which implies a performativity. Rituals continue to be very important. In a world of standardization and vulgarization, of blurring the boundaries between public and private, institutional and intimate, rituals have never been so

necessary. The interruption of a class should be exceptional, because it is a space-time of immersion, sharing and creation that demands to be preserved.

The same is true of Camilo Castelo Branco's novels, which can be grasped in their entirety in a single reading session. This is due to one of Camilo's powers: the creation of a space-time that captures the reader and launches him or her into a series of possible worlds. Eugénio Lisboa saw this very well when he described Camilomania, the phenomenon of Camilo addicts.

PALIMPSESTO

6) What advice would you give to students and researchers who are beginning their studies in Portuguese Literature? What are the most important skills and perspectives to develop in this field? We would like to know which skills and approaches you consider essential for those who wish to pursue an academic career.

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

Choose your teachers carefully. A good teacher wants to be challenged by his disciple. In this sense, the teacher does not choose, he is chosen. Whatever the path to be followed, with more or less hardships, if we have the right advisor by our side, we will overcome these difficulties with the guarantee of a qualitative transformation. One of the things I am most proud of in my life is having chosen my teacher, Professor Luís Adriano Carlos, to whom I owe, more than what I know, what I want to know.

In addition, it seems to me essential, not only at the beginning but throughout an entire academic career, to never lose sight of the object of study, which is always a phenomenon, never a noumenon. This attitude implies a willingness to accept whatever may happen in the event. A total willingness to learn, which the vicissitudes of today's careers tend, unfortunately, to squander. But let the best examples always help us. I am fortunate to spend time with and have very rich conversations with colleagues, some of whom are already retired, who have the flame of knowledge very much alive in their eyes. It is with these colleagues that it is important to follow and make progress. For me, enthusiasm is an indispensable criterion in academia. A professor-researcher who is not driven in his heart by the joy of knowledge — a joy that often coincides with the anguish

of uncertainty — is certainly not cut out for that mission. This leads me to a third piece of advice, taken from Cartesian methodology.

Methodical doubt is a commitment to discipline and rigor that every student must follow. Start from a place without prejudice and, from there, make progress methodically and confidently. Reject easy options. Try to read everything and anything, far from previous protocols. The most authoritative paths are not always those that bring us the most learning. We need to be methodically suspicious, have the patience to always return to the starting point and make the first journey each time. Read Descartes' Discourse on the Method and the first Metaphysical Meditations. It is a great school of research. It is no wonder that it launched Modern Philosophy.

If these three recommendations, which are in themselves very demanding, are met, I believe that whatever the formal cut in the material object of Portuguese Literature, it will provide research that is both lucid and risky, which is what is intended.

PALIMPSESTO

7) Taking advantage of the previous question, what perspectives regarding Camilo Castelo Branco's work still need to be explored, in your opinion? What lines of research would you recommend to a beginner Camilian researcher?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

As I mentioned before, there are many Camilian themes that are on the agenda and to which Cultural Studies, in its multiple variants, is dedicated. Personally, this is not what I am most interested in studying, but I understand that there is this interest and, if there is, Camilo provides food for thought. Often accused of being backward-looking, Camilo actually has a very modern worldview. So there must be a desire to discover the new in the ever-new Camilo. And this interest and this desire must be motivated by Camilian scholars. Here in Brazil, there is an excellent example of this. Just look at the multiplier effect generated by the initiative of Professor Paulo Motta Oliveira, from the University of São Paulo.

Camilian Studies have already made a path and much still to be done. The problem of the authorial voice in Camilian fiction, in my opinion, still needs to be considered and relaunched. It is a question that has been present in Camilian Studies since

the beginning, prompted by the subject itself. I believe, in fact, that it organizes the various movements of Camilianist criticism, which began while the writer was still alive. The first wave of Camilianists produced a type of criticism that was biographical, psychological and impressionistic, very much in line with the times, but which nevertheless sowed seeds that are still fertile today. I am thinking, for example, of Ricardo Guimarães and Ramalho Ortigão, or later of Fialho de Almeida. It could be said that the landmark of this first phase is the biography of José Cardoso Vieira de Castro, published in 1861, with Camilo and Ana Plácido (to whom it is dedicated) locked up in the Porto Court of Appeal. Certainly not because of its critical value — which is very limited —, but because it is the first biography of a professional writer, a writer who brings this topic into the heart of his work.

In 1946, with the defense of Jacinto do Prado Coelho's doctoral thesis, Camillianist Studies 2.0 were inaugurated, conceived based on structuralist software and in an openly anti-biographist reaction. However, when, three decades later, in 1981, Prado Coelho republished the Introduction to the Study of the Camillian Novel in a revised and expanded version, he made a point of adding a final chapter, entitled "The Biography-Work Equation", in which he responded to and moderated the anti-biographist gesture of the first edition. This repositioning was accompanied by Aníbal Pinto de Castro, who devoted himself to the analysis of what he called "processes of poetic transfiguration". At the end of the 1980s, Abel Barros Baptista's Camilo and the Camillian Revolution opened a new chapter in Camillianist Studies, bringing to the field very pertinent inquiries in the line of Foucault and Deconstruction. Here, not only are the conditions of the discourses and practices of Camillian Literature debated, but also the conditions of the discourses and practices of Camillian Studies. Unfortunately, this version has not garnered significant support, neither from the essayist himself nor from others. But I believe that it is a fundamental essay for understanding the internal movements of the dialogic construction of Camilo Castelo Branco's name in the canon.

On the eve of the bicentenary of his birth, we are now experiencing a time of great influx of research works that would be great if they represented version 4.0 of Camillian Studies. To do this, some boldness is required, of course. First, questioning the authority considered unquestionable, which is Jacinto do Prado Coelho's thesis. In the Humanities

as in the Physical Sciences, excessive authority indicates an alarming danger. Contrary to this Camilianist tendency, in Pessoa Studies, the thesis Diversity and Unity in Fernando Pessoa, while still a reference, has already been duly commented on, criticized, revised and repositioned. For me, this is the mission of the researcher. Subservience does not suit him. His work consists more of dialoguing with others than of uncritically inheriting. This is the problem of overly closed circuits regarding his object of study. Enclosing Camilo in a hermetic bubble has done him a lot of harm. Lovers tend to be short-sighted, as a rule — although there are exceptions, of course, such as that of José Régio, who, in my opinion, wrote one of the best essays on the writer: “Camilo, Romancista Português”, from 1964.

In this sense, it seems to me that the best studies can come from scholars outside the Camilianist sphere. Óscar Lopes is the best example of this. Admitting his preference for Eça de Queirós, first and foremost for ideological reasons, Óscar Lopes is a key critic of the profound implications that Camilo's work has for the literary history not only of the 19th century, but especially of the period that followed, even to our own day and to those yet to come. I believe that scholars should turn to him and read him more, with great attention. We are fortunate that this work has been brought together in a single volume, *Ensaio Camilianos*, with the rigorous editing of Luís Adriano Carlos, who wrote an excellent introduction, which I highly recommend reading. It is a book that is a treasure trove, there are many avenues to be explored. But also, today, I think, for example, of a compatriot of yours, Professor Daniel R. Bonomo, from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, who has contributed with great work to the study of Camilo's work. His research on the Camilian influence in Brazilian Modernism is a very important and unprecedented contribution.

PALIMPSESTO

8) To conclude, we would like to know what, in your opinion, makes Camilo Castelo Branco a different author from the others of his time? By the way: what are the factors that you believe are fundamental for Camilo to still be a studied author today?

TÂNIA FURTADO MOREIRA

Jorge de Sena says that Camilo is one of the great poets of the Portuguese language, and rightly so. Literature is the art of the word, and the novel can be the most vibrant place for artistic experimentation with the verb. That is Camilo, a writer who had as peers the best prose writers of Portuguese Literature. When we read Camilo, we are gripped by the word, which is why I say that it is not a matter of adherence to the text, but of actual adherence. Camilo manages to galvanize us with great skill. We lose control in his hands. The truth is that, despite the question of the stereotyping of the characters and the schematism of the plots — which, in 1879, was the subject of controversy following the book by Princess Rattazzi — we read Camilo driven by an incessant search that coincides at the same time with a certain practice of negligence. And all of this is reflected in the rhythm, in the pulsating and significant flow of verbal language, in its semantic-rhythmic nature, as Meschonnic would say. The end of a Camilian novel connects with the beginning of another, whose end connects with the beginning of another. The search there is linked to the knowledge of the nature of man. Camilo represents human passions in a way that any reader, from yesterday, today or tomorrow, can identify with. “If, by virtue of metempsychosis”... Camilo Castelo Branco reappears in 23rd century society, he will certainly be happy to see that readers continue to be moved by what he wrote.

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