

IN THE FRAGILE GLOW OF EXISTENCE, THE SEDUCTION OF THE VISIBLE AND THE PASSION FOR THE INVISIBLE. IN MEMORY OF JOSÉ AUGUSTO MOURÃO

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RESUMO

This text traces the personal, intellectual and academic trajectory of José Augusto Mourão (1948-2011), Professor of Semiotics at the New University of Lisbon.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Semiotics; text and textuality; structuralism; Algirdas Greimas; morphogenetic and morphodynamic structures; catastrophe theory; biblical textuality; the Order of Preachers

INTRODUCTION

“Blessed be the text” – this is the opening essay of the book of homilies *Quem Vigia o Vento não Semeia* (2011), which José Augusto Mourão did not get to see published in his lifetime. A semiologist, theologian, poet, musician, literary critic and essayist, José Augusto Mourão was a life-long textualist. Writing and the text were his mediators of “experience”. He used them as shields against immediacy, passionate effusion, and intuitionism.

José Augusto Mourão was a Dominican friar. I was with him innumerable times in liturgical acts which mark the rituality of life, some times as celebrations of joy, festivity and promise, other times as manifestations of sadness, suffering and death. His words were expressions of remembrance of the essential word, a word that visited the places of the invisible and the visible, and that was also a work of resistance, where a sense of community, which he always kept in mind, was established. But his preaching never strayed from the same pattern: the analysis of texts closely read and meticulously written about. *A Palavra e o Espelho* (2000), and *Quem Vigia o Vento não Semeia* (2011) are collections of homilies that show José Augusto Mourão’s adherence to the mediation of writing, even in preaching. It was indeed to the plane of the text that all his intellectual filiations converged.

TEXT AND TEXTUALITY

The anaphors of Catholic liturgy were José Augusto Mourão’s first object of semiotic study. And it was François Genuyt who introduced it in the study plan of the Greimasian school. Genuyt was the supervisor of Mourão’s undergraduate studies, which he finished in 1977 at the Faculty of Theology at the Lyons Catholic University. After that,

he worked on analyses of biblical texts, particularly those in the New Testament. In 1991, he translated and wrote an introduction to the book by Jean-Claude Giroud and Louis Panier, *Semiótica - Uma Prática de Leitura e de Análise dos Textos Bíblicos* (Lisbon, Difusora Bíblica). And in 1999, already at the height of his academic career, which he had begun back in 1981 at the New University of Lisbon, and where he obtained his agrégation, he edited *Semiótica e Bíblia*, published by Edições Paulinas. The collection includes essays by Ívan Almeida, Jean Delorme, François Genuyt, Jean Calloud, Louis Panier, François Martin and Cécile Turiot.

By then, José Augusto Mourão had already published important theoretical and analytical works, including the ones he authored about mystical texts of the Christian tradition, such as *A Visão de Túndalo. Da Fornalha de Ferro à Cidade de Deus* (1988) and *Sujeito, Paixão e Discurso. Trabalhos de Jesus* (1996). This last work, where he analyses texts by Friar Tomé de Jesus, resulted from his PhD thesis, which he concluded in 1991 at the New University of Lisbon. In *A Sedução do Real - Literatura e Semiótica* (1998), Mourão revisits The Vision of Tundale and *Trabalhos de Jesus*, but the work exhibits small traces of his earlier textualist choices.

In 2001, he organised, with Maria Augusta Babo, *O Campo da Semiótica*, an important issue of the *Revista de Comunicação e Linguagens*. Apart from Portuguese authors like Luís Carmelo, António Fidalgo, Pedro Barbosa, António Machuco Rosa, Aníbal Alves, Fernando Belo, myself, José Augusto Mourão and Maria Augusta Babo themselves, names like Lúcia Santaella, Winfred Nöth, Thomas Sebeok, Herman Parret, Jacques Fontanille, Eric Landowski and Norma Tasca, among others, also contributed to that issue of RCL.

As it happened, José Augusto Mourão was also a poet. He wrote *Vazio Verde* (1985), *Dizer-Deus - Ao (Des)abrigo do Nome* (1991) and *O Nome e a Forma* (2011). It is therefore understandable that poetry, or should we say, literature in general, also became the object of his semiotic practice. In *A Sedução do Real* his range is wide: Torga, Celan and Duras, Beckett, Saramago, Vergílio Ferreira, Maria Gabriela Lansol, Herberto Helder, Bernardim Ribeiro, Bernardino de Santa Rosa. But he is most famous for *O Fulgor é Móvel. Em torno da Obra de Maria Gabriela Llansol* (2003) and, with other authors, *Natália Correia. A Festa da Escrita* (2010).

José Augusto Mourão began his work as a semiologist with the analysis of texts belonging to the Christian community and tradition, into which he had been born and which he was passionate about. And it was because he felt he was part of a Christian community and tradition that, in his semiotic practice, he confronted literary texts by Saramago, Beckett, Duras, Eugénio de Andrade, Proust, Vergílio Ferreira, Celan and Torga, as well as philosophical texts, such as those by Thomas of Aquinas. For there is no memory that does not evoke a body, nor a new word “that is not already marked by fire or by wind”, as Mourão once wrote.

IN DEFENCE OF METHOD

José Augusto Mourão's penchant for textuality acquired new contours and gained new articulations when he became interested in the phenomena of communication, and

specifically in electronic communication. In *A Sedução do Real*, his mastery extended to the analysis of rap music, reality shows and tobacco. However, his most important work about communication in modernity is *O Mundo e os Modos da Comunicação*, which he published in 2006; with *Para uma Poética do Hipertexto. Ficção Interactiva* (2001) and *Textualidade Electrónica. Literatura e Hiperficção* (2009), José Augusto Mourão took on new digital textualities.

There is this first aspect that makes the work of José Augusto Mourão singular: he is a textualist who is suspicious of, and indeed resists, the word “experience”. His tempestuousness, and José Augusto Mourão was tempestuous, was always mediated by the text and by writing. However, being a textualist, this presbyter, who was a friar of the Order of Saint Dominic, did not identify himself with the hermeneutic thesis which gathers the most enthusiasm these days, and which can be formulated in the following rhetorical terms: there is no experience of truth that is not an interpretative act, that is, there is no experience of truth that is not an act of reading.

José Augusto Mourão was a modern man, so that the “lax thought” of renouncing any foundational reason could only irritate him. And that was the tune he followed in his whole work: his texts are modern, which is to say critical, and show a strong rationality. In those texts there is no place for relativist indifferentism, nor for “the idea that there are only interpretations” (Mourão, 1998: 156). The charlatans of the ineffable, the term he used to refer to pragmatists “open the backdoor of delirium and say: all perspectives are equivalent!” (Ibid.: 85). He believed that in a world where everything was equivalent nothing had a meaning, and everything was meaningless.

José Augusto Mourão’s semiotic proposal is a critical proposal. And since criticism is not neutral, from an axiological point of view, discourses become hierarchical. This conclusion is closely associated with a dialogical understanding of criticism, which is characteristic of Mikhail Bakhtin. In this sense, the experience of the text includes both the experience of the limits of communication and everything that connects us, everything that constitutes openness to alterity. In the face of the shock of postmodernity, whether in the shape of Derrida’s deconstruction, which radicalises Heidegger’s “Destruktion” and leaves us in a sophist paganism, or with Rorty’s pragmatism, which radicalises Nietzsche’s perspectivism and leads us to think without origin nor ending, without Genesis nor Apocalypse, José Augusto Mourão’s work is, according to dialogic criticism, a refusal to abandon the criteria of final judgement.

Mourão uses dialogic criticism to oppose relativist indifference. But it is with this same procedure that he combats historicism, that dogmatic dumbness that drowns in the imperatives of an established discourse, from an ideological and moral point of view. As he rightly pointed out, in that instance, the text has nothing to tell us: it simply must fit our theory.

It is known how much of a defender of method José Augusto Mourão was. He justified it in the following terms: “The reductionism of the “literary object” is defensible, at least from a methodological point of view” (Mourão, 1998: 14). And he became irritated with what he called “terrorist aversion in relation to any type of method” (Ibidem).

Elsewhere in *A Sedução do Real*, after he points out that he is not a judge of taste and that he does not usually pronounce about a text or work in aesthetic terms, he says the following: “I prefer [...] the semiotic position that analyses texts, explains the internal workings of the combination of signs of which texts are made, the general systems from which they come into existence, the articulations of various planes of structuring and generating meaning. This methodological option implies renouncing the undefined search for hypothetical determinations outside language, and adopting a standpoint that is generative, and not genetic, of production and functioning of texts. I shall therefore make use of the semiotic know-how to indicate the place where critical commentary loses the innocence it claims, by simulating its processes, the action of doing” (Ibid.: 93-94).

Here is the defence of method, done in an energetic and intrepid way. However, I think that method is a difficult ascesis, to which only the most brave and the most resilient adhere. Mourão did possess those qualities; he was a resilient analyst with audacious hermeneutics. But it is nonetheless surprising that the poet who wrote *Vazio Verde, Dizer-Deus - ao (Des)abrigo do Nome* and *O Nome e a Forma* could also be the author of harsh and rough writings, shaped by the scalpel of the Paris school, shaped, in his own words, by “semiotic know-how”, here understood in the generative view of production and functioning of texts. I was always surprised that the renovator, since the mid 1980s, of the heavy rituals of Catholic liturgy, through polyphonic choir music and poetical creation, could follow the categories of narrative and modal semiotics of Algirdas Julien Greimas.

It was the resistance of the real that seduced him and turned him into an ascetic of method, of controlled knowledge. For that reason, Mourão invested in an immanentist perspective of meaning. Greimas and the Paris school first, then Per Aage Brandt and Jean Petitot, became, with others, his companions, which lends to some of his texts the appearance of impenetrable fortresses, so dense is the web of logical semiotic structures and semiophysical forms. *Semiótica. Genealogias e Cartografias*, co-authored with Maria Augusta Babo, and published by Minerva in 2007, is a good example of this theoretical orientation, where José Augusto Mourão revisits a significant number of the texts that he used in this Agrégation, in 1999¹.

THE FIGURES OF THE EXPLORER AND THE MISSIONARY

Luckily, the most significant part of Mourão’s work is not an example of this procedure. “The real” always seduced José Augusto Mourão, prescribing him the method, but “the real” also seduced him for its other aspects, those that are not controllable. For that reason, this semiologist of the Order of Preachers was also an explorer of signs that indicate laws that transcend us. Today, I believe Greimas and the Paris school were an accident that later became a conscious choice that he renovated continuously.

¹ In *A Linguagem, a Verdade e o Poder. Ensaio de Semiótica Social*, a book I published in 2002 (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia), I carried out, under the title “Para uma physis fenomenológica” (pp. 47-57), a critical reading of the work of José Augusto Mourão, focusing particularly on the texts he presented at his Agrégation. But I had already presented a paper at the 2nd Sopcom Conference, in Lisbon, in 2001, with the title “Sobre o impacto de uma physis fenomenológica”. See the University of Minho *Repositorium*: <http://hdl.handle.net/1822/25334>

When considering the totality of José Augusto Mourão's work, I get the impression that it relies on an interpretation that is rooted in something more resistant and deeper than the morphodynamic and morphogenetic structures in which he based many of his analyses. That reliance comes from a further place than that of criticism itself. Criticism is always articulated from controllable methodologies, techniques and theoretical horizons. However, it seems to me that the trust he placed in the granting of meaning that is prior to criticism constitutes José Augusto Mourão as a receptor subject and a critical subject.

It is perhaps for this reason, because he accepted a base of interpretation that is prior to criticism, that Mourão preferred to see himself in the role of an explorer rather than in the role of a missionary. The figure of the explorer evokes an essence (a word he does not shy from) and suggests openness. It is also openness that is understood by the expression of "quasi-transcendental infrastructures that assure us that every time [we read a literary text] something uncertain is touched, allowing the reader freedom of choice" (Mourão, 1998: 15). That openness also seems to be hinted at when Mourão says: "the tone, both of the writing and of the reading, obeys a regime of apocalypse with no other scatology than the tone of 'come', beyond good and evil" (Ibid.: 15). One could say that the wandering, the indeterminate, the uncertain and the figural place us before an "open immanentism", an expression he borrows from Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Jean-Claude Coquet.

It can equally be said that in José Augusto Mourão, the algorithm always went hand with hand with metaphor, that is, the discourse under surveillance always went hand with hand with its other. Indeed, in Mourão, the analyst was never the bureaucrat nor the parasite of writing. On the contrary, the analyst was an explorer of new interpretative possibilities, he was always a creator. It is well known that morphogenesis and morphodynamics, which Mourão cultivated, appeared as a result of the mathematical theory of catastrophes by René Thom. This is a general theory of forms, both linguistic and natural. But if numbers are ever relevant in Mourão's work, it is those of the "Geometer God", of Timaeus of Locri, numbers like words, which order the cosmos and give it proportion, balance and justice. That is, in José Augusto Mourão, the force of metaphor usually overcame the algorithm.

Furthermore, it is my belief that nothing was lost whenever the texts by José Augusto Mourão were not perfectly canonical analyses. It is a fact that he would have liked them to be so, he has said, perhaps confessing some fear, or perhaps asking the reader for forgiveness. To give an example, nothing is lost in the fact that *A Sedução do Real* consists of "a few treasons" of that "semiotic position that analyses texts" (Mourão, 1998: 94). I actually think that where the texts by José Augusto Mourão keep their aspects of a canonical analysis, they are less interesting for the reader.

Faithful to the nature of language, what it means, its dialogical aspect, José Augusto Mourão shows us in his work that what is expressed through language is not simply the fixation of what is meant to say. That which is expressed in language is also "an attempt in constant transformation, better still, a temptation constantly repeated of committing to something, through dialogue. Which means that we expose ourselves"

(Mourão, 1998: 25). Through writing we expose ourselves. With the work of José Augusto Mourão we learn that, instead of validating our prejudices, the word puts us to the test, submitting those prejudices to our doubts and to the reply of the other. That is the meaning of dialogic criticism.

Thus it is surprising that he whom we thought was the missionary of Greimasian exegesis, a world of narrow and rough edges, turns out to be an explorer of worlds, of new ways of being and new forms of life. José Augusto Mourão embodies what he says about great writers: “The style of a great writer is also a lifestyle, not something personal, but the invention of a possibility of life, a way of existing. The artist knows when a work is finished, and only then does its life begin. Only when the work is found, questioned, “ingested” by someone else, will it provoke in the reader that interior change that will mysteriously enrich him/her” (Mourão, 1998: 66-67).

This is what Mourão says about great writers, but these are also the exact words I have found to talk about his work: the suggestion of a lifestyle, the invention of a way of existing. José Augusto Mourão was a man of criticism and conviction, and his work is that of a modern man, a work of ethical exigency. Before the conflict of interpretations, which results in the war of paradigms, the exigency of ethics is as essential as the “need to arbitrate”.

José Augusto Mourão’s proposal is an “ethics of reading”, an ethics that refuses the “pagan” and “sophist moment” for which Jean-François Lyotard is somewhat responsible, that is, an ethics that does not settle with the “abandonment of any prescription or criteria of final judgement” (Mourão, 1998: 67).

Criticism and ethics are the two dimensions that lend the idea of movement that Mourão imprints on reading, both when he analyses texts by Friar Tomé de Jesus, Saramago, Torga, Celan or Duras, and when he does work of theoretical aspirations.

It is this strong rationality, the rationality of a modern man with ethical demands, that makes Mourão explode before apathy: “How can a feeble thought, which has renounced foundational reason, which has become memory and foundation-without-foundation, become moral consciousness?, he asks in *Sedução do Real* (Ibid.:73). José Augusto Mourão can even understand “the fear that triggers the idea of analysis” (Ibid.: 72), as it is a dissolution. But apathy is beyond his understanding. Those who are apathetic annoy him, and he throws them up. He agrees with Michel de Certeau’s diagnosis: “Convictions become feeble, lose their edges and we find them in the common language of a mental exoticism, a fictional koiné: convictions accumulate in the region where one says what one does not do anymore, where the questions that are no longer thought become theatricalized, where various “needs” become mixed, still irreducible, but completely devoid of credible representations” (Ibid.: 156).

Michel de Certeau was talking about the soul that deserted any conviction. José Augusto Mourão embraces his diagnosis, and reads it as a refusal of a sophist and pagan moment, a closed world, which is that of the abandonment of all criteria of final judgement. Against indifference, this man of convictions trusts openness, which, to elaborate on Derrida, is to be read “simultaneously in the sense of a system that is not closed,

of openness to the freedom of the other, and of openness of the invitation made to the other” (Ibd.: 160).

FINAL NOTES

Taking my clue from the image of openness, I shall conclude with one last question: what other interest may lay behind José Augusto Mourão’s desire to analyse Vergílio Ferreira, Gabriela Llansol, Ângelo Monteiro, Herberto Helder, Torga, Natália Correia, Saramago, Celan, Duras, etc., apart from the fact that they all express, in their different ways, a common passion for the infinite passage for a somewhere and a someone else, while they formulate the present as an enigma?

With a monumental body of work² which deals with the fragile glow of existence and shows the vertigo of the human, and with a writing that resounds like whiplashes against the erosion of time and against human cowardice, José Augusto Mourão has become the highest reference in the study of Semiotics in Portugal. He was a member of the board of the International Association of Semiotic Studies [Associação Internacional de Estudos Semióticos] from 1999, and the coordinator of the research group in Semiotics which he founded, in 2009, in the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences [Associação Portuguesa de Ciências da Comunicação (SOPCOM)].

I have always thought that this relentless runner, who all his life fed with new conjectures the source of his questioning, would cross the finish line in time to see recognised the importance of his work, a work which originated at that uncertain point where semiotics, hermeneutics, literary criticism, philosophy and literary theory intersect. I believe that moment has arrived, though it is too late to do him justice in his lifetime. //

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² It is in by all accounts majestic one of the last works that he co-edited and authored, the *Dicionário histórico das ordens e instituições afins em Portugal*, published by Gradiva in 2010, whose editors are José Eduardo Franco, José Augusto Mourão and Ana Cristina da Costa Gomes. For approximately six years, about 300 authors worked on this dictionary. This work is 1019 pages long, it deals with 368 institutions, and is divided into seven sections, one of which containing five sub-sections.

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