TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

We are who we were.

Motto of CART 3313, António Lobo

Antunes's artillery company

Africa, in particular Angola, has played a crucial role in the sprawling fictional world created by António Lobo Antunes, from his first major literary success, *The Asshole of Judas*, to the book you have before you, published in Portuguese in October 2017. Angola is a site of both wondrous natural beauty and all-too-human terror, both a region with its own engrossing cultural distinctiveness and a broader stage of conflict between European expansionism and its unfortunate victims, denigrated, enslaved, and forced to accept the norms of a supposedly superior culture. This region of immense contrasts and struggle provides extraordinary material for the *theatrum mundi* of Lobo Antunes's bold prose, at once violent and tender, contravening and exploiting the grammar of the novel and the Portuguese language. Here is indeed a world to discover, as one of Lobo Antunes's critics has remarked, a world like no other in contemporary fiction.

Lobo Antunes's interest in Africa has a biographical element. The writer spent twenty-seven long months in the Portuguese army in Africa; he experienced some of the most bitter moments of the protracted colonial war that ended soon after the revolution in Portugal of April 25, 1974, which overthrew the harsh dictatorship established by António de Oliveira Salazar in 1928. The war in Angola began in the aftermath of the revolt of cotton farmers in Baixa do Cassange in January 1961 and involved approximately eight hundred thousand Portuguese troops over a thirteen-year period and three Portuguese colonies in Africa: Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique. Given that the population of Portugal at that time was only a little over eight million people, this expenditure of manpower can only astonish us. Still more astonishing is that the war, even to this day, remains a difficult and largely underresearched subject in Portugal. Lobo Antunes is one

of the few major authors to write extensively and openly of the war; *Until Stones Become Lighter Than Water*, though much more than what is typically called a war novel, is perhaps his most frank depiction of the casual brutality that characterized the Portuguese wars in Africa, and, indeed, characterizes war in general.

Biographical Sketch

Lobo Antunes comes from one of the best-known families in Portugal. Born in Lisbon in September 1942 as the eldest son of a prominent neurologist, Lobo Antunes was from early on interested only in becoming a writer. This abiding interest did nothing to comfort his parents, who, reasonably enough, directed the young man to a more stable career: medicine. Lobo Antunes thus studied medicine and spent two years as an intern in London in the late 1960s. Called up for service, he spent six months training in Mafra before shipping out to Angola in January 1971 as medic with the rank of second lieutenant for an artillery battalion. He returned to Lisbon only in March 1973. With a specialization in psychiatry, Lobo Antunes strained to make ends meet in the turbulent Portugal of the mid- and late 1970s, working full-time as a psychiatrist in the Miguel Bombarda Hospital and writing when he could. He published his first novel, *Elephant's Memory*, in 1979 but became famous in Portugal almost overnight later that year with the publication of *The Asshole of Judas*. He continued to work as a psychiatrist until 1985, when he was in a position to devote all his time to writing. He has produced a large body of work from 1979 on, comprising twenty-eight novels and five volumes of short works referred to as *crónicas*. His talent was quickly recognized by international critics, and Lobo Antunes has won a remarkable number of literary prizes; his work has been lionized by celebrated critics like Harold Bloom, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, and George Steiner, and he counts among his admirers a constellation of important contemporary writers from J. M. Coetzee and Javier Marías to Mario Vargas Llosa.

Lobo Antunes's novels are difficult to classify, and this seems quite appropriate for a writer who claims, not without irony, that he does not write novels. While this claim may seem purely ironic at first blush, there is indeed something to Lobo Antunes's insistence when one considers the immense network of linkages that emerge in the course of reading his creative output as an integral whole. For Lobo Antunes's novels form part of a single

large work, an equally ambitious *Comédie humaine*, that needs to be read as a whole if one is to come to anything like a sober assessment of Lobo Antunes's artistic achievement.

African Context

Since you have only this one volume before you, let me familiarize you with the African context of Lobo Antunes's fictional world. I will first give a thumbnail sketch of the war in Angola, followed by a brief discussion of the novel. I will conclude with a few comments about the distinctive and innovative prose style of Lobo Antunes, as well as my attempt to convey some of its more characteristic features in this translation.

As I noted, the colonial war in Angola began as a response to the Baixa do Cassange revolt in 1961 and ended in 1974 with the general withdrawal of Portuguese forces from Africa. In length and result, the war in Angola bears more than a little resemblance to the Vietnam War, with a similarly contested result. Depending on one's political convictions, the war in Angola was either a grotesque and unmitigated failure or a failure that could have been transformed into a Portuguese victory, or at least an honorable peace, in different circumstances with more vigorous political and military leadership.

The war, however, was merely the last act in a long, complicated, and often brutal occupation. The Portuguese made incursions into Africa—in particular, into what became Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique—from the mid-sixteenth century onward during the period of radical Portuguese expansion that created the first global empire. While Portuguese adventurers sought to open up new venues of trade in gold and spices, they also initiated an enduring slave trade between Africa and Brazil. By the end of the nineteenth century, Portugal was an established colonial presence in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique, with widespread exploitation of the local peoples engendering a terrible legacy.

This presence was not challenged until after the end of World War II. The challenge came from local independence movements that sought, as elsewhere in Africa, to be freed from the harsh conditions of colonial rule. And like other European colonial powers—the French in Algeria, the English in Kenya and Northern Rhodesia—Portugal resisted all attempts at decolonialization, and this refusal to accede to the emancipatory hopes of its colo-

nial subjects ended up leading to the violence that finally exploded into war in 1961.

The Portuguese troops who fought this war were the product of Salazar's long dictatorship, the so-called *Estado Novo*, the new state, that imposed conditions at home that were not appreciably milder for many Portuguese citizens than those in the colonies. Hence many of the soldiers who fought in Africa came from a kind of European poverty that existed in neither England nor France, at least not to the same extent. They were also closely watched over by the dreaded PIDE (Polícia Internacional e de Defesa do Estado) or political police, which perpetrated atrocities during the war, as the novel shows us. Relations between the Portuguese army and the PIDE were always fraught, and with good reason, since the task of the PIDE in Africa was to ensure the obedience of the army to the prerogatives of the political leadership.

Until Stones Become Lighter Than Water

The novel itself appears initially to be a reflection on the war based on a not wholly unusual incident. Portuguese soldiers routinely raided villages and, as Lobo Antunes himself has noted, these raids were often exceptionally brutal, with whole communities being wiped out, animals and all. From time to time soldiers took orphaned children rather than killing them, though often those children were killed later if they did not manage to escape. Yet some did return to Portugal with the soldiers who had taken care of them. Here we have the bare bones of the plot: a soldier, having assisted in the raid of a village, an everyday event, takes a child and brings him back to Portugal. There the child participates in the central action of the novel, the pig killing. The practice of killing pigs almost as a rite is one deeply rooted in Portuguese culture. The fact that the black child kills his adoptive Portuguese father at that moment is both high melodrama and the fulfillment of prophecy, insofar as many of the Portuguese father's comrades cautioned him about the possibility of bloody revenge.

This revenge plot seems to have a fated, tragic element, which is hardly surprising in a novel so governed from its very beginning by a sense of ineluctable destiny, if not indeed a certain fatalism. Yet as in many other instances in Lobo Antunes's work, the tragic element is accompanied by elements of parody that puncture what appear to be the aggrandizing qualities

of the tragic. For if the tragic is nothing if not solemn, emphasizing the dreadful stakes of human life, the comic elements in Lobo Antunes's work are prisms through which the great seriousness of the tragic, its focus on suffering and brutality, is ridiculed. While generalizations are precarious, especially when applied to a fictional output that creates slippery ambiguity wherever possible, it seems to me that one of the striking aspects of *Until Stones Become Lighter Than Water*, as of much of Lobo Antunes's work, is its pervasive respect for suffering coupled with sardonic mockery, recalling Aristophanes, of the sheer stupidity of our limited existence. Thus the pig killing seems to be a metaphor of tragic intensity, and it is, but it is also a darkly comic metaphor insofar as there is nothing dignified, elegant, or heroic about the pig. The highest "value" of the pig is survival, a value that is hardly heroic, hardly dignified, but rather evidence of the ugliest reality of our lives, the unbridled impetus to self-preservation, an impetus that turns every soldier into an animal seeking nothing so much as his own survival.

The dodges and deceptions of this impetus intertwine throughout the novel, its main characters seeking to create narratives that insulate themselves from the horror of mortality as well as the loss and suffering that accompany it. When Lobo Antunes claims, as he is wont to do, that stories are the least important aspect of his works, we may interpret his apparently unconventional claim as pointing to another dimension of his work, a more engrossing one, namely, its open portrayal of a fundamental struggle with narratives themselves, with the promise of salvation or justice that so many basic narratives reflect. Without going into the details of the novel, suffice it to say that a series of narratives wind through it on the background of the pig killing. Each of these narratives attempts to justify or protect those who believe in them from a seemingly more bitter truth, and there is no more bitter truth than the fact of suffering and death, the brutal humiliation that nature imposes on us, in the words of Fyodor Dostoevsky's underground man.

Lobo Antunes's Language and This Translation

This pervasive sense of struggle is reflected in the unique language Lobo Antunes has created over his long career. It is no exaggeration to assert that Lobo Antunes has transformed literature written in Portuguese, and his distinctive style has attracted many imitators in both Portuguese and other languages. I would like to address some significant aspects of Lobo Antunes's

style and to explain as well how I have attempted to translate them into English, often with a literalness that may appear jarring to the English ear.

The struggle with time itself is paramount. Lobo Antunes radically attenuates the complicated verbal system of Portuguese by favoring infinitival structures over finite tensed ones. Lobo Antunes's use of the personal infinitive in Portuguese allows him to create a "presencing" effect—much of the novel seems to take place as a performance initiated by the reading process itself. Like other English translators of Lobo Antunes's work, I have tried to capture this effect by using the English gerund, the -ing form. "Pigeons flying," "soldiers shooting," "the man walking"—these are all translations of the Portuguese personal infinitive that imply a static quality as if the activity itself continues uninterrupted by or indifferent to temporal sequence.

This "presencing" effect is also evident in Lobo Antunes's pronounced tendency to omit the verb "to be" in the present tense. An example, chosen at random:

the engines of the unimogs deafened me, the soldiers, three or four, put the animals on a trailer and their legs so thin, it seemed to me people hidden in the jungle seeing that a trembling in the leaves different from the wind, the doctor drew an oval with a pen going around the white stain of an X-ray

Another example:

the impression that a fox up there, next to the cemetery, the impression that a genet, I asked the sergeant that he take care of my son while me in Luanda, no one knew of us in Portugal, no one speaks of war, one pretends that it's forgotten or it's really forgotten, me on the street of bars filled with mulatto women and men at the counter, only elbows, as clumsy as me, with the noses in their glasses like donkeys, tied up to wagons, in front of the baskets, with their snouts in the middle of the hay staring at the people while they were eating, a woman disappeared into the cigarette smoke and emerged from the smoke, next to me, with another ring

While this effect creates an awkward English, it is equally unusual in Portuguese, and I have preserved it throughout. On the one hand, the effect gives the impression of a certain timelessness, as if no tense were required in reference to the relevant circumstances and objects. On the other hand, it has another intriguing consequence, consonant with the tendency of Lobo Antunes's style to efface temporal linkages, in that the verb "to be" as copula is suppressed. Rather than explicitly joining objects or subjects with objects,

the suppression of the verb “to be” as a copula enhances the dislocation of temporal order by putting in question the basic integrating function of the verb “to be.” This integrative function matches subjects with predicates and defines relationships; to omit it in a way that calls attention to that omission creates a prose that we may call paratactic because it refuses to succumb to traditional modes of temporal and syntactical subordination. This is a promiscuous prose that can be linked up in many different ways with other segments within the novel. This is a prose that lends itself to multiple connections, both affirming and threatening each particular connection because so many others offer themselves at any given time; this is thus a prose of a somewhat hidden simultaneity.

The upshot of these techniques is thus clearly to put in question the temporal subordination and logical connection that are crucial to the construction of any narrative. Rather than supplying a story that fits more or less exactly the famed Aristotelian plot structure of beginning, middle, and end reflecting the temporal coordinates of past, present, and future, Lobo Antunes emphasizes the fact that all takes place now, that we live now, that this now is the only venue of what we call past and future, and that these temporal coordinates are in fact created by us as ways of orientation that disorient us in the sense that they turn us away from the essential importance of the present. If, for that matter, the present has long been considered indescribable, the ever elusive “now,” Lobo Antunes restores to this “now” a remarkable richness attained by putting in question temporal segmentation itself. Moreover, this refusal to obey the Aristotelian “unities” also undermines another central element of Aristotelian emplotment, that all parts of a narrative prove in the end to fit together with the others in a single, definite purposive manner such that there is no narrative gesture that is not necessary to the conclusion of the narrative.

Hence another distinctive feature of Lobo Antunes’s style: the constant shifts in time and location. While it can be argued that these shifts are a kind of montage or collage effect that is similar to techniques deployed in film, the intricate interplay of verbs and persons in Lobo Antunes’s work goes far beyond simple montage insofar as he attempts to suppress *any* overriding temporal order along with other ways of creating an authoritative syntax. In other words, by suppressing temporal order, even the most basic sequential order that we often assume, erroneously, to be time in its “raw state,” as well as the copulative function of the verb “to be” and other modes of syntac-

tic integration, Lobo Antunes creates a text that challenges the most basic modes of assembling narratives.

Returning to my earlier point, I think it is instructive to look at these techniques as creating a remarkably ambiguous and polysemous text that both relies on and subverts the basic constructive principles of narrative. In a complicated sense, Lobo Antunes puts narrative in question not simply as a kind of lie (since other constructions are possible), but as a specifically salvific lie, as a means by which we seek an impossible salvation or, at the very least, as I have suggested already, shelter from a both expansive and damning present.

Here as elsewhere in Lobo Antunes's work there is both a striking appreciation for the lies we tell ourselves and a harsh rebuke of them, both dour tragic respect and vibrant comic insouciance, admiration for order and repetition coupled with an equal loathing of both, a struggle, in other words, that remains unresolved and, perhaps, unresolvable.

Jeff Love