

AUGUSTO SANTOS SILVA

## OLIVEIRA MARTINS : DEATH IN HISTORY

Portuguese 'decadence' is one of the central issues discussed by the authors of the so-called 'Generation of 1870'.<sup>1</sup> Antero de Quental in his second lecture at the Casino in 1871 expressed his ideas on the origins of this decadence - which could have been subscribed to by many of his friends of the time - in the following way: since the 17th century, Portugal had witnessed a continuous process of social and moral decomposition. The country had been dominated by absolutism and by the Jesuits, blocked by her own conquests, and closed to scientific and cultural progress. The access of the Liberals to power in 1834 had not been able to stop the nation's decadence. All this made it necessary for those men who met together in the 1870s to question received ideas, to arouse public opinion, and to give new life to the moribund motherland.

This reflection on decadence thus included one aspect which we should emphasize: a reflection on death. For Eça de Queirós, Teófilo Braga, Antero and some others, death was the precise term to be used in describing the state the nation was approaching and was going to reach unless something was done to save her. This was by no means a new element. It is well known that the funereal, thanatological theme is central to romanticism, and Almeida Garrett, Alexandre Herculano and King Pedro V had introduced it into socio-political discourse, by referring to the possibility of the nation's collective death. The 'Generation of 1870',

<sup>1</sup> Brief notes on the authors, ideologies, movements and events referred to below have been inserted as an appendix to this article for the convenience of readers.

however, regarded Portuguese Liberalism, of which the above-mentioned had been key figures, as a stage in that decadent and moribund past they considered necessary to overcome.

Oliveira Martins (1845-1894) seems to have been, in the closing stages of the 19th century, the one who has best explored the metaphorical, analogical and analytical features of death. This is visible both in his historiographical and in his anthropological or literary works. Three factors can be stressed as accounting for the presence of death in his writings. First, Oliveira Martins was still a romantic writer, eager to enhance the rhetorical and passionate effects of his writing; second, he was much influenced by the decadentist ideology, and death was, in this domain, an excellent metaphorical argument; third, he was influenced by organicism, and as such he considered societies, individuals and nations as beings that are born, grow old and die.

The interest of Oliveira Martins in death is not exhausted by his stylistic, analogic and emphatic uses of the theme. Controlling these uses in his global attitude to death (or a particular sentiment in relation to it) and a consistent attempt to manipulate the image elicited in his readers by death itself (or the representations they have of it) as an analytical category, as a key to cognitive, critical and philosophical decoding.

The meditation on Portugal undertaken by Oliveira Martins gives a privileged place to history, and in this analytical space the profit derived from treating the subject of death is more intense than elsewhere in his work. The position of history in his thought-system needs to be elaborated to avoid confusion. History must be written as a drama, he wrote in the preface to the 2nd edition (1883) of his *Portugal Contemporâneo* (first published in 1881). This implies a literary framework. On the other hand history is one of the main pillars of the 'Library of the Social Sciences' he attempted to create.

The analytical enterprise of Oliveira Martins comprehends two permanently intersecting levels. The first is that of the definition of the general trends of human evolution in the sense of an evolutionism with Proudhonian and biologist roots; that would be the task of the social science, nomology. The second consists of the description and interpretation of those events related to each people or group, or combination of both, which fills in a unique and original way the area limited by the laws of evolution - and that is the scope of history.

This theory, stated in the introduction to his *Tabuas de Cronologia* (1884) denies the strictly scientific character of historiography, but on the other hand values it as an analytical tool, liberating it from its permanent subordination to the schematic vision of the march of mankind entailed by biologism and evolutionism. If history cannot reach truth, if it must often remain at a level of 'indeterminacy', it is then necessary to deploy all sorts of tools to enable us to ascertain what endures in a given nation - its civilization. If one adds to this his under-

standing of history as *the* exercise of criticism inasmuch as it is only through history that our social genealogy can be known and the present explained, the pivotal role of this discipline in Oliveira Martins' general system of thought will be better appreciated. Hence the indispensability of a dialogue with the nation through its dead, its past transactions. They always remain present - through death.

The Roman Republic, to which he devoted a book (*Historia da Republica Romana*, 1885) is the matrix of the model of evolution of those societies which acquired some historical dimension. The model asserts the immutability of a succession of three main states: formation, apogee, decadence. In Rome, a period of organic formation, culminating in the Republic, was followed necessarily by another - expansion through military conquest; such expansion in turn introduces in the ancient city foci and factors of disintegration leading to social disorganization, then to Caesarism and the Empire. In their main features, both the history of Portugal and that of Spain (studied in 1879) follow a path similar to the Roman case. The process of formation covers the Middle Ages, and from it stemmed, in the Portuguese case, the establishment of independence and the 'Atlantization' of the national trajectory. During the 15th and 16th centuries such a direction is embodied in the overseas expansion - that is the period of apogee, heroic by its very nature, during which Iberia played a salient role in European history. The 1500s, however, ended in catastrophe, and the process of decomposition which started then, and became increasingly more intensive, had not been reversed. Modern Portugal, under the dynasty of the Braganças, had no energy of her own; governed by the Jesuits, dependent on the English, the only genuine expression of national consciousness it could show was sebastianism. The dictatorship of Pombal was unable to extricate the country from the path of decadence. The implantation of Liberalism, even if responsible for the elimination of the Ancien Regime, had not meant the *construction* of a new, solid collective organism.

Why does decadence occur? In his *Causas da Decadência dos Povos Peninsulares* (1871), Antero imputed its responsibility to exogenous factors: post-Tridentine Catholicism, absolutism, the 'conquests'. Oliveira Martins recasts the problem: the roots of decadence are to be found in the apogee period. The Iberian Peninsula falls into the hands of the 'mercantile spirit', which is alien to its nature, but which the Peninsula itself had imposed on Europe through overseas expansion. There is a fatality which redeems the 15th-century nation from culpability by invoking a destiny which is not transcendent but immanent to historical reality - 'a destiny which resides in the very essence of things'.

The thanatographic imagery, cultivated to exhaustion by romanticism, serves exceptionally well to emphasize this interpretation. The historian-artist is allowed to see in the voluntarily sought disaster of El-Ksar-el-Kebir or in the climate of religious fanaticism so well translated into an institution by the Inquisition, indices and demonstrations of a desired death,

of *suicide*. He is also allowed to see the liquidation of the Ancien Regime (the old nation which had in Prince Miguel its last and most legitimate representative) through a political process initiated abroad and helped by foreign powers, against the popular will, as a *murder*. (The use of the terms suicide and murder in this context was proposed by Oliveira Martins.)

Sustaining that imagery there was a reflexive work which uses death as one of its axes, and from which three extensions are visible: the first, of a hermeneutic kind; the second more heuristic and analytical; and a third one with a more generalizing nature, interpretative in the widest sense of the term.

Note first how the historian understood the period of two centuries during which apogee occurred and decadence started. The *Historia de Portugal* announced, in 1879, what Oliveira Martins sought to demonstrate in the 1890s with *Os Filhos de D. João I* (1889-90), *A Vida de Nun'Alvares* (1893) and the unfinished *O Príncipe Perfeito* - the overseas expansion represents the fulfilment of the Nation's destiny, which is a tragic one. In fulfilling its destiny, the Nation achieved the maximum splendour, but at the same time, its role in the general evolution of mankind was exhausted. The Portuguese tragedy resides in that the assumption and actualization of a particular destiny contained a challenge to that stronger destiny - the necessary evolution of things. For this clash - a tragedy for the romantic vision of time - death is either the punishment or the desired solution.

In the second place, the framework for a historiographical reading which includes death as a main feature, favours, in heuristic terms, the manifestations of collective psychology and phenomena of the popular masses' everyday life - because they alone allow us to glimpse the core of the ideologies, values, forms of sensibility, which we now call *mentalités*, and which the author referred to as 'collective temperament', 'unconscious sentiments' or, in its widest sense, 'historic education'. There lives the 'genius' or the 'soul' of the Nation, which in the last instance are the terms that serve, by analogy, to synthesize each civilization. In situations of social disaggregation, the general traits of those attitudes become more evident; hence the care with which he dealt with phenomena related to death in an attempt to carry out what he called 'collective pathology'. The analysis of the values and forms of behaviour of a society in organic extinction - the whole nation at the beginning of the reign of King Sebastião, the miguelite nation during the civil wars - contained in his *Historia de Portugal* and *Portugal Contemporâneo*, are revealing in this respect.

Thirdly, it is in terms of death that Oliveira Martins envisages Portuguese decadence. In this sense, he extends the romantic reflection,<sup>2</sup> respecting the rhetorical parameters, but

<sup>2</sup> The best study of the romantic reflection on death belongs to J.A. França, *O Romantismo em Portugal* (Lisbon 1974-5). See also T.F. Earle's article in this volume.

obviating the perils of ultra-romanticism, and investigating the problem at a deep level never achieved before, both from the standpoint of the *intensity* of questioning and that of the analytical tools employed. His interpretation rests its pessimistic diagnosis of Portuguese social death on economic and sociological analyses which are still timely, and on a genealogic understanding of history, in which death is a hermeneutic key. For Oliveira Martins, the national death, or its spectre, is an organic, not a purely rhetorical death.

Why and when does a society die? Death is the key word to characterize social disorganization, and according to the author, this must be regarded at two levels: first, as a disaggregation and disintegration of national *organs*, that is, as the absence of a stable economic constitution and of any form of regulation or control of social conflicts and interests - a weakness of the State which Martins as a social and economic historian emphasizes; and secondly, as moral decomposition, that is, the non-existence of a collective moral unity or national *will*. Like Antero, Oliveira Martins stresses the importance of this factor and the role played, in a broad context, by the blocking of intellectual and scientific advance. Hence his attributing to the Portugal of the 1600s a *moral death*, an expression first used by Antero in 1871.

A society which does not live, i.e. which does not possess either intellectual or organic energy, a society without ideas and actions, is a dead society. Such a claim accommodates perfectly the attitude expressed, among others, by Oliveira Martins, about the life and the death of a person: life is valued by ideas, the intellectual passion of thought and the ethical duties commanding action - and that guarantees, through the collective memory, immortality; death offers the best occasion to assess each person's worth.

So it is with societies. History there obtains its justification - a discourse about the past is the privileged locus for the meditation on 'the nature of things', as the last paragraph of Martins' *Historia da Civilização Iberica* (1879) reads. The very fact that things are dead thus becomes a source of illumination.

The assumption of death as one analytical axis helps us to understand three other important elements of this author's thought and writings: a) the narrative dramatization and the literary apparatus are not only the necessary surface realities of an understanding of this kind, assuming history as drama and tragedy, but also, and above all, one of its essential components; b) the attention devoted to the phenomena of social psychology and *mentalités*, and the making of a historiography of everyday life, are both rooted in the idea that it is in the collective and unconscious sentiments that the soul of the nation lives - hence, it is there that the nation's historical life or death is decided; c) the characterization of the long, unfinished period from the Discoveries onwards as decadence leads to the presentation

of an alternative - either total death, or an eventual regeneration which Martins regarded, in the 1890s, as a moral regeneration.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than going further into the peculiarities of Oliveira Martins' thought, it is perhaps more appropriate here to stress some general points regarding attitudes towards death and the use of death as an analytical tool. My last two suggestions aim, therefore, to assume a theoretical dimension, both from the standpoint of research on systems of thought and from that of studies of the relationships between man and death.

If we regard the polyhedral figuration of the system of ideas displayed in Oliveira Martins' work, we can conclude that research such as the one summarized in this paper - taking death, the representation of death, and the use given to it - as a line of questioning and a set of criteria for characterization, allows another side of Oliveira Martins to emerge more clearly. It does not replace nor surpass others, more visible and explored, such as the economic, the sociological, the critical and the political activities, or the purely literary aspects; but it will not fail to occupy an important place in any attempt at a global understanding of the system of ideas under consideration. In this new light, we face a reflection of Portugal postulating the *longue durée* as one of its most fundamental parameters, and using historical analysis as its main channel. The meeting/dialogue with the present from a perspective of past time - that is, history - integrates death as a crucial analytical category. The dialectic life-death is, therefore, a key to the understanding of the past: in the final analysis, death is a mediation of history. Oliveira Martins does not represent, in this respect, a unique case. Death is a fundamental value in romanticism, and the Portuguese social death is a pervasive theme through the 19th century, from Almeida Garrett to the so-called 'literary nationalists' of the 1890s. It is necessary to distinguish the purely metaphorical and rhetorical uses of death, visible mainly in the various ultra-romanticisms, from its use in a specifically reflexive and interpretative form. Above all, it is now incumbent upon us - those who are concerned with a social analysis of thought - to consider the attitudes and the representations which death originates, as a fundamental path in our approaches to culture (including ideologies). I believe this to be a suggestion worth pursuing in the domain of research on thought - approaching it in a way which apparently does not deal with *ideas* but with *sentiments*, but which would soon reveal how illusory such a demarcation is.

<sup>3</sup> Three Portuguese poets were subsequently to pay close attention to this issue, regarding moral regeneration as an alternative to social death: António Nobre (1867-1900), Teixeira de Pascoaes (1877-1952) and Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935).

My second suggestion is directed at those social scientists whose concern is with 'man and death' - be they social historians, historians of *mentalités*, anthropologists or sociologists. With reference to Ariès' typology, Oliveira Martins' attitude towards death is clearly romantic, and it reveals the traits of the 19th-century kind of attitude the French historian has called '*la mort de toi*'. But the experts have been mainly concerned with attitudes towards real, biological, individual death. That is not our case. What is most interesting in the Portuguese thinker is his conception of a moral, collective death. It is his figuration of death. Not only does he speak and think *about* death, he speaks and thinks *with* death - using his own image of death as an analytical category, a master-key to decoding the world. I believe that there lies a cornerstone of the understanding of the relationships between man and death. It certainly is necessary to analyse the attitudes and forms of behaviour towards physical death, having in mind Vovelle's distinction between '*mort subie*' and '*mort vécue*' and the '*discours sur la mort*'. That requires multi-disciplinary research, both within existing theoretical frameworks as well as within the framework of the total science of Man proposed by Morin when he discussed this very issue, or even of the 'anthropo-thanatology' outlined by L.-V. Thomas. It will nevertheless be worth bearing in mind a very simple element most investigators seem to have overlooked<sup>4</sup> - that is, that men think not only *about* death, but also *with* death, and death is not solely a physical reality but a meta-physical image as well. Death often serves as a key to decipher the world. And an analysis of the ways in which that key is made and used is essential to the understanding of the world that created it and that it helps unveiling.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See Edgar Morin, *L'Homme et la Mort*, Paris 1970; Michel Vovelle, *Mourir Autrefois*, Paris 1974; Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Anthropologie de la Mort*, Paris 1975; Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Towards Death*, Baltimore and London 1974, and *L'Homme devant la Mort*, Paris 1977.

<sup>5</sup> I wish to thank Mr Eugénio Lisboa for his comments and, in a very special way, Rui Feijó.

## APPENDIX

Brief notes on the authors, ideologies, events etc., referred to above.

King Sebastião (1554-1578) was the last king in the dynasty of Avis. He tried obsessively to resume the expansionist policy in Africa, and led a military expedition which was tragically defeated in El-Ksar-el-Kebir (in Portuguese, Alcácer Quibir). The king died, the nation lost independence (1580) and was united with Spain. The battle of El-Ksar-el-Kebir became a symbol of the end of Portuguese apogee, and sebastianism emerged as a messianic movement, present in all stages of the nation's history thereafter.

From 1640, when independence was recovered, Portugal was governed by the dynasty of Bragança. In the 18th century, the government of Pombal (between 1750 and 1777) was characterized by an attack on parts of the nobility, the promotion of bourgeois interests, the expulsion of the Jesuits, the secularization of the Inquisition, and an educational reform; hence the modernist, pre-liberal image created around Pombal by the 19th-century Liberals.

The end of the Ancien Regime entailed an open struggle culminating in the civil war, which ended in 1834 with the Liberal victory, under the command of King Pedro IV (1798-1834). The leader of the absolutists was Prince Miguel (1802-1866), the king's brother; hence the term miguelism, used to designate the political movement and the partisans of the Ancien Regime.

The two most important Portuguese romantic authors were Almeida Garrett (1798-1854) and Alexandre Herculano (1810-1877), the latter being particularly influential during the reign of King Pedro V (1837-1861), the king-thinker and pedagogue. Realism and Socialism were mainly diffused by the youths of the so-called 'Generation of 1870', who organized a series of public lectures in the Lisbon Casino in 1871 which were banned by the government. Antero de Quental (1842-1891) was the group's leading philosopher. Eça de Queirós (1845-1900) became a celebrated novelist. Oliveira Martins (1845-1894) was a thinker and political activist. Teófilo Braga (1843-1924) adhered to positivism and became a leading figure of the Republican Party in Opposition, and later President of the Republic.

In the 1890s, a new generation attempted a return to romanticism and embarked on an aesthetic glorification of the rural nation. Their literary movement is called 'literary nationalism'.