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PASSION ACCORDING TO MTH

ANNA KLOBUCKA
(University of Georgia)

The place occupied by Maria Teresa Horta within contemporary Portuguese literary and cultural landscape is perhaps easier described than neatly and properly defined. Most commonly identified, particularly on the international scene, as a member of the feminist triumvirate that in 1972 made history with publication of the groundbreaking **Novas Cartas Portuguesas**, she is also remembered as the author of scandalizingly explicit erotic poetry gathered in volumes such as **Minha Senhora de Mim** (1971) and **Educacão Sentimental** (1975). (In fact, it was the publication and subsequent suppression of **Minha Senhora de Mim** that prompted the "Three Marias " to launch their collective writing adventure). Horta's literary and political prominence in the early to late seventies contrasts abruptly, however, with the nearly complete obscurity to which she has been consigned in the years that followed the heady days of the Portuguese revolution. In literary-historical assessments of Portuguese poetic production in the last few decades, her name tends to be mentioned primarily in connection with **Poesia 61**, a collective publication in which she participated as a young poet; in fact, according to Luis Miguel Nava (writing in the volume that purports to sum up "a century of poetry" in Portugal), it is in those early years that Horta's best poetic work may be found (154). Given the series of rather extreme ups and downs that have shaped her literary career, it is no wonder that, in an interview given in 1990 to the then young and upstart weekly **O Independente** (in itself a comment on her somewhat ex-centric status in relation to the Portuguese cultural mainstream), she should complain about being denied recognition as a writer: "as pessoas esqueceram-se de que eu tenho livros de poesia, esqueceram-se de que eu tenho determinada posição na literatura portuguesa, e passei a ser tratada como feminista, apenas" (III-7). Although such a complaint might be suspected of leading up to an all-too-common disclaimer of the ideological affiliation in question, in the same interview she nevertheless reaffirms her unwavering conunitment to feminism.

Both Horta's recent obscurity and her somewhat anachronistic allegiance to feminism and to feminist literary practice (anachronistic, again, in relation to what, in Portugal, may be taken to constitute the contemporary cultural and political mainstream) are alluded to on the blurb of her novel **A Paixão Segundo Constança H.**, published in 1994 by the prestigious Bertrand Editora. Chosen to inaugurate a new series in the collection "Autores de Lingua Portuguesa" and endowed with an arresting title, the novel appeared to mark yet another upswing on Horta's uneven trajectory as a literary

public figure. And it is indeed a remarkable work--even though its value, at least to this reader's mind, consists less in its purely literary merit, than in its often contradictory and confusing identity as Horta's latest feminist statement--or perhaps, as I will argue, a "postfeminist" revision, not to say retraction.'[1]

The book's title evokes an immediate association with Clarice Lispector's celebrated and much-discussed **A Paixão Segundo G.H.**. However, the Portuguese writer's novel is likely to prove a disappointment to readers hoping to find in it a sustained and incisive dialogue with Lispector's work, perhaps another intertextual phenomenon along the lines famously set out by Hèléne Cixous[2], but this time (while also reaching across the transatlantic divide) lodged firnily in the Portuguese language and thus less vulnerable to the pitfalls of linguistic and cultural mistranslation.' Although Lispector and G.H. are repeatedly mentioned in the course of the novel's narration, along with a great many other female writers and characters, the one author whose work is thoroughly probed, dissected, recycled and deconstructed in **A Paixão Segundo Constanca H.** is Maria Teresa Horta herself. In fact, even the novel's title, offering as it does an explicit indication of its intertextual indebtness, harks back to Horta's lifelong literary **passion for retelling familiar** stories and cannibalizing well-recognized **texts, a tendency discernible** already in her early poetry and brought to full fruition in works such as **Minha Senhora de Mim**, a lyric return to the roots of Portuguese poetic tradition that both emphasizes and questions the prominent place accorded in that tradition to the female voice, and, most notably, in **Novas Cartas Portuguesas**.

A major theme in most of Horta's work has been, throughout the years, chronicling of what she perceives as a millenary tradition of women's culture, an endeavor aimed at the creation of a diachronic contiguity, which purports to be both historical and mythical, between women's lives, bodies and destinies. Her latest novel is a self-conscious continuation of this effort, as it incorporates a vast gallery of references to literary works by and about women, to real and fictional women's lives that are linked together to form a specifically feminine genealogy: the novel's main protagonist "reads and rereads" Marguerite Duras, Sylvia Plath, Clarice Lispector, Florbela Espanca, Zelda Fitzgerald, Virginia Woolf, to mention but'a few of the women's names abundantly scattered throughout its pages; in reading, she 'recognizes herself in each paragraph":

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[1] I am well aware that the interpretive direction I have chosen appears to mark me as an accomplice of those singleminded critics guilty of reading Horta as a "feminista, apenas. " Implicit in the author's complaint cited above is, however, a recognition that such a judgement tends to be based in an updated version of the notorious conundrum articulated by Virginia Woolf: one can be either a first-class feminist but a second-rate writer or vice-versa. Needless to say, I reject this alternative as I consider Maria Teresa Horta Portugal's leading *feminist writer* of her generation.

As for my use of the loaded term "postfeminist," I hope to clarify its meaning and implications in the course of further discussion; provisionaly, I take it to imply neither negation and rejection of feminist principles ("antifeminist"), nor their historically postponed revival ("neofeminist"), but rather their ambivalent, dialectically charged incorporation that is instrumental in informing present practices. As such, "postfeminism" may be likened to Linda Hutcheon's paradoxical model of "postmodemism, " whose very label "signals its contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that both historically preceded it and literally made it possible" (23).

[2] I have dealt with both pleasures and discontents of the textual relationship between Cixous and Lispector in "Hélène Cixous and the Hour of Clarice Lispector", **SubStance** 73 (1994(, 41-62.

"na mudez de Maina ou sa insanidade apaixonada de Lola Valérie Stein, na imponderabilidade de Mariana Alcoforado" (56-57).

And yet, while at a first glance the novel might appear to seamlessly blend with Horta's earlier work, protracting and vindicating the feminist writer's lifelong literary commitment, it is in fact anything but an unproblematic continuation of that quest for an all-encompassing harmony between individual women's lives that stood out as a governing fantasy in volumes such as **Rosa Sangrenta** (1987) or **Minha Mãe meu Amor** (1986). Instead, since the novel's very point of departure constitutes a sort of reworking in the negative of this favorite theme, it becomes apparent from the beginning that its plot is likely to move in a disconcertingly different direction. The novel's first brief chapter opens with a depiction of a sexual encounter between two women; the reader follows the eyes of one of the lovers as they register minute anatomical features of the other woman's body. This opening passage, with its frank eroticism and microscopic attention to detail, whether morphological or somatic, is vintage Horta; so much greater the shock when, halfway through the first page, the reader gains access to the mind behind the eyes and the ostensible love scene reveals its darker side (13):

> Repeli-a.
> Repeli-a sempre numa espécie de repugnância. E nunca tirara nenhum prazer do seu corpo, mas antes aquela náusea e aquele vómito contido.

This outburst of nausea and physical revulsion in the middle of what promises, at first, to develop into a beguiling celebration of female same-sex desire, akin to Luce Irigaray's lyric manifesto "Quand nos lèvres se parlent, " is a startling revelation, its negativity standing in stark contrast to the writer's earlier, passionately affirmative and inclusive, explorations of women's sexuality. Given this apparent – and defiantly exhibited – , change of direction in her work, **it** is particularly interesting to observe that the main theme of **A Paixão segundo Constança H.** is precisely a traumatic confrontation between faithfulness and betrayal, in which the unwavering strength of Constança's "passion" is pitched against a series of desertions inflicted upon her by her loved ones.

As if to set them apart from the hosts of historical and fictional female figures who are constantly summoned into the discourse as sympathetic witnesses to the unfolding events, somewhat in the manner of a Greek chorus, the novel's three main protagonists form a sparsely named trio, furnished with first names only and all sharing the same last name initial: Constança H., Henrique H. and Adele H. Henrique is Constança's husband, while Adele--named after Victor Hugo's daughter by her mother who "adored Truffaut" (14)--is the young woman whom Constança seduces (or by whom she allows herself to be seduced) after she finds out that she has been betrayed by Henrique. It is that revelation that unhinges Constança emotionally; as her passionate love for Henrique metamorphoses into hatred, she dreams of violence and murder. Her husband is not the intended victim, however; one night Constança wakes up bathed in sweat, having just dreamed of cutting another woman's throat: " sonhara que enterrava urn estilete **na** garganta de uma mulher, num enorme gozo: lentamente, até **ao cabo cromado e** fino, a lâmina cravada, a atravessar tecidos, cartilagens, veias" (233).

Shortly afterwards, she meets Adele and halfheartedly responds to the young woman's advances in order to revenge herself upon Henrique. Constança derives no pleasure from the liaison: while in bed with Adele, she imagines and desires Henrique's naked body, feeling sad and cold "corn toda aquela espécie de farsa erótica e pobre do romance mascul ino " (249), which is how--as a pornographic tableau--she perceives her homosexual affair. Trying to hold on to her gradually ebbing sanity, Constança collects her children and takes a vacation in a little house on the beach; after Adele follows her there, Constança's despair and hatred focus on the younger woman who in her mind becomes a stand-in for her husband's lover. Constança's favorite companion at that time is a large black dog, a stray whom she takes in and disciplines; one day, as Adele appears in the cottage's doorway, Constanga whispers a **command** into the dog's ear and watches silently as the beast attacks and rips the other woman's throat. Constança is subsequently imprisoned and placed in a psychiatric hospital; one year later her husband Henrique kills himself by cutting his wrists in a bathtub.

The manner in which Horta's novel tells this utterly melodramatic, tabloid-like story of Constança's love and crime both masks and underscores the antithetical tension between the postulate of contiguity sustaining the multitude of its intertextual references and the radical rupture that is effected by its literally slashing plot. The novel's structural resemblance to **Novas Cartas Portuguesas**--it is similarly fragmented and formally heterogeneous, as it incorporates poems, letters both old and new, numerous quotations, fragments of a diary, and narratives of dreams--is reinforced by the account of Constança's relationship with her long-deceased grandmother. The special bond between them is said to have been **fomented by their** common ability to experience and share similar "visions," graphic **dreams** of female victimization at the hands of men--a woman buried alive by her husband, another one beheaded in defense of male honor--that vividly recall the accounts of violence against women gathered in the course of the collective enterprise of writing **Novas Cartas** ("Eram histórias entre elas" [1531, says the narrator of Horta's novel). Constança's own crime mimics her childhood visions in a gruesomely accurate way, just as her madness or "passion" models itself explicitly on the ravishing of Vol V. Stein or on the suicidal despair of Madam Butterfly--even though, through a sort of bizarre negative transference, she herself appropriates the malevolent posture of the victimizer. Nevertheless, her fate is repeatedly presented as just one more thread weaving itself compliantly into the neverending story of shared female experience; listening to Madam Butterfly's final aria, Constança muses in the following manner: "A paixão segundo Madame Butterfly... Tanta paixão de mulher, misturada. Tanto ódio e amor, misturados, fusionados, numa longa trança de cabelo que se estende através dos séculos" (148).

While the parallels, both direct and inverted, between **A Paixão segundo Constança H.** and **Novas Cartas Portuguesas** are evident, it is perhaps more enlightening to juxtapose Horta's latest work with her volume of poetry or, more properly, book-length poem **Minha Mãe meu Amor**, published in 1986. Subdivided into chapters, the poem progresses, much as a novel might, through temporal succession and recollection, narrating the lyric subject's experience of her mother's body through pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and childhood, sections that are followed by a poetic

commentary on the difficult yet in the end successful task of reconstructing those memories and articulating the mother-daughter relationship into literary discourse. The poem's last "chapter," titled "Transference," fuses the figure of the mother with that of the female analyst, who also becomes the speaker's lover, and offers a sort of lyric apotheosis of female interconnectedness and, as Irigaray might put it, indifference (207), un-difference. The final poem of that section strikes a more open-ended note, however, suggesting ultimate impossibility of such retrospective communion, even as the daughter's interrogation must inescapably continue: "Por isso te pergunto/e já sem esperança:/Que hei-de fazer/de um coração aceso?" (149).

These final lines--"Que hei-de fazer de um coração aceso?"--are repeated almost verbatim in **Paixão segundo Constanca H.**, as one of the numerous parenthetic epigraphs that separate the novel's brief chapters (139). Likewise, the main protagonist's relationship with her mother occupies a central place in her life story and is transferentially echoed in Constança's relations with other women. Here, however, the similarities apparently end, as the rhetorical question posed at the conclusion of **Minha Mãe meu Amor** is answered in the novel in a dramatically negative way, by Constança's fall into madness and by the hatred and disgust that she directs toward her female lover and, ultimately, victim. And yet, here too, the mother's **role** is pivotal; Constança's husband's betrayal is presented as a virtual reenactment of the major trauma of her childhood: her mother's affair with another man, eventually resulting in her abandoning the family. It is that event--along with Constança's grandmother's death, which occurs nearly at the same time--that effects a never-to-be-healed rupture in the continuum of female bonding briefly, if powerfully, experienced by the child. As a result, the existential connectedness between women is recalled in the novel as a feature of an idealized past, even as both Constança and the narrator attempt to reinvent it as an imaginary construct, relentlessly--and fallaciously--insisting on weaving Constança's story into the intertextual web of shared female experience.

Horta's revision, in **Paixão Segundo Constanca H.**, of her earlier, more straightforwardly affirmative feminist narratives appears to reflect a trend--identified by Deborah Silverton Rosenfeld in reference to a number of North American women's novels of the 1980s--toward uneven and often contradictory reinscription of feminist politics inside the social and cultural texts of a more conservative era, trend labeled by the critic as "postfeminist. " Although drawing any such transnational and, particularly, transatlantic parallels between culturally distinct individual and social contexts tends to be a highly problematic enterprise, I would argue that it is legitimate in the particular case of Maria Teresa Horta who, like no other Portuguese woman writer, has over the years remained closely attuned to varying wavelengths on which international feminist trends and movements have played out their advances, changes of heart, failures and recoveries. Like the "postfeminist" novels analyzed by Rosenfeld, Horta's **Paixão segundo Constança H.** retreats from the revolutionary feminist thrust of the writer's earlier work, but in the process it exhibits its own ambivalence about doing so as it simultaneously demolishes and reinscribes the guiding feminist trope of sisterhood. In Constança's world, all women are "other women," one another's rivals, one another's victims or victimizers; and yet, solidarity is still desired, although, as the novel seems to

claim, it can only be attained on a purely fictional level, narcissistically intuited through listening to Butterfly's aria or reading a poem by Sylvia Plath. It is one of **Paixão**'s many ironies that even the imaginary solidarity in suffering, or "passion, in which both Constança and the narrator take such frequent and eager refuge, is built on a misappropriation of otherness: after all, unlike Madam Butterfly, Constança is Henrique's lawful wedded wife (much as her historical namesake, the royal spouse of D. Pedro and the involuntary rival of the far more famous Inês de Castro).

As Horta's novel thus simultaneously rejects and embraces one of the most cherished feminist themes and narrative strategies, that of spiritual bonding between women, it repeatedly reveals itself as not only an exercise in self-contradiction, but also, more disturbingly, as something of a cover-up operation for its own ambivalences. To give a both particularly vivid and significant example, one of the novel's final chapters, having opened with a graphic account of blood spurting from Adele's ravaged throat, moves on to a sort of free-associative play of images that is characteristic of Horta's poetic practice in general, but which in the context produces a jarringly inappropriate effect (289):

> 0 sangue mancha a cara, o corpo quase nu de Adele, os seus lábios humedecidos como se fosse deles que o sangue brotasse. Constanga pensa numa hemoptise... Marguerite Gautier morrendo, gritando o norne do seu amante, camélias da cor de menstruação, postas A cabeceira ...

This imaginary levelling of three very different bloodstreams cannot fail to imply that Constança's crime actually has the desirable outcome of welcoming the heretofore rejected Adele into the mythic sisterhood lodged, as Constança's diary has it elsewhere, in a "tempo lunar das mulheres marcado na descida do sangue pelo interior do corpo" (195). Adele finally lives up (or, shall we say, dies up) to the promise of her name, becoming yet another of the melodramatic heroines who populate the opera—not to say the soap opera--of Constança's love-and-crime story. The misappropriation of her death, however, unlike that of Madain Butterfly's plight, goes beyond mere narrative inconsequence: the assimilation of Adele, that true Other Woman of the novel, suggests that Horta, for all her courageous venturing out of the customary reaches of her literary experience, cannot in the end resist drawing back into the reassuringly familiar shelter of the fantasy in which all "other" women are ultimately the same in the commonality of their passion: the passion according to MTH.

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