



The Myth of Narcissus as *Ars Poetica*

O mito de Narciso como ars poética

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Abstract: The popularity and versatility of the senses by which the myth of Narcissus has been interpreted is notorious. In Portuguese literature this fact is also evident. Therefore, it is our purpose, in this reflection, to consider several poems of Portuguese contemporaneity in which the myth of Narcissus has a common line of reading: the projection of the artist in the work created.

Keywords: Portuguese poetry; José Régio; Miguel Torga; David Mourão-Ferreira; Ruy Cinatti.

Resumo: A popularidade e versatilidade de sentidos por que o mito de Narciso tem sido interpretado é notória. Na literatura portuguesa esse facto é também uma evidência. Por isso, é nosso propósito, nesta reflexão, considerar três poemas da contemporaneidade portuguesa em que o mito de Narciso tem uma linha comum de leitura: a projeção do artista na obra criada.

Palavras-chave: Poesia portuguesa; José Régio; Miguel Torga; David Mourão-Ferreira; Ruy Cinatti.

1 Introduction¹

There is abundant evidence of the vitality that the myth of Narcissus has had in contemporary Portuguese poetry (PENA, 2017).

¹ I warmly thank Prof. Lorna Hardwick for her attentive reading and all the suggestions.

And considering the multiple poets who have rewritten it, the privileged motifs are those that its traditional sources have provided. Among them are the fascination of beauty, the shift of emphasis to individualism as opposed to socialization, the search for self-knowledge and introspection – in respect of human existence and its enigmas – but also the literary (or artistic, in general) self-reference, that is, the challenging dialogue between the creator and his work.

Before the reading of this myth was configured, in Hellenistic-imperial times, with traces that became conventional, some references already testified to the poetic tradition of the flower called “narcissus”. Sophocles, *Oedipus Coloneus* 682-684 included it among the charms that made Colonus, in the vicinity of Athens, a place of unparalleled beauty. And the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 1-14, in narrating Persephone’s abduction by Hades when picking flowers, highlighted the beauty and fragrance of narcissus as a factor of attraction, with which the Earth/Nature made easier the harassment of the loving god.

In 1st BC – 2nd AD centuries, the most relevant testimonies of an evolution to what we might call the ‘myth of Narcissus’ were recorded. Conon (*apud* JACOBY, 1999, p. 24),² and Ovid,³ at almost the same epoch, looked at the motive from a biographical perspective. They tried to follow, in the life of Liriope and Cephissus’ son, the path that led him from childhood to maturity, from naivety to arrogance, from a frustrated socialization and repudiation for all passionate approaches to loneliness, until the punishment, consummated by a kind of obstinate and suicidal

² *FGrHist* 24. In the last decades of the 1st century BC, the Greek mythographer Conon composed and dedicated to King Archelaos Philopater of Cappadocia his *Diegeseis* (*Narratives*), a set of texts in which he relates myths associated with foundations of cities, cults, or regional aetiologies. This work came to us only indirectly, through the summaries of Photius (*Bibliotheca* 134b 29-41).

³ Within the excellence that the poetic production reached in Rome at the time of Augustus (1st century BC / AD), Ovid produced a long poem, unique in its theme and configuration, *Metamorphoses*, which has ‘transfiguration’ as its articulating motive. And he dedicated to Narcissus a long passage (3.339-510), of strong influence in all the later reception.

autism. In the following century, the geographer Pausanias,⁴ in his account as a traveller through the various regions of Greece, returned to the subject to discredit, as unthinkable, its central motif: the passion for oneself. He then created the figure of a twin of Narcissus, whose death had led him to review in the waters an image which he knew was his own, but which was so similar to his lost sister that it could be a consolation to him.

Without losing sight of the Greco-Latin tradition of the myth and its contribution as a main source to successive reconfigurations (literary and artistic) – based on the traditional lines synthetically enunciated above –, it is our aim to consider a specific symbolism of Narcissus' theme: that of poetic creation. Let us then take as an example the rewrites that some contemporary Portuguese poets – José Régio, Miguel Torga, David Mourão-Ferreira and Ruy Cinatti – have dedicated to the myth, in which we see this focus valued or implicit.

It is not a simple coincidence that Pausanias, when describing the region of Boeotia where he found the memory of Narcissus celebrated in a fountain with his name (9.31.7; cf. Conon, *Diegesis* 24), gave it by coordinates Mount Helicon, considered since Hesiod (*Theogony* 1-8, 22-23) the dwelling of Eros and the Muses, which had a sanctuary there. That's why Helicon – the “twisted” hill – became a place of poetic inspiration. This thriving valley where the gods had their dwelling was not far from Tespias, a city considered to be the cradle of Narcissus, nor from Ascra, the homeland of Hesiod. Due to the very region to which it was associated, the myth of Narcissus accumulated the notion of poetic creation.

In our approach we will explore three inseparable elements of the reading of the myth of Narcissus: the natural environment surrounding the picture and, in particular, the liquid surface where his self is reflected and the greater or lesser accuracy of the image; the relationship between the Ego and the Alter, as expressing the projection between man/poet or between poet/work; and, finally, the condemnation or punishment inherent in the search, difficult or useless, for self-knowledge.

⁴ In his *Description of Greece*, in the book dedicated to Boeotia (9.31.7-8), Pausanias tried to establish an *aition* for a ‘Narcissus fountain’, where he found the ballast of a tradition associated with the well-known myth.

2 José Régio (1901-1969)⁵

Narciso⁶

Dentro de mim me quis eu ver. Tremia,
 Dobrado em dois sobre o meu próprio poço...
 Ah, que terrível face e que arcabouço
 Este meu corpo lânguido escondia!

Ó boca tumular, cerrada e fria,
 Cujo silêncio esfíngico eu bem ouço!...
 Ó lindos olhos sôfregos, de moço,
 Numa frente a suar melancolia!...

Assim me desejei nestas imagens.
 Meus poemas requintados e selvagens,
 O meu Desejo os sulca de vermelho:

⁵ Régio is an outstanding figure in 20th century Portuguese cultural life as a poet, novelist, playwright, essayist and critic. His university education, not directly focused on Classics, certainly included – given the time and the plan of studies in Modern Languages and Literature – a general knowledge of Latin and what we could call Classical Culture in a broad sense. In addition, his studies in Romanic Philology forced him to become familiar with the great contemporary literatures, in particular French and English. He was a member of *Presença* magazine, a publication that was interested in adding critical and innovative intelligence to literary production, breaking with conventional patterns. He distinguished himself not only as a creator, but also as a theorist, being relevant the publication of the essay *Pequena História da Moderna Poesia Portuguesa* (Small History of Modern Portuguese Poetry) (1941). In short, about his production as a poet Lisboa says (2001, p. 657, our translation): “Very personal poetry, by the themes and their execution (disturbing combination of a traditional line with new rhythms and a daring and modern language, not infrequently on the verge of outrage)”. And, as central themes in Régio, the same author identifies: “body and spirit, good and evil, artistic vocation and its traps, suffering and redemption, death and resurrection (...), difficulty of human coexistence, intelligence and intuition, trapdoors of friendship and love, knowledge and irony, expression and expressed, the achievement of simplicity, creation and solitude, perfection and death...”

⁶ Included in *Poemas de Deus e do Diabo* (Poems of God and Devil) (1925), this text was republished in *Biography* (RÉGIO, 1978).

Que eu vivo à espera dessa noite estranha,
Noite de amor em que me goze e tenha,
... Lá no fundo do poço em que me espelho!

Inside me I wanted to see myself. I trembled,
Folded in two over my own well ...
Ah, what a terrible face and what a chest
This languid body of mine hid!

O tumular mouth, closed and cold,
Whose inscrutable silence I hear well! ...
Oh, beautiful, eager eyes of a boy,
On a melancholic sweaty brow! ...

So I desired myself in these images.
My exquisite and wild poems,
My Desire furrows them in red:
Because I live waiting for that strange night,
A night of love when I enjoy and own myself,
...at the bottom of the well where I am mirrored!
(RÉGIO *apud* PENA, 2017, p. 120, our translation)⁷

The point of contact between the Self and the Other is, in the tradition of myth, a liquid surface, functioning as a mirror or replica of an image. But there are different ways to achieve this complicity or detachment. The divergence was already clear among the references in the ancient texts. Conon (*Diegesis* 24) and Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 9.31.7) simply spoke of “spring water”, without determining its sharpness or movement, neutralizing the role that water could have in that context.⁸ Therefore, they put all the strength of the episode in its protagonists, in the image that projects and is projected. Ovid, on the other hand, is subtler in the treatment of the motif. By going back to the progenitors of Narcissus – the river Cephissus, which by the rape of a marine nymph, Liriope, generated him (3.341-344) – the poet integrated

⁷ The translations of all poems are mine.

⁸ The *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 69.4711 also speaks of “spring”, as Philostratus, the Old, *Images* 1.23, Severus of Alexandria, *Narcissus*.

water into his existence as a genetic factor. And when, having already completed his life route, the water returns to the existence of Narcissus, the poet is more precise in the function that he attributes to it, as unexpected scenery of vengeance and extinction, as if the same water that gave him life welcomed him at the end of his journey. “A limpid, argentine source of glittering whirlpools”,⁹ always untouched (*Metamorphoses* 3.407-410, 451, 486), but generous in stimulating the power of nature around it (3.411), has a personality and an active role in the relationship of which it will be the shaping force. Clearness promises exemplary clarity in the projection of the image, while movement gives rise to enigma and mutability (3.460-461). Therefore, although clear, the source is still “misleading” (3.427) and, if touched, prints a fleeting and distorted movement on the image (3.428, 432). Instead of approaching, it provides distance, “a thin line of water” more effective than “the immense sea” in separating two sides of the same being (3.448-450). If it consents to any complicity this results from the clouding that tears of suffering cause it (“with tears he clouds the surface of the water. Shivering, the lake sends back the blurred image”, 3.475-476).

José Régio integrates, in his sonnet, the topic of water in a decisive way. Instead of the spring, he prefers “the well” to open and close the poem, interiorizing the enigmatic character of Narcissus’ projection and giving to the purpose of ‘looking’ an intimate and hardly accessible dimension.¹⁰ Instead of an external, superficial reality, meeting point between the Ego and the Alter, the well is read as the depths of the soul of the poetic subject, “my own well”, over which he bends in a closed fixity on himself. Impenetrability increases as the search continues. That’s why the final mention of “the bottom of the well where I’m mirrored” gives to introspection a deeper dimension. And although at the bottom

⁹ The motive is repeated; e. g., Kallistratos, the Sophist, *Descriptions* 5.1, 5.4

¹⁰ This word alone justifies the poetic identity of Régio, as established by CACHADA, 2000, p. 5-6: “His artistic personality, which revealed itself to be antagonistic and as such binary, because desirably authentic, true and original, expresses countless moments of analysis and introspection that truly reveal the human condition”. In the same vein Veloso (1976, p. 173) comments: “What imposed him as an original poet was a certain style, spectacular, of confession and dialogue alone”.

of the well there is the reflection of a mirror, it certainly does not have the immediate luminosity that water from a spring possesses, the image projected is obscure and tends to be inaccessible.¹¹

Defined by these limits, the poem analyses the intrinsic relationship between the man and the poet – this and another Self – as its main theme. The Ego dominates through the emphatic repetition of a first person in the initial verse (“inside me I wanted to see myself”), in a difficult exercise of introspection. Then follows the profile of the ‘man’ who ‘trembles’ in front of the adventure of knowing and expressing himself. What he sees is obscure and persistently offering difficulties to discovery: “terrible face”, “languid body”, “tumular mouth”, “inscrutable silence”¹² are expressive traits of animosity, muteness and mystery, of an unknown “I” so far from the weakness of the body that shelters him; perhaps also suggestive of the human creature, paralysed in a kind of potential still amorphous waiting to be sketched out.

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¹¹ This is a motif that pleases Régio, who repeats it in the poem “A longa história” (“The long story”) (1978, p. 163-164): “The well was bottomless, but I went down, / went down until I thought I found its bottom”.

¹² The adjectives used in Portuguese to qualify the mouth and silence are particularly expressive. “Tumular”, associated with ‘tomb’ and ‘death’, suggests the rigid and irrecoverable immobility to which death condemns the mouth that utters the words; there seems to be no hope for the poet in search of expression. For its part, the silence, “esfíngico” (“of a sphinx”), “inscrutable”, is nevertheless audible, although strangely enigmatic.

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And yet, the possibility of access to intimacy, comprehension, and hope lives in the “beautiful, eager eyes of a boy”, full of vitality and youth, determined to overcome the effort that the sweat of the forehead denounces. Perhaps here lies the ‘metamorphosis’ of the man into a poet, the coup of creativeness, at once original and autonomous,¹³ that the glow of the eyes promises. Because from inanity one passes to “desire”, as creative impulse. The human being transposes himself into the poet. And the words his poems long for have all the symptoms of an unknown vigor, at the same time “exquisite and wild”; but to achieve them perhaps requires of the poet the violence of a real scourge, the tearing of flesh that dyes them red,¹⁴ in the same way that the Ovidian Narcissus “desperately lacerated his arms with his hands” (*Metamorphoses* 3.497; cf. 3.482: “the battered chest is covered with a pinkish redness”), powerless in front of such overwhelming passion. ‘Inspiration’ could perhaps have been an alternative title for the poem, valuing that moment in which the inscrutable suspension is followed by the “night of love in which I enjoy and own myself”, ‘man’ and ‘poet’ finally entangled. From the darkness unknown to ‘man’, after a long ‘wait’, the ‘poet’ emerges, both looking into each other’s core. In Régio, there is no frustration or uselessness in this encounter; on the contrary, there is firm hope in complicity, which eliminates suspension in order to make room for an act of full and productive love.

¹³ Two merits praised in good literature by Régio (1977, p. 17).

¹⁴ In this context of poetic creation, there may be an indirect allusion to Marsyas, whom the myth consecrated as the skillful *aulos* player who dared to challenge Apollo to a music contest. So the god punished him by attaching him to a tree and tearing off his skin or limbs. From his blood came a river that flowed nearby. Several topics are common between the two myths: the act of *hybris*, punishment, metamorphosis, liquid surface, as well as the association with poetic creation.

3 Miguel Torga (1907-1995)¹⁵

O Narciso¹⁶

O desenho impreciso
De cada rosto humano, reflectido!
Mas o velho Narciso
Continua fiel e debruçado
Sobre o ribeiro...
Porque não há-de ver-se inteiro
Quem todo se deseja revelado?

Devorador da vida lhe chamaram,
A ele, artista, sábio e pensador,
Que denodadamente se procura!

À movediça e trágica tortura
De velar dia e noite a líquida corrente
Que dilui a verdade,
Quiseram-lhe juntar a permanente
Ironia
Desse labéu de pérfida maldade
Que turva mais ainda a imagem fugidia...

The imprecise design
Of every human face, reflected!
But old Narcissus

¹⁵ Torga (professionally a doctor) is a well-known Portuguese poet, playwright, novelist and short story writer, who always claimed to be at odds with a precise literary movement. He was a member of *Presença*, a magazine appealing to all who wanted to break with the weight of the convention, which in the meantime he abandoned because he understood *Presença* not entirely faithful to its stated purposes. In his Diaries, which he composed throughout his life, he reports on the “discovery and subsequent personal achievement” (ÁLVAREZ, 2005, p. 462). Titles of poetic collections such as *Odes*, *Nihil sibi*, *Cântico do Homem* (Song of Man), *Orfeu Rebelde* (Orpheus Rebel) bear witness to the classical mark that abounds in his creations.

¹⁶ Poem published in *Cântico do Homem* (Song of Man) (1950).

Remains faithful and bent
 On the stream ...
 Why won't he see himself as an entire being
 The one who wants to be revealed?

Devourer of life he was called,
 He, the artist, wise man or thinker,
 Who thoroughly searches for himself!

To the moving and tragic torture
 Of watching day and night the liquid current
 That dilutes the truth,
 They wanted to add the permanent
 Irony
 Of this shadow of wickedness
 That further blurs the elusive image ...

Mergulho (Dive)¹⁷

Tirem o Céu da sua altura triste;
 Olhem a cor do inferno aqui no chão:
 Verde-esmeralda que, se não existe,
 É um milagre de luz em cada mão.

Anjos de barro, o nosso espelho apenas
 Deve ser o cristal que viu Narciso:
 Água dum poço de ilusões pequenas
 Onde morra e renasça o Paraíso.

Take heaven out of its sad height;
 Look at the color of hell here on the ground:
 Emerald green that, if it doesn't exist,
 It's a miracle of light in each hand.

Angels of clay, our mirror must
 Be only the crystal that Narcissus saw:
 Water from a well of small illusions
 Where Paradise dies and is reborn.

¹⁷ Poem dated 22 July 1951 and published in *Diário VI* (Cf. PENA, 2017, p. 133).

Lago Turvo (Muddy lake)¹⁸

Angústia marginada,
Meu canto é um lago turvo
Que devolve a paisagem, como um eco
Silencioso.
Um lago onde me afogo
Sem vontade,
Puramente impelido
Por não sei que fatal necessidade
De me sentir poeta e possuído.

Mar sem nascente e só do meu tamanho,
A doçura que tem é um sal sem gosto.
E a estranha inquietação de que se anima,
E o céu olha de cima,
São rugas que se agitam no meu rosto.

Anguish margined,
My song is a cloudy lake
That gives back the landscape, like a silent
Echo.
A lake where I drown
Unwillingly,
Purely propelled
By I do not know what fatal need
To feel poet and possessed.

Sea without a spring and only of my size,
The sweetness of it is a tasteless salt.
And the strange restlessness that it gets excited from,
And the sky that looks down from above,
They're wrinkles that stir up in my face.
(TORGA *apud* PENA, 2017, p. 133, our translation)

¹⁸ Poem dated 28 April 1956 and published in *Diário VIII* (Cf. PENA, 2017, p. 133).

In the various poems he dedicated to Narcissus, Torga diversifies the reading of this element so striking in the myth: water as a reflective mirror of an identity. Firstly, the sequence of the titles is suggestive: the first – “Narcissus” – identifying the myth, and the following – “Dive” and “Muddy Lake” – promising the water a relevant role in the episode. In the first case, the persistence of the search dominates and therefore the notion of “a stream”, as an unstoppable flow, better serves the idea of continuity, in interesting contrast with the placid immobility of “Old Narcissus”. Human impotence is confronted with the challenge of the instability of life, the central meaning of this poem. This is the precarious fate that the last verses accentuate: “To the moving and tragic torture/ of watching day and night the liquid current / that dilutes the truth”. Add to this, as an aggravated penalty, doubt and scepticism – “That further blurs the elusive image”. In what could be considered a more daring “dive” in oneself, the second poem replaces the “stream” with the “well”. The dimension is now another, the one that replaces fluidity with immobility, at the same time that the mystery worsens and radicalizes. It is not only because it stands still that the water becomes sharper when you look at it. Finally, with “Muddy Lake”, the liquid surface takes on another, more disturbing sense. The lack of clarity also obscures the image that is mirrored in it. Fluid and cloudy, this water is powerless to reflect nature and the creative impulse. For the first time, the water has a taste – or lack of it: “the sweetness of it is a tasteless salt”; therefore, the contact between the target and the touch is more intimate, but not effective.

Everything suggests that, among the three poems dedicated to this motive, there is a dialogue based on a permanent starting point: that of the persistence of those who seek to recognize themselves in their image and the difficulties that prevent their success.¹⁹ The reflection that confronts the poetic subject is imprecise, either because the water flowing makes it incomplete, undulating and fleeting, or because it becomes

¹⁹ The way in which (FERREIRA, 2014, p. 397) refers to the intervention of myth in Torga’s poetic creation is expressive: “Thus, besides being a mere stylistic artifice, the myth in Miguel Torga serves the poet, essentially, as a delimitation of the narrative identity construction, tracing out a greater myth, the *I-myth*”.

muddy and therefore incapable of reflection at all. Therefore, there seems to be evolution in this Narcissus: from hope to the most discouraging frustration, which is after all knowledge of this ephemeral and limited reality, which is man's existence.

It is not the impossibility of knowing himself that, at first, intimidates the persistence of an ego, identified as "artist, wise man or thinker", the only one capable of facing the tremendous challenge of understanding the projection of his image. "The design... of every human face" exists, "reflected", but incompletely. It is therefore necessary to go further, to "see oneself in one piece", to discover, in its totality, the relationship between the surface and the beyond. And for this, the "artist, wise man or thinker" does not lack "desire" and optimism. "Why won't he see himself as an entire being" is, despite the doubt, a cry of hope. In this adventure, "old Narcissus" invests his whole life, "remains faithful and bent", devouring day by day, in the dense search for himself. To perseverance is added discouragement and the tragic awareness that his persistent effort of "watching day and night the running liquid" does not bring satisfaction to his purpose. Perhaps because "irony", "perfidious evil" or "tragic torture" – that of the human condition and its limits – steals "the truth" and muddies the water. More than fleeing, it passes into obscurity, compromising one's obstinacy.

That is why the poem "Dive" seems to accentuate these limits, between a distant and inaccessible sky – "sad" by the very height that makes it incomprehensible – and the earthly hell – "bright" and attractive – of the human condition. In this universe, to man is attributed the painful condition of "angel of clay"; "angel", because he is after all a product of the divine will, "of clay", because he lacks the pure transparency of his greater competitors in the cosmic order. This is another way to contrast heaven and earth. It is then that his capacity for projection and knowledge is confined to "water from a well". What do men know about themselves? Only that the well, of narrow limits, in its natural obscurity, is for them the beginning and the end of the world, all the experience that is consented to their smallness.

Finally, in “Muddy Lake”, persistence gives way to “anguish”. The song produced falls far short of a project only dreamed of. In what seems to be the fusion of the myth of Echo with that of Narcissus – in a revival of Ovid – the poet loses the capacity of the creative word and confines himself to the condition of a reflection. Fascinated by the landscape, his source of inspiration, he reproduces “a silent echo” of it. Even obstinacy disappears, before unwillingness (aboulia) only subjected to the impulse of “a fatal need”, that fate which leads man far beyond his will. Despite the effort, which is denounced in the wrinkles of his face, this mirror where his work is reflected is “a sea without a spring and only of my size, /the sweetness of it is a tasteless salt”, the modest product of simply human talent.

4 David Mourão-Ferreira (1927-1996)²⁰

*Ars Poetica*²¹

Roubado à natureza o dossier secreto
 Patente a analogia entre o fundo do poço
 o rosto de Narciso o sangue do incesto

há-de tudo perder-se aereamente solto

Que o verbo seja um espelho Ao mesmo tempo um véu
 Que não baste no lago a pureza do rosto

A lira é com certeza a mão esquerda de Orfeu
 Mas é a mão direita a que revolve o lodo

²⁰ David Mourão-Ferreira was a professor at the University of Lisbon, in the area where he did his studies, Modern Languages and Literatures. The subject of Literary Theory for whose creation he was responsible shows well his way of living literature, both theoretical and creative. He has also worked in cultural institutions in the remit of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. He practiced diversified genres – poetry, tale, novel, essay and theatre. One aspect of his work of particular interest for this reflection is valued by (MARQUES, 2007, p. 984): “Against the precariousness of his human condition, the subject takes refuge in what of eternal Greek-Latin myths offer, sometimes suggested in the background (...), sometimes explicit”.

²¹ Poem published in *Do Tempo ao Coração* (From Time to Heart) (1966).

Stolen from nature the secret dossier
evident the bottom of the well analogy
the face of Narcissus the blood of incest

it's all going get lost aereally loose

May the verb be a mirror at the same time a veil
Not enough in the lake the purity of the face

The lyre is surely Orpheus' left hand

But it's the right hand that turns the mud

(MOURÃO-FERREIRA *apud* PENA, 2017, p. 137, our translation)

David Mourão-Ferreira confesses, right from the title of the poem – “Ars poetica” – his main objective: the reading of the myth that he proposes is metaphorical of literary creation, and the Latin formulation of the proposal clearly refers to a tradition.²² And, in the graphic structure he gives the poem, he also suggests the difficulty of cohesion from which the creative act suffers. Everything is “loose”, “the bottom of the well”, “the face of Narcissus”, “the blood of incest”, although these are the elements that sustain creation itself.

²² “D.M.-F. was one of the most fruitful theorists of the *Round Table* (MARTINHO, 1996) defending the balance, coherence and proportion between motives and technique, between themes and forms, seeking to reconcile the values of tradition and modernity (...). This ideology would be reflected in his future work, which, from the technical point of view, represents the happy alliance of creative force and rigorous construction, being generally considered as the holder of the best poetic workshop of his generation” (MARQUES, 2007, p. 118, author’s italics, our translation). Original quotation: D. M.-F. foi um dos mais fecundos teorizadores da *Távola Redonda* (MARTINHO, 1996) defendendo o equilíbrio, a coerência e a proporção entre os motivos e a técnica, entre os temas e as formas, procurando conciliar os valores da tradição e da modernidade, revalorizando o lirismo, recusando a imediatez da inspiração e o aproveitamento da poesia para fins utilitaristas, demarcando-se do neorealismo. Este ideário ver-se-ia plasmado na sua futura Obra, a qual, do ponto de vista técnico, representa a feliz aliança da força criadora e da construção rigorosa, sendo geralmente considerado como detentor da melhor oficina poética da sua geração.

The liquid surface is again “the well”, as always expressive of the obscurity of existence, or of all that “the secret dossier of nature” sponsors: man and the context surrounding him. There is no coherence between a mirror of water that hides in the depths of a well, a face that projects itself into it with inevitable shadows, nor what seems to be hidden behind the face and the image and is intimate and strangely closed – because it is “blood”, the condition of life itself, but also “incest”, the irregular/circular way of living it. An enigmatic whole results, which it is the poet’s job to ‘transgress’ (the idea of ‘creation/transgression’ implicit in the initial “stolen”) and rework or recreate. Because the poem is not born of nothing, it depends on a tradition –the complex net of influences that come from Antiquity till modern times –, on the projection of a face in its individuality, on the expression of the core that it conceals.

Poetry seems to arise, in this darkness that is human experience, as a saving tablet and agent of a redeeming metamorphosis. “May the verb be a mirror” is a first transposition of nature into the word, i.e. the possibility of looking at and expressing the ‘I’ and the world through another filter. Certainly, “the veil” persists, access to knowledge is not patent without shadows, nor is the Word that gives it form clear and luminous. But the projection of the image “in the lake” – no longer in the well – and the purity of the face, which the clarity of the day illuminates, are a promise of access to lucidity. Then the lyre is added – the musicality of the word – with the ability to touch that water, now closer, and to revolve the mud with one’s right hand, the dextra, always endowed with a positive and promising gift.

5 Ruy Cinatti (1915-1986)²³

Narciso²⁴

Digo: Narciso!
Narcisos são em barda... são aos montes...
um batalhão... nos vales, junto aos ribeiros,
campânulas amarelas, campainhas...
Quando perpassa a brisa, ouve-se música
nervosa e ondulante... São os narcisos!...

Wordsworth, poeta lacustre
dos lagos ingleses, junto à Escócia,
diz-nos, idêntico o sentido:
Não vale a pena pensar muito,
sensibiliza-te, faz como os narcisos.
Já madrugada, escreve... *daffodils*...
e dança com os narcisos toda a noite.

Pelos montes e vales é que me afirmo,
passeando com os poéticos narcisos...
Quando debruço os meus olhos n'água,
que vejo eu?... Vejo um narciso!...

²³ Ruy Cinatti's life circumstances can justify his particular approach to the subject of 'Narcissus': firstly, by his training as an agronomist, meteorologist and anthropologist; and, secondly, as someone with an experience of traveling and living through different continents (Africa, Asia, Australia, America, besides, of course, Europe to which he was bound by his father's background). No doubt he is someone accustomed, by profession and life path, to look carefully at different landscapes and to contact different cultures and literatures. This experience reverts in favor of someone who carries out "an incessant interior pilgrimage, with metaphysical contours" (BORGES, 1995, p. 1146). Besides the scientific production, he was the founder and director of the *Cadernos de poesia* (Poetry Booklets, 1940-1942, 1951-1953). BORGES (1995, p. 1146) also writes about his poetic creation: "His poetry is a demand undertaken in a world where one lives in exile and from which, nevertheless, one joyfully sings the physicality"

²⁴ Text published in 1981 in *56 Poemas* (Cf. PENA, 2017, p. 139).

Vivi com narcisos toda a vida.
 A minha vida tem sido toda narcisada.
 Em novo, não passava de um poeta.
 Agora velho, contemplo-me num espelho,
 mas matutino... Ó espelho rigoroso!...

I say: Narcissus!
 Narcissus are abundant... are plentiful ...
 a multitude ... in the valleys, by the streams,
 yellow campanula, bells ...
 When the breeze blows, you hear music
 nervous and wavy... it's the daffodils!...

Wordsworth, lacustrine poet
 of the English lakes near Scotland,
 tells us the same meaning:
 It's not worth thinking about,
 get aware, do like daffodils.
 At dawn, write ... *daffodils*...
 and dance with the daffodils all night long.

By the hills and valleys I affirm myself,
 by walking with the poetic daffodils...
 When I lean my eyes in the water,
 what do I see?... I see a daffodil!...

I've lived with daffodils all my life.

My all life has been narcissistic.
 When young, I was nothing but a poet.
 Now old, I contemplate myself in a mirror,
 but early ... O rigorous mirror!...
 (CINATTI *apud* PENA, 2017, p. 139, our translation).

Perhaps Ruy Cinatti's personality as an anthropologist and agronomist as well as a poet justifies what seems to be a new way of looking at the myth of Narcissus. Cinatti is not unaware of the symbolic significance attached to it, although above all it seems to impose in the poem the perfect and inspiring image of a flower. Perhaps right there

lies the difference between that young man who “was nothing more than a poet” – without being a thinker or a wise man – and the “old man” who, now contemplating himself, with an ability to think that seems to have replaced intuitive creation, reads his image with clarity, prudence and rigour.

Perhaps “Narcissus” (in an ambiguity made clear by the initial capital letter with which the word is written) represents nature, its ability to produce images and sounds, and the seduction it exerts on a “simple” poet as a source of inspiration. The word – “I say: Narcissus” – is enough for the creative impulse to penetrate the poetic self, from an image in which a flower represents the power, the vitality, the colour, the sound, everything that is offered to his senses.

The poem has affinities with Wordsworth’s evocation of the movement of the sprig flowers – in “I wandered lonely as a cloud” –, which Cinatti confessedly recreates.²⁵ All it takes is a little loneliness, a long rambling that invites one to concentrate on the beauty of what

²⁵ I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

surrounds man, to emerge the poet. More than reflection is the sensation that can dictate the poem: “It’s not worth thinking too much, /get aware, do like daffodils”. This time, creation means neither obscurity, nor effort, nor frustration; rather, it means the pleasure of “looking, seeing... and say what you have seen” (to use words of Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen).²⁶ In themselves “poetic”, the daffodils contain in potency their own creative effect, just see them, hear them and give them voice.²⁷ Not even the projection of the image in the mirror constitutes an enigma, because in it the image produced is not that of the “I”, in a paradoxical unfolding. The image that is offered is that of inspiration itself, the finished creation, the narcissus.

And so Cinatti can remember his poetry, as a persistent mirror of nature: “I’ve lived with daffodils all my life. / My all life has been narcissistic”.²⁸ Poetry is a gift of nature, more than a creative effort, to a poet who is more than a producer, also a translator. Only time seems to have brought this path a few pitfalls, now closing the perspective in an invitation to reflect on oneself. It is man who now imposes himself on nature, and occupies the image of the mirror, which remains, as always, sharp and “rigorous”.

For oft, when on my couch I lie
 In vacant or in pensive mood,
 They flash upon that inward eye
 Which is the bliss of solitude;
 And then my heart with pleasure fills,
 And dances with the daffodils.

Wordsworth (1770-1850) is a prominent name in English romanticism. His poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud” was published in 1807. His poetry often speaks of lonely journeys through a vast and varied landscape, in an inspiring coexistence with nature.

²⁶ Affirmation of Sophia de Mello, a well-known Portuguese poet of the 20th-21st centuries, about her poetry criteria in an interview with Moura (1957, p. 5), in which the influence of Rilke to whom Cinatti was possibly not immune is undeniable.

²⁷ Cinatti’s options are still expressive and reconcilable with other statements by Sophia de Mello, such as: “The poem appears done, emerges, given (or as if it were given). As a saying I hear and notice” (SOUSA, 2015, p. 895).

²⁸ The Portuguese original allows an etymological effect lost in translation, as the name of the flower, “narciso”, suggests the creation of an innovative qualifier, “narcisada”.

6 Conclusion

Although gathered in this analysis by a common factor – the rewriting of Narcissus’ theme – each of the four poets present a distinct personality, in what concerns intellectual insight or literary style. While Régio and Mourão-Ferreira have a specific literary background and even professional incentives for more theoretical approach, Torga and Cinatti are men of science, for whom literature is a ‘parallel’ activity.²⁹ Familiarity with poetic creation – and in particular with the classical tradition – will have to be diverse. Basic Humanities training will have provided some with an early access to that tradition, which others have acquired through their own interest and effort.

All of them, on the other hand, have lived the path experienced by Portuguese literature throughout the 20th century, and the general trend seems to be one of divergence from the conventional models (see, e. g., BORGES, 1995, p. 1146-1147; LISBOA, 2001, p. 654-658; ÁLVAREZ, 2005, p. 461-467). Régio and Torga, as active members of *Presença* magazine, made this distance manifest and, like Mourão-Ferreira and Cinatti, affirmed their literary autonomy. Therefore, in the treatment of the myth of Narcissus, it is above all the topics of the classical tradition particularly Ovid – more than any aesthetic fidelity to contemporaries – associated with an individual sensibility, which determines in all of them the innovative trace from a common source.

Despite this intellectual independence, the myth of Narcissus takes up the same essential traits in all of them, even leading to controversial versions. That is why three topics underpin our analysis: liquid surface, relation between image and projection, access or inaccessibility to knowledge or self-understanding. But common to them is mainly the final objective of translating, with reference to the myth, the contingencies of poetic creation. The path to inspiration can be one of complete inaccessibility; or, on the contrary, it can correspond to pleasure,

²⁹ We must recognize, however, that Torga abandoned his medical career and made his doctor’s office the setting for an intense intellectual life.

when the poem appears. But, above all, it leads to the recognition of the modesty of the human condition and talent.

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