

## METAMORPHOSES

ALICE R. CLEMENTE

REVIEW: Raul Brandão, *The Unknown Islands*. Translated from the Portuguese by David Brookshaw. Tagus Press, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, North Dartmouth, MA 02747-2300. 2020

Raul Brandão (1867-1930) is not as well known beyond the Portuguese-speaking world as he should be. In his lifetime, he was well-loved and highly respected in Portugal, as an intellectual, writer and journalist. He was also a painter. Born to a family of sailors and fishermen in the Oporto region, and thus familiar with the sea, he nevertheless chose a military career and attained his stature as a writer while working in the Ministry of War. The writer's humanitarian interests early on bred in him a fascination with the Azores but it was not until 1924, fairly late in his life and after years of research on the subject, that he finally embarked on the two-month "voyage of discovery" to the Azores that is the subject of *The Unknown Islands*, published two years later.

The subtitle of this book is "Notes and Landscapes" and the author claims that the book was "made from travel notes, almost without revisions." Though structured as a travel diary, the text in fact goes well beyond those notes to include knowledge previously acquired in his years of research, as well as philosophical reflections inspired by what he encounters along the way. The author admits that he expanded the occasional scene, "making every effort not to distract from the freshness of my first impression... I hope I was able to paint with words some of the most scenic parts of the islands." What he adds to his exquisite impressionistic paintings of the landscapes is his discovery of a people, individuals and communities with societal and linguistic differences from island to island, growing out of the inhabitants' adaptations in each instance to the geographic and geological particularities determined by the volcanic activity that created each of these islands. A common thread, in pre-aviation 1924, was remoteness and isolation from the rest of the world.

That the author is equally as attentive to the stylistic aspects of his text also becomes abundantly clear early on. After harrowing days and nights at sea anxiously listening to the fearsome and threatening waves slapping against the ship outside his porthole, he begins to sight land:

On the horizon, another island extends like a screen, low,

immense, and monochrome. But what interests me is the light that has changed—the fragile light of the Azores, the Azorean sky laden with humidity and padded with clouds that a painter would convey on his canvas, using tiny, horizontal, lead-gray brushstrokes, fleshing them out and piling them ever more tightly as far as the line of the horizon. And it is this light that stays with me and never lets me go, I who live for crystalline light, and awaken each morning thinking about light... It illuminates São Miguel (June 13), filtered through a gray dun sky, with Ponta Delgada extending the length of its harbor, with a great violet hill next to it. It illuminates Terceira in the early morning of June 15, next to a pine wood and a fortress, and it stifles me almost to the end of my journey—a changeless sky, a mildew mist, a light that is so discreet that things lose their impact and their definition. (p. 19)

Light, color, clouds and mist are themes that recur in passages resonant of Claude Monet, as do other natural elements: uncontrollable remnants of volcanic activity in Brandão's case, domesticated nature like grazing lands and extensive fields of grain. Gardens, not the formal ones of European chateaux or Giverny specifically, but kitchen gardens, the canvases of those who live from the land.

Brandão begins his "discovery" of the Azorean archipelago at the westernmost and poorest island of Corvo. Life in the poorest of these spaces verged on the primitive in some respects, at this point in history, but in other ways it was remarkably nurturing and humane, sustained as it was by Christian belief and folklore. The author first sights Corvo from aboard ship:

I can clearly make out the truncated bronze cone, with its coppery green streaks high up on its flanks. There is no sign of a tree on that huge lump of rock battered by the waves. It is with some trepidation that I go ashore in the poorest and most isolated place in the world. (p. 29)

Black stone, black sand and a greenish sea, which during winter assaults this huge sheer rock with an endless succession of breakers, its craggy cliffs crumbling into the depths, corroded by the waters in a ceaseless, doleful roar. The sky is very low, the clouds white. Ferocity, solitude and bleakness. (p. 30)

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Ashore, a single settlement awaits him, consisting of “half a dozen fetid, cobbled village lanes, some no more than a meter wide”, elderly women with headscarves and dark shawls, barefoot men, “gloomy houses where humans and oxen live side by side, reek of milk and the cowshed”. Boys smell of cattle. “It’s all so humble, so abject, so remote, that I am filled with fear.” The author, disoriented, cut off from his world, questions his reasons for coming. “So far away—so alone—so sad!” Then he remembers. There are no rich or poor here... “No one subjects himself to serving others—but all the neighbors help each other out.” He remembers “the words of a man in the throes of debating with his own conscience”:

“On Corvo, when I sit down at the dinner table, everyone sits down to dinner at the same time, and there is no poor wretch without shelter.” In truth, I never saw anyone in rags or in a state of penury. No one has to beg. If someone falls ill, the others tend his land. (p. 32)

Little by little, the traveler takes in the scene. Knowledgeable cowherds, a delightful variety of cows, perfumed milk...women who work in the fields in the morning, make cheese and tend their children in the afternoon, weave the cloth for the clothes they will make, toiling constantly, it seems. But it is they—the women—who take charge of the family’s money, keeping it in a locked box made from Corvo’s fossilized cedar. “To hold the key is to hold the scepter and prestige. And once it is in the woman’s hands, no one will be able to prise it away from her...” Men with huge, gnarled hands, burnished timbered beards, “faces chiseled by a master sculptor who never got around to finishing his work.” Uncomprehending but seeking to understand, the author looks into the souls of these people. He learns that doors remain unlocked. There are no murders and no robberies.

Major issues are resolved on Sunday, in the churchyard, by the priest and the island’s elders. When an inhabitant of Corvo dies, four of his fellow residents volunteer to dig his grave and carry the coffin—which is for common use—to the cemetery. The other villagers accompany the dead. I have never witnessed such an extraordinary sense of equality as on this island. Corvo is a Christian democracy made up of farmers. (p. 37)

The author reflects, cites Rousseau and Chateaubriand, and ends up understanding less and less about human existence. He does understand that it is religion that unites these people and is their salvation...life, death, and the Holy Ghost. He is also surprised by the amount of communication between them and between them and him, the openness with which they speak to him about hunger and tithes, for example, the many stories they tell. The author understands their value and values but he himself wants, needs, more. After more exploration of both the human and natural landscape, he moves on from Corvo.

Flores is the next stop on Brandão's itinerary. It is a marked contrast with what he had just left, a landscape that imposes itself on the author as a voluptuous space, "purple and green with purple rocks and its high ground covered in delicate shades of verdant pasture." Hydrangeas divide the fields. Serene and with a touch of sadness... The colors fuse into gray "but a gray that is tinged with hues, where humid colors float, mainly green and mauve..." It is mainly a pastoral landscape, pastoral agriculture with uncultivated fields. Grass... Cows... "Life here," the author confesses, "is of no interest to me." "Everything here is structured from birth to death." "I understand Corvo, but I do not understand the parochial interests, mulled over again and again, in a tiny isolated town hundreds of miles from anywhere." Parochial and superficial. But it is here that he first encounters the spiritual and cultural devotion to the Holy Ghost. He is impressed by the elaborate festival, so familiar to residents of Southeastern New England who have continued that festival in their new world. Somewhat affected by events but mostly amazed by the spirit that moves them: "It is their idealism, as ridiculous and as tragic as that of Don Quijote." "Who knows anything at all in this enigmatic world, in this world of the imagination, where we are all lost, clinging to our explanations and subterfuges." (p. 68) Here, in response to the enigma, everything is carefully and routinely organized, festivals, weddings, wakes. Wilderness here is an "enchanted forest" and cascading waters, waters that fill him with ecstasy.

The next island, Faial, is the blue island, with masses of hydrangeas everywhere. The first quirky social novelty Brandão points to here is the capote, the ubiquitous hooded cape, cherished by women of all ages for its versatility. This island is more affluent perhaps than the first two. However, Horta, the largest city, "was once more prosperous and full of life". The land is divided into larger parcels, many of them the property of absentee owners, off in America "making good", but many are still owned and worked by weary smallholders. The garden that attracts the

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author here, once grand, is now a reminder of the ephemeral quality of life. Hydrangeas are everywhere...but there is something lacking. Brandão spends several days traveling around this island that lends itself to several of his most beautiful landscape paintings.

The largest of the islands, Pico, reveals itself first to the author as “scorched rind”, blackened to the core. There are patches of garden with the “contented hue of their vegetables”...and the trickle of sparkling water. Here, too, there is a festival, this one to celebrate St. Mark. Overall, Pico is gray and black, always gray and black, a mineral landscape. Rocks that have been through fire. “The product of some monstrous birth process, the island was devoured to such an extent that it was at the point of melting away.” (p. 109) In the end, everything that at first repelled succeeded in seducing him. It is “...dark and dramatic, eaten away by its ashes that will eventually devour living creatures and things, leaving it alone and proud against the sky.” Not surprisingly, the men from Pico and other islands, hardened sailors, turn to the sea. At this point in his text, Brandão not only observes but supplements, drawing on past research, to produce chapters on “Whaling” and “Men and Boats”, in the first, dramatically recreating the art and perils of whaling, as well as the economic and affective contexts in which it takes place. He does the same with deep sea fishing, with its supportive industries, thus underlining the centrality of the sea to the life of the islands. Boats enable the drama of whaling and deep sea fishing but there are other boats that provide the rare link to the outside world, bringing in supplies, taking out product, and, for some, providing a means of escape.

Brandão completes his voyage of discovery to the remaining islands, acknowledges in appreciative detail the life of the sea itself and finishes up full circle back on Madeira where his island trip began. Less enthusiastic for Madeira than he was at the beginning of the voyage, he sees more clearly now the impacts of a century of tourism.

As Urbano Bettencourt notes in his Introduction, despite the century of change between the writing of the original and the English translation, Brandão’s work retains its relevance. It succeeds not only in capturing the incomparable beauty of this extraordinary place but in identifying the essence of and paying a subtle tribute to its equally extraordinary people.

Raul Brandão was fortunate in “finding” a translator who was fully up to the challenge. David Brookshaw, Emeritus Professor of Post-Colonial Portuguese Literature at Bristol College, U.K., has a long and successful history as a translator. His work ranging from places as far

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afield as Portuguese-speaking Africa and Macau, he is especially known as the translator of Mozambican novelist Mia Couto, with a dozen of his works already in print and another due out soon. His sensitive translation of Brandão, “poet”, painter and consummate realist, makes *The Unknown Islands* a joy to read, especially uplifting and welcome in this troubled year of 2020.