

Anne Caufriez

THE PORTUGUESE BALLAD AS AN EMBLEMATIC SONG?

Introduction

The ballad or romance (*romanceiro*) occupies a special place among Portuguese folk songs. It is a form that has survived for centuries, traversed continents, different social environments and political periods, during which it served as an alibi. One might say that the ballad played a very significant role not only in the expansion of the Portuguese colonial empire (during the Renaissance, the epoch of great discoveries), but also in the cyclic periods of the reaffirmation of national identity both in the nineteenth and certain parts of the twentieth century.

The ballad was also valorized in different, even conflicting, political contexts (which will be discussed in more detail later on).

The role of the ballad compared to other forms of folk music is special inasmuch as it asserted itself, on several occasions, as a kind of national epic which transmitted historical facts and in which one could recognize, if not national and autochthonous events, then at least a special way to narrate these events. The ballad or *romanceiro* has been perceived, both throughout history and today, as an autochthonous creation and inalienable cultural heritage. The ballad has also appeared as a source of collective memory in critical moments of national history.

It could be said that, of all the folk songs, the ballad truly represents the repertoire characteristic of Portugal because it is present in all parts of the country. Although it primarily stands out as a song from the islands and the country, it is also a town song, even if its expansion in towns is limited in terms of time and space.

During Salazar's dictatorship – a period when identity and reason were stifled – the ballad played an important role through a group of musicians we can call “the singers of freedom” and whose style was inspired by the *fado* from Coimbra.

If the ballad did serve as a catalyst for Salazar's opposition, its social impact was strong yet its existence brief, because the influence of the ballad could be felt in towns only for a dozen years or so. Neither then nor now can the role of *fado* and ballad in Lisbon or Coimbra be compared for several reasons:

- the ballad is a folk song that appears in towns only occasionally and sporadically
- the ballad is sung in different social circles from the *fado* and does not perform the same function in terms of national identity

- finally, the *fado* sings of the fatality of fate or incurable heartache, while the ballad implicitly sings of hope (for the return of freedom or democracy).

The Renaissance Period

The ballad that we can collect in villages today has existed as a folk song since the fifteenth century. At the time it was transmitted by jongleurs from one region to another. The ballad also penetrated the Portuguese and Spanish courts (already in the middle of the fifteenth century). At the courts of the Iberian Peninsula, poets enjoyed interpreting and even “standardizing” folk verses, while musicians, particularly great vihuela players, composed a series of instrumental compositions inspired by melodies of romances sung among the people. Owing to its “success” at the Portuguese court, the ballad asserted itself in several, now forgotten, historical moments. Namely, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the ballad played the role of an emblematic patriotic song, at times similar to a national anthem.

Thus, in 1476 the entourage of King Alfonso V of Portugal sang romances during the entire Battle of Toro. Portuguese campaigns of war were accompanied by romances for almost an entire century. One example is King Dom Sebastiao’s campaign to Alacer-Quiber where he brought along his own personal performer of romances, troubadour Domingos Madeira, who sang accompanying himself on a guitar. Furthermore, according to historical documents, when the Moors killed Dom Sebastiao (in 1578) the people composed a romance in his honour. The popularity of the romance can be explained by its presence in palaces of kings and noblemen where it served as accompanying music for the balls. At the time ballads also played the role that journalism has today by publicizing events that shook society. On the one hand, they sung “new” romances depicting recent events, and on the other hand, the old ones, arranged to the taste of the court and performed to the accompaniment of instruments such as the vihuela, harp, lute, flute, organ and vielle (fiddle).

During these fashionable evenings, the listeners would sometimes intervene in order to change the story to the advantage of their homeland. Thus, the Portuguese nobleman Fernao de Siveira, visiting the Spanish court, could not bear the story of the Spanish-Portuguese battle of Toro. He abruptly interrupted the troubadour in order to change the facts and praise the defeated King Alfonso V of Portugal. Characters from the plays of the great Portuguese Renaissance playwright Gil Vicente, who organized celebrations and entertainments at the court of King D. Manuel I of Portugal, also sing folk romances. In his work, the music of the romances is not merely an interval between the acts but actually forms part of the action. The characters in his plays play and sing romances to the accompaniment of the trumpet, shawm, flute, lute and guitar, parodying, and even ridiculing, the aristocracy of the time. The character of Conde Claros, a well-known character in *romanceiro*, also

appears in one of his plays (*Audo de D. André*). Other characters of this author also sing ballads, such as the *bâtelier* from Hell or the two Jewish tailors who sing romances in Portuguese, while G. Vicente wrote the remainder of the text in Castilian¹. With this author, romances represent a music repertoire whose aim is the affirmation of the autonomy of the folk spirit and language.

At the same time, the sailboats sent out to the oceans by Portuguese kings spread romances to all regions of the world. From the middle of the 15th century, romances were disseminated to future colonies by seamen who invented new stories in order to pass away the time. History recorded the name of Luis Hurtado, one of the great national adventurers, who used to compose romances on board the ships. Thus, his songs were brought to Madera not only by seamen, but also by the convicts who were deported by the Portuguese crown, officially, in order to inhabit the island, and, in reality, to clear the forests and cultivate the land. Romances were also transmitted through “cordels”² and, later on, by Castilian soldiers of Philip II who were sent to the garrison on Madera (the Spanish crown annexed Portugal in 1580).

In the Azores, *romanceiro* spread in the same manner as in Madera, but the thematic cycles differed from island to island. Thus, for example, historical romances can be found mostly in Sao Miguel and Sao Jorje and not as much on the other islands. The literature of the “cordels” was the principal way of transmitting romances on these islands.

In Goa, India, the Portuguese victory at Salseta (1510) was celebrated by romances sung by captains and soldiers. The famous Jesuit Saint Francois Xavier also seems to have composed romances (to religious themes) during his long pilgrimages between India and China.

Romances arrived to Brazil, which was conquered by Alvares Cabral in 1500, primarily via colonists from Minho, Tras-os-Montes, from Madera and the Azores. Finally, the *romanceiro* arrived even to Sao Tome, on the South African coast, this time through the written word. In this archipelago, the romance was the music basis of the theatre form *tchiloli*, a parody of the judicial system and courts of Portuguese colonists.

Finally, at the time of the Inquisition during the reign of kings D. Joao and Manuel I, Portuguese romances were transmitted by Portuguese Jews exiled from the country (at the end of the 15th and in the 16th century) who settled the coasts of the Mediterranean (Morocco, Algeria, Syria, Turkey, Greece, Italy). Even though we can still come across themes typical of Portugal with the Sephardim in Morocco, the Jews who came from Portugal did not preserve

¹ Castilian was the official language of Portugal from 1550 to 1640.

² *Cordel Literature* is the name given to a set of separate sheets of paper with printed texts (including ballads). The word *cordel* refers to a string which these sheets usually hang from when they are sold at fairs and markets.

the language of their country of origin. Most of the romances were sung in Castilian: namely, the Spanish and Portuguese immigrants showed great solidarity during the wave of great persecutions imposed by Spain. Namely, the Spanish Jews cyclically escaped to Portugal, especially in the borderline zone between the two countries. For them the romances became the songs of exile and their homeland.

The Romantic Period

The romances that had played the role of a national flagpole in conquering the colonies during the Renaissance period fell into oblivion in the seventeenth century.

It was not until much later that they were discovered by the great Romantic poet Almeida Garrett (1799-1854) who accidentally heard them from his maids (aunt Brígida and the mulatto Rosa de Lima, as he called them). Garrett created a network of informers who brought him new poetic material from the country, which became the main source of his inspiration. Garrett published a *romanceiro* in three volumes, which was not a collection of texts recorded in the field, but rather poetry adapted in accordance with his taste; a metamorphosis of the material from the country that had enchanted him.

With the publication of this *romanceiro*, which represented a consecration of folk poetry and elevated it to the highest artistic level, Garrett became the founder of an entire school of collectors of romances who worked in various parts of the country. They recorded only the texts, without attaching any importance to the melodies which these poems were sung to. This was probably not caused by a lack of music education of the first collectors, but rather by a failure to perceive the ballad as a social phenomenon. Namely, social sciences did not develop until much later. Romances were not recorded until the appearance of tape recorders, even though their existence is inseparable from 15th-century music.

José Leite de Vasconcelos, a precursor of Portuguese ethnology, stands out among the first collectors of texts. He was the first to go out into the field and develop a work method specific to the collecting of folk literature in the field. Leite de Vasconcelos travelled all across the country and collected over a thousand texts which he published in one *romanceiro*, thirty years after Garrett's death. This time, it was a real *romanceiro* which contained only original texts collected from the people. Leite de Vasconcelos offered us abundant and raw literary material, practically without any analytical commentary. The thematic classification of this material was carried out much later, in the 1950's, by philologists from the University of Lisbon.

The first attempt at collecting a national *romanceiro* led T. Braga to publish a general Portuguese *romanceiro* in a completely different spirit from that of Garrett or Leite de

Vasconcelos, dealing with the content of this great epic. He actually established the bases of a scholarly history of folk literature. According to this philologist from the time of the first Republic³, the themes that we come across in the *romanceiro* allow us to reconstruct periods of national history.

If the truth be told, his *romanceiro* was completely based on indirect experience, since most of the published poems were collected by his collaborator Joao Teixeira Soares de Sousa, who travelled to islands and villages on his behalf. Although Braga claimed that the published poems were original, his *romanceiro* is very heterogeneous and contains numerous romances from written literature, which he found in Renaissance books. It also contains romances from theatre plays by Gil Vicente, as well as those recorded by writers such as Garcia de Resende, J. Ferreira de Vasconcelos, F. Rodrigues Lobo and Balthasar Dias, a blind travelling salesman of *cordels*, author of poetic and prose works (including several romances of the Carolingian cycle, such as Valdevinos). The *romanceiro* also contains anonymous romances from written literature, accompanied by harp music, and even later romances with darker themes.

Braga believed that his collection of romances from different epochs and environments had the honourable task of proving the existence of a rich and original poetic corpus as an expression of the Portuguese nation. Braga went even further in his interpretations: using the themes of the *romanceiro*, he constructed historical projections in which he was determined to recognize certain events from national history. That is why he singled out a special thematic cycle about the Atlantic Odyssey. Braga saw the *romanceiro* as a sort of myth about the inception of the Portuguese nation, so he searched for direct connections between the Portuguese *romanceiro* and Homer's *Odyssey*. According to his interpretation, the first part of the *Odyssey*⁴ was directly linked with Portugal and the events described in this work had not taken place either in Greece or the Mediterranean, but rather on the European coasts of the South Atlantic, in Portugal and Asturias. He believed that Ulysses' travels described in this part of the epic did not correspond with the travels of the Phoenicians (who were often represented as the first people to land in Portugal), but rather with those of the Ligurians⁵ who preceded them. According to Braga, the Ligurians were the first inhabitants of Portugal and the legends of their travels were later Hellenized by rhapsodists and retold by Homer.

For instance, in the ballad *A Nau Catrineta* (the name of a famous Portuguese ship) Braga saw Ulysses' shipwreck and rescue by Calypso on the island of the Phoenicians; while in the romance *Bela Infante* he recognized Penelope waiting for Ulysses, the captain of the

³ TH Braga himself would go on to become President of the Republic in 1915.

⁴ The oldest part of the *Odyssey* dates from the eighth century B.C.

⁵ The Ligurians originally came from ancient Ligurian Italy.

abovementioned ship. He believed that Carolingian legends were later superimposed on ancient themes.

Even though Braga also singled out other cycles from the *romanceiro*, such as the German-Scandinavian cycle brought over by the Normans or the Breton cycle which came to Portugal back in the middle ages, the author placed the birth of the Portuguese *romanceiro* at the time of the voyages of the ancient Ligurians.

Accepting later influences of foreign legends that the *romanceiro* gradually assimilated, Braga searched for the sublime birth of the Portuguese nation in the distant past of the Ligurians.

All in all, the relationship between the *romanceiro* and the national issue is very ambivalent. Although the *romanceiro* has its own clearly defined identity, it does not depict any great events from national history. Naturally, this observation supports the Spanish theories that claim, in a desire for domination, that the Portuguese *romanceiro* was created in Castile. The truth is that, aside from a few exceptions, the great battles such as the one of King D. Sebastiao of Morocco, significant discoveries and conquests or important events from court life such as the tragic fate of Inês de Castro – these emotionally intense events – hardly left a mark on the Portuguese *romanceiro*. Romances with national themes do exist, but they are very rare (for example, those describing the death of Prince D. Alfonso of Portugal in 1491; the departure of Princess Beatrice of Savoy; the ship D. Maria; the epidemic of yellow fever that marked the period of the reign of D. Pedro, the religious legend of Santa Iria...). Braga attached no importance to these themes from Portuguese history, which could substantiate much more legitimately the thesis about the essentially national epic.

The Salazar Period

Much later, in the 1950's, the appropriation of the values of folk heritage took on a different form. The process was still conducted through the ballad, but not only through it. In the political context opposite to the Republic, that is, during Salazar's dictatorship, musicians remembered the *romanceiro*. This time there was no interest in analyzing the themes and stories of the ballads and they had no importance in their own right. The ballad was a song that was meant to serve as a vehicle for rediscovering the strength of affirmation and autonomy. This search for a new national identity, contrary to the *New State*, used the return to the land that was considered to be a source of inspiration for artists, regardless of whether they belonged to the world of classical or entertainment music.

In 1955, a famous composer of classical music F. Lopes Graça (the Portuguese Béla Bartók, 1906-1994) composed a work entitled *Five Old Portuguese Romances*. In the given

sociopolitical context, developing the virtuosity of folk music seemed to be a new and authentically Portuguese technique.

This composer would gradually borrow more and more melodic, harmonic and rhythmic elements from folk production and arrange original melodies with the help of very developed expressive means based on the modal and polytonal structure, using all the knowledge of contemporary music. Lopes Graça was interested in the *romanceiro* because of its unique melodies (frequently based on old ecclesiastical modes or highly characterized pentachords). The discovery of folk production and the inspiration he found in it induced him to transcribe melodies of folk romances recorded across the country or to reproduce melodies of old singers of chansons with the aim of achieving a music synthesis. In 1964, in collaboration with the poet Alves Redol, he published a general Portuguese *romanceiro*, which this time contained only the melodies of these songs.

During the last ten years of Salazar's rule (1958-1968) the ballad once again came from the country into town, where it played a more important social role than the incomprehensible works of F. Lopes Graça. The ballad was then transformed into a town song. It was appropriated by artists from Lisbon and Coimbra who were creating a new wave in Portuguese music. The ballad reached its peak between 1968 and 1970 and, due to historical events, this period was extended up to the *Revolution of the Carnations* (1974). At first, ballads were performed in small closed circles, only to later ascend the stage under pressure. We will mention José Afonso, Adriano Correia de Oliveira, Sérgio Godinho, Luis Cília, Fanhais, Manuel Freire, as well as younger musicians such as José Mário Branco, Vitorino, Júlio Pereira, close collaborators of José Afonso. Most of them included ballads in their repertoire. Indicatively, one of the records released by José Afonso at the time (which also contained one ballad) was entitled *Contos velhos – rumos novos (Old Stories, New Paths)*. The ballads, along with other songs from the repertoire of the singer of chansons, represented songs of a tacit gathering against Salazar's regime. José Afonso gathered friends of different social backgrounds and ideas, who all had one thing in common: their political opposition to Salazar's dictatorship and the fact that they belonged to the resistance movement, regardless of whether or not they belonged to a (secret) political party.

José Afonso went even further in his activities: in his frequent performances among the workers and union movements in Setúbal and around Lisbon, he addressed the people through his songs, trying to reestablish the interrupted dialogue. Afonso chose themes close to the people by adopting well-known folk themes and symbols typical of them, such as flowers or pastoral love. This was followed by a new period in his music production: he outgrew the *fado* from Coimbra only to turn to traditional music and poetic forms (1968-1969) and

composed a series of songs inspired by folk tradition, including the ballad or romance⁶. Those several folk romances that he performed had a symbolic role for the people, because they were often accompanied by a feeling of warmth. We will mention the tenderness he felt for the beautiful shepherdess Rosa, a character from the romance from Tras-os-Montes (*Deux te salve Rosa*) which his interpretation brought to life, a romance I personally recorded in that part of Portugal in 1978. In most of the ballads he performed, this otherwise original, creative and imaginative composer retained the original melody as a sign of respect for the song preserved by tradition, but also out of a desire for simplicity and reduction which he believed to be the strength necessary for delivering the blow. He wanted the song to speak for itself and to retain the power of evocation, which is one of the characteristics of the romance in folk production. Namely, the ballad or romance always carries a message that is both historical and ethical. In other songs, José Afonso employed quite a different technique and composed a new melody or used its original characteristics as embellishments, as in the case of the pilgrim song from Beira, *A Senhora do Almortao*, which he turned into a lyric song. Here he used the descending pentachord from the folk version which forms the melodic matrix as a motive for the refrain, imitated the drum *adif*⁷ on the guitar, through three or four chords that he used as *ostinato*, while beating the resonant box in order to set the rhythm of chanting. None of these techniques can be found in his ballads.

The ballad, however, represented a minor aspect of the folk songs that Afonso added to his repertoire and whose melodies he borrowed or recomposed. He composed both Christmas songs and songs for olive picking, carnival songs, songs of exile, lullabies. He also composed songs to Camões' poetry. When looking at the rhyme and word games in some of his songs, it seems as though he was inspired by the *Songs for a Friend* of medieval troubadours, a few of which can be found in folk tradition even today.

The poet-singer José Afonso, lyricist, surrealist, anarchist, anti-clericalist and anti-colonialist, also influenced the student environment in the 1970's. PIDE (Salazar's political police) regularly interrupted his performances and, finally, arrested him. The ballad, as part of his repertoire, was no longer a neutral form.

José Afonso became familiar with folk songs through his uncle, who partly raised him and who was always humming songs from his village Beira. Paradoxically, José Afonso used the ballad (among other music forms) as a weapon against fascism, while his uncle, who supported both Salazar's and Hitler's regimes, used to sing them to him as an ode to the

⁶ In his terminology, Zeca Afonso did not always use the term ballad in the sense of *romance*. He associated the ballad more with a folk song filled with freedom and diffused all around the country. Namely, thanks to his many travels during which he hitchhiked, Zeca Afonso discovered the social circumstances of his country and became familiar with the common folk.

⁷ A drum played only by women, which often accompanied pilgrim songs in the province of Beira.

country (in the conservative sense of the word). Salazar advocated ox carts and old agricultural techniques with the aim of crystallizing the social differences of the “nation”.

The neo-traditional chanson created by Afonso and his pupils had limited influence in towns, because it was initially performed in small circles and only later in a militant context. The ballad never became part of the regular repertoire like *fado*, whose performing was linked to fixed venues; it also never became the subject of an organized system of education producing generations of musicians. Ballads were sung here and there and did not have fixed places for performances. They were an itinerant, informal, ephemeral and paramusical phenomenon, because they accompanied the civil struggle (of Lisbonians and others) in a particular moment of Portugal’s history. Today they would be identified as battle songs.

The small repertoire of freedom songs represented by the ballad or romance would, nonetheless, continue to exert some influence even after the *Revolution of the Carnations* (1974) and would be appreciated as such. Namely, fifteen years after the ballads of José Afonso, new musicians published a record of folk romances. These musicians were Vitorino, accompanied by Janita Salomé and Pedro Caldeira Cabral who did the arrangements, partly using traditional instruments such as *viola campanisa* (a type of old guitar), *viola concertina*, *guitarra portuguesa* (a combination of zither and guitar), *pifaro* (small oboe) and partly employing classical instruments such as *viola de basse* and *viola gamba*.

Many present-day musicians sometimes find inspiration in ballads, even if they do completely mar and change their melody (for instance, traditional guitarist Júlio Pereira or “disco” musicians who insert romances traditionally sung during the harvest into the synthesizer).

Owing to the work of previously mentioned musicians and in the context of the long dictatorship, the ballad was emancipated from the villages to which it had previously been confined and became a town song. Even if we can claim that these ballads, which originated from the country, met with a widespread response in towns, we cannot say that the ballad, which was recast or created in the town, has any significant influence in the country where it is more likely to be perceived as imported goods.

Conclusions

The ballad or romance rising to the surface of country life nowadays is a song that has had great influence in space and time, not only in the modern age but also in the distant past. Few Portuguese folk songs can boast of such a diverse and long existence. What differentiates the ballad from the *fado* is undoubtedly its uninterrupted existence from the fifteenth century, as

well as the great diversity of its roles throughout time, social layers and political contexts in the country.

All in all, the ballad has performed all the functions: it was originally a song from the public square (accompanying the jongleurs), then court music, war song, national anthem in overseas conquests or a referential song about the metropolis for the first colonists, a critical song in the case of Gil Vicente, a song of exile for the displaced Sephardim, the muse of the Romantics, the founding song of the nation for the Republicans and, finally, the song of resistance to fascism. From the 1980's onwards, the ballad has simply become an entertainment song resembling old melodies from the country.

We can observe that the semantic or music *romanceiro* is hardly ever appreciated in its own right. It has primarily been in the service of all possible sociopolitical positions. In this respect, we can say that the ballad undoubtedly represents the traditional repertoire which, affectively speaking, made the greatest contribution to the unifying of Portuguese collective identity.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić