

‘What is that to me?’ Jorge de Sena’s *Sinai de fogo*, poetry and testimony during the Spanish civil war

Abstract

The Spanish Civil War is featured in the works of Jorge de Sena as the moment which created a new level of political awareness and militancy. Sena’s incomplete, posthumously published novel *Sinai de fogo/Signs of fire* (1979), which draws from Sena's biographical experiences as a young student in 1936 Lisbon and Figueira da Foz, attempts a fictional inscription, for future remembrance, of the conflict’s impact on António de Oliveira Salazar’s *Estado Novo* regime, supportive of the *alzamiento* and Franco, and on the living conditions and political positioning of the generations which endured it. To this end, Sena’s considerations on poetry and testimony will assist in shedding light on the novel’s questioning of the roles and functions of – as well as relations between – art, politics, history, and individual memory. Ultimately, the novel will prompt a reflection on the meaning(s) and purpose(s) of *communitas*.

Keywords

Jorge de Sena, *Sinai de fogo*, Spanish civil war, *communitas*, poetic testimony, Roberto Esposito, Jacques Derrida

Poetic testimony

This is a political age. War, Fascism, concentration camps, rubber truncheons, atomic bombs, etc. are what we daily think about, and therefore to a great extent what we write about, even when we do not

name them openly. We cannot help this. When you are on a sinking ship, your thoughts will be about sinking ships. (Orwell 2014: 453)

In 1968, in an interview of a special issue of *O Tempo e o Modo* dedicated to his work (issue 59, April), Jorge de Sena refers to *Sinais de fogo* as part of a novelistic cycle which was intended to ‘cobrir, através das experiências de um narrador, a vida portuguesa desde 1936 a 1959’ (Sena 2013: 68) [‘cover, through the experiences of a narrator, Portuguese life from 1936 to 1959’].ⁱ

It was, of course, no minor detail that the unfinished *Sinais de fogo*, published posthumously only in 1979, the first volume of the novelistic cycle titled *Monte Cativo*, should be set during the Spanish civil war (see Amorim 2002 for a study of the genesis of the novel). In 1964 (November 30), in a letter to Vergílio Ferreira in which he discusses his novelistic efforts, Sena had signalled the importance of the Spanish civil war: ‘Eu não posso omitir a guerra de Espanha, decisiva para nós; nem o amoralismo hipócrita que foi o da nossa geração’ (Sena and Ferreira, 1987: 124) [‘I cannot omit the war in Spain, which was decisive for us, nor can omit the hypocritical amoral stance of our generation’]. In 1977, in an interview in *El Adelanto* (Salamanca, May 21 1977) in which Sena once again mentions the novel (Sena 2013: 381), he qualifies the Spanish civil war as an awakening for his generation (Sena 2013: 380). Such an awakening is reflected various literary texts that refer directly or indirectly to the Spanish conflict (see Lourenço 2007b), including the short stories ‘A Grã-Canária’ and ‘Os Salteadores’ in *Os Grão-Capitães* (1961, published during Sena’s exile in Brazil).

As early as 1962, participating in oppositionist movements during his exile in Brazil, Jorge de Sena pointed out how the Spanish civil war provided a pretext and proved to be a watershed moment in the fascist swerve of the regime (Sena 2011: 150-51). Despite this fact, the support of Portugal’s Estado Novo to the rebel uprising is (perhaps unsurprisingly but still

shockingly) overlooked. Although Sena complained about this gap in historiographical knowledge as late as 1976 (see Sena 2011: 314), Portuguese historiography has since then caught up and has increasingly noted how Portugal's initial support, from the very start, was crucial to the early success of the military operations (before the German and Italian involvement, for instance). Salazar's *Estado Novo* regime played a crucial role supporting the rebels in a number of ways, as was established by Iva Delgado's and César Oliveira's classic texts on Portugal and the Spanish civil war which emerged in the 1980s, following Portugal's transition to democracy post-1974 (Delgado 1982; Oliveira 1987). Portugal's territory was the rearguard of the coup, Lisbon was the port of the rebels and acted also as the Foreign Office for the Junta de Burgos. Ammunition and troops moved throughout the territory, Republican combatants and sympathisers were handed over; Portuguese diplomacy and bankers were enlisted to support the rebels, press and radios emitted nationalist propaganda to Spanish territory and mobilized the Portuguese population against the red scare and in favour of the Catholic civilization (as well as of volunteers to fight alongside the rebels) (see Delgado 1982; Oliveira 1987; Rosas 1998; Pena 2007; Vicente 2007). The Spanish civil war is seen as a decisive moment for Salazar's consolidation in power, marks a point of inflection, and creates an environment propitious to the further constraint of civil and political liberties and to an approximation to fascism after military confrontations against military forces with Republican sympathies which tried to oppose the ascension of the *Estado Novo*.ⁱⁱ

Jorge de Sena's *Sinais de fogo* depicts the Portuguese *Estado Novo*'s increasingly notorious swerving towards fascism and an increasing climate of repression and authoritarianism created by the policy of *Defesa do Estado* (PVDE-PIDE), supported by the constitutional and legal apparatus inscribed by the *Estado Novo* as amendments to the 1933 constitution, culminating in the rally in Campo Pequeno which officially aligns the *Estado Novo* with the Spanish rebels, Italian and German fascists, and creates the 'Legião

Portuguesa'. More crucially still, it features the episode of the 'revolta dos barcos' [revolt of the ships'] as a *topos* and a trope of the political situation in Portugal in 1936, as the *Estado Novo* grew increasingly authoritarian and employed aggressive and punitive tactics in line with the rise of fascism across Europe. The historical episode of the 'revolta dos barcos', an uprising of the sailors in the ships *Afonso de Albuquerque*, *Bartolomeu Dias* and *Dão* in the Tagus river, has since become symbolic of the resistance to the *Estado Novo* in as much as it was, in its time, an effective propaganda piece and a clear warning shot to opponents of the military dictatorship and the ensuing *Estado Novo* regime.

The fierce repression by António de Oliveira Salazar's *Estado Novo* was brought down on the Portuguese Navy ships under the pretext that they betrayed the nation by planning to join the Spanish Republican fleet, a justification that has sustained the interest in the episode on the part of supporters as well as opponents of the regime: although the revolt was a protest against the imprisonment of seventeen colleagues as a consequence of the visit to Spanish ports of the boats, the immediate objective was not joining the Spanish Republican fleet, it was seen as a viable alternative (Gomes 2006: 78). This repression is justifiably seen as the moment which most clearly laid bare the socio-political tensions in Portugal brought about by the Spanish civil war. The war proved to be a watershed moment for Portugal, whose intelligentsia often expressed admiration for the resistance put up in Spain by parliamentary democratic forces which, in Portugal, had seen their successive efforts to reinstate the Republican regime thwarted: the last military threats to that regime had taken place in February 1927 and April 1931 from Portuguese internal dissidents ('revirinho'), many of them loyal to the Republican regime (1920-1926) that the military coup of 1926 had ousted. With the sinking of the ships in the 'revolta dos barcos', *Estado Novo* nailed its colours to the mast.

It would be restrictive, however, not to read the novel *Sinais de fogo* (and related texts) as more than a reflex or a product of its times – the diegetic (1936, Portugal [Figueira da Foz and Lisbon]) – and that of its writing. The bulk of the novel was composed between 1964 and 1967, in Brazil and the United States of America, composed with the benefit of insight provided by the Second Great War, which Sena – as was the case with the Spanish civil war – also approached in short stories. *Sinais de fogo*'s frequent references to the Great War through the past tragicomic adventures narrated by Tenente Justino, Jorge's uncle and a Great War veteran, do much more than situate the diegesis historically: they pinpoint the diegetic events in a larger cycle of interrelated conflicts, a larger cycle from which *Monte cativo*, with its several volumes of which *Sinais de fogo* would be the first, would expand.

The concept of 'civil war' in the sense used by Enzo Traverso (2017; see chapter 'The anatomy of civil war') is useful for an approach to Sena's treatment of the Spanish civil war while bearing in mind both his wider concerns on conflict and war as well as the novel's representation of conflicts in Portugal as a civil war. In his analysis of civil war in Europe between 1914 and 1945, Traverso highlights how the Spanish civil war is both exemplary of the general movement and, only apparently contradictorily, a landmark in the paradigm shift in violence (total war, with engagement of the civilian population; targeted elimination of political groups; use of colonial tactics; abandonment of conventions on war; see Traverso 54; 92; 118-119). The sort of revolutions Jorge remembers growing up when he first hears about the Spanish 'revolution', are a thing of the past. The Spanish civil war will teach Jorge, the first-person narrator, that 'total war' respects no boundaries and no rules; the Spanish 'revolution' was not like the previous Portuguese revolutions against the Republic, the aforementioned 'revirvalho', or even the nineteenth century civil wars that the narrator immediately evokes upon his arrival in the seaside town of Figueira da Foz, a popular beach resort for Spanish vacationers, on the day after the *alzamiento* (19 July 1936).ⁱⁱⁱ

Jorge functions as a poetic witness to the chaos that follows the break-out of the Spanish civil war in Figueira da Foz as he tries to make sense of the situation based on the little knowledge he has of revolutions and wars. Still trapped in a solipsistic vision of the world ('eu', 'medito', etc), Jorge will eventually find himself as a point of articulation between several related actors in the upcoming tumultuous events. Jorge fails to appreciate that this 'revolution' was not like others: no classical war, restricted to military professionals or willing enthusiasts who respected codes of conduct which populations could safely observe from the sidelines. However, it will be a matter of days until his perspective changes. The Spanish civil war was fought beyond the border but its effects are felt in the diegetic *here* and *now* (Figueira da Foz and Lisbon):

A Guerra Civil espanhola fizera isso. [...] A vida de ninguém estava em condições de continuar a ser uma paz podre. Não seria também uma paz limpa. Era uma guerra, com tudo o que ela implica de podridão e de lixo. (Sena 1981: 295)

[This was what the Spanish Civil War had done. [...] None of their lives could continue in any kind of rotten peace. Nor would it be a clean peace; it was a war with everything that that implied by way of decay and dirt. (Sena 1999: 293)]

The war lays bare force relations which are ever working even in supposed peace ('paz podre'):

O tumulto da Espanha abrira fundas ravinas nas nossas vidas, a princípio apenas como um terramoto as abre longe do seu epicentro. Mas, agora, mesmo que as armas não fossem brandidas, mesmo que a política não se definisse, não era já um terramoto

distante, mas uma guerra civil que fendera de alto a baixo aquele mundo tão falsamente calmo como a tarde que me rodeava. Estaríamos todos ou de um lado ou do outro, e mesmo os nossos problemas particulares, as nossas amarguras, as nossas traições, tudo deixava de ter sentido, o estrito sentido que teria antes, para só significar em função disso. (Sena 1981: 375)

[The tumultuous events in Spain had opened great fissures in our lives, at first only as an earthquake opens them far from the epicentre. But now, even though guns were not being waved about, even though political positions were not yet clear, it was no longer just a distant tremor, but a civil war which had split from top to bottom that world which was as spuriously calm as the evening which surrounded me. We would all be on one side or the other and even our own private problems, our bitterness, our betrayals, they would all cease to mean anything, in the narrow sense which they had before, and only have meaning in relation to this event. (Sena 1999: 366)]

Critical studies of *Sinais de fogo* as a *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* (Fazenda Lourenço 2007a, Carvalho 2010: 345-403), which focus on the experience of Jorge (the first-person narrator, an emerging poet and an easily identifiable authorial alter ego) are a useful point of departure for a wider consideration of the dialectical play between what the extract above suggests are indistinguishably literary and political (i.e. political *as* literary) texts and contexts in their multiple dimensions (political, poetical, aesthetic, sexual, and social). The action of *Sinais de fogo*, in which poetry plays such a determining role, may take place in the early months of the Spanish civil war, but (to pick up on, while questioning, Theodor Adorno's famous statement on the impossibility of lyrical poetry after Auschwitz), it was written (knowingly) after Auschwitz and after the Second Great War. Contrary to Adorno's

(now commonplace) aphorism, the suggestion is that lyric poetry still can and must, more than ever, be written. Poetry is necessarily an act, Sena states in a 1972 interview to *Vida Mundial*:

Para mim um poema é um acto, não um acto poético, como tanto se diz agora, mas um acto filosófico e sociopolítico através da expressão poética. E nisto não estou a ser menos lírico do que qualquer dos ilustres poetas deste mundo que me precederam, que todos eles nunca tiveram medo de dizer essas coisas. (Sena 2013: 263)

[For me, a poem is an act, not a poetical act as people now say, but a philosophical and sociopolitical act through poetic expression. And by saying this I am in no way less lyrical than any of the illustrious poets of this world before me, because none of them was ever afraid to say those things.]

The approximation between Jorge-the-author and Jorge-the-narrator, therefore, is not an invitation to literary critical biographism; it enhances an appreciation, rather than for homonymy and biographical coincidences, for Sena's reflections on what could be termed his poetic testimony, indissociable from a larger socio-political context. Coincidentally, Sena dates the beginning in earnest of his poetic activity from 1936 (1988: 13). In the preface to the second edition to an anthology (*Poesia-I*), Sena refers to it as the 'diário poético de uma testemunha [...] de 38 anos de vida portuguesa, desde que o fascismo se instalou com o estalar da Guerra Civil de Espanha' (Sena 1988: 13) ['poetical diary of a witness [...] of 38 years of Portuguese life, since the establishment of fascismo with the breaking out of the Spanish civil war']. In the preface to the first edition, Sena had been keen to establish that poetry is not just 'fingimento' (25) [feigning] but a 'processo testemunhal' (26) [testimonial process]. The use of the word 'testemunho' [testimony] is significant in and of itself and

should raise enough eyebrows on either side of the conventional testimony *vs* fiction, law *vs* literature fence; even if (or perhaps because) it appears in tension with the Pessoaan concept of ‘fingimento’ (which the critic Jorge de Sena ultimately defined as composition). Sena’s text dispels a rigid binary distinction between ‘fingimento’ and ‘testemunho’ – indeed, Sena’s text implies that they complement each other (not frictionless) in a dialectical fashion:

Se o ‘fingimento’ é, sem dúvida, a mais alta forma de educação, de libertação e esclarecimento do espírito enquanto educador de si próprio e dos outros, o ‘testemunho’ é, na sua expectação, na sua discrição, na sua vigilância, a mais alta forma de transformação do mundo, porque nele, com ele e através dele, que é antes de mais linguagem, se processa a remodelação dos esquemas feitos, das ideias aceites, dos hábitos sociais inconscientemente vividos, dos sentimentos convencionalmente aferidos. (Sena 1988: 26)

[If ‘feigning’ is, undoubtedly, the highest form of education, of liberation and the enlightenment of the spirit as the educator of himself and of others, ‘testimony’ is – in its expectation, discretion, and vigilance – the highest means of transforming the world, because it is in testimony, which is language first and foremost, with it and through it, the remodelling of pre-conceived schemes, of received ideas, of unconsciously interiorized social habits, conventionally accredited feelings takes place.]

Sena’s reference to testimony as language first and foremost, and as an essential aspect of the transformation of the world (and poetry should aim to transform the world; 25) is all the more striking when one considers Jacques Derrida’s meditations on testimony with reference to a

text that blurs and subverts the boundaries between testimony and fiction, Maurice Blanchot's *récit* 'À l'instant de ma mort' ['The instant of my death'], set during the final stages of World War II, coincides with Sena's reflections on testimony and 'fingimento'. According to Sena, testimony is language first and foremost, but its transformative power cannot be overlooked. In Derrida's words, if testimony were to be understood solely as 'proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony' (Derrida 1998: 29-30). Testimony implies 'in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, lie, and perjury – that is to say, the possibility of literature' (Derrida 1998: 29). Testimony cannot be confused with 'fingimento', it is – as poetry is for Sena, as mentioned – 'first a present act' (Derrida 1998: 38).

The testimonial dimension of poetry adds to the complexity of the novel's engagement with its historical and political trigger, the Spanish Civil War (always understood as an integral part of a larger historical movement), as the 'apparition of poetry' for Jorge coincides with the narrator's socio-political and interpersonal (including sexual) awakening and allows for a veering away from the personal, or indeed to re-equate the relationship between the personal and the community. In an interview in the newspaper [check] *O Globo* (Rio de Janeiro, 16 February 1965), Sena makes use of similar wording to describe the aims of *Sinais de fogo*, a 'magno romance sobre a evolução política e moral da minha geração' (Sena 2013: 52-53) ['major novel on the political and moral evolution of my generation'] which 'pretende ser ao mesmo tempo testemunho e documentário de uma geração, além do levantamento moral e ambiental de uma consciência em situação' (Sena 2013: 53) ['aims to be simultaneously the testimony and documentary of a generation, besides being a moral and environmental survey of a conscience in the field'].

Sena's commitment to perform a testimony not only for himself but for an entire generation speaks volumes of the necessity to consider the issue of 'community' (the inverted

commas recognize that such term is problematic, despite a whole generation's worth of reification by authors such as Maurice Blanchot [2015], Jean-Luc Nancy [1991; 2000] and Roberto Esposito [2010]). To do so through a novel in which poetry and the poetic take centre stage, in the case of an author for whom testimony was an inalienable part of poetry, will require addressing poetry and the poetic as an intrinsic part of the testimony.

The aesthetics of politics and the politics of aesthetics

‘No fundo, sou um *político*, na medida em que um poeta pode e deve ser *político*.’ (Sena 2013: 32)

[‘Ultimately, I am political, in the sense in which a poet can and must be *political*’]

Michel Foucault's proposal of the ship as ‘l'hétérotopie par excellence’ [‘the heterotopia par excellence’] acknowledges both the role of ships as ‘le plus grand instrument de développement économique’ [‘the great instrument of economic development’] as well as ‘la plus grande réserve d'imagination’ [‘the greatest reserve of the imagination’]. As Foucault put it: ‘Dans les civilisations sans bateaux les rêves se tarissent, l'espionnage y remplace l'aventure, et la police, les corsaires’ [‘In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates’ (Foucault 1984). The lingering impact of the violent repression of the ‘revolta dos barcos’, justified by the *Estado Novo* as a necessary attack to safeguard the health of the motherland when faced with the communist threat, lies in its blowing off of the thinly veiling yet long-standing cover of benign authoritarianism and harmonious rule ushered in by the *Estado Novo*'s myth of ‘brandos costumes’ [‘mild manners’]... blowing up its own ships. This violent confrontation

against the Portuguese Navy's ships runs counter to the *Estado Novo* political discourse and propaganda, animated by references to seafaring, maritime expansion and adventure as *modus vivendi* to be glossed over and celebrated/imitated, respectively. The state-sponsored celebration of seafaring (nation of seafarers and discoverers) prompts a critical, contextually-based, departure from Foucault's view of the ships as heterotopia.

In the Portuguese context, the flight heralded by the heterotopic space is mirrored – and, thus, undermined – by shipwreck and drowning (in Figueira da Foz and Lisbon). The potentially heterotopic space of the ship is itself already haunted, possessed, in fact, by that from which it could configure a means of escape: ships are sunk and/or one is indefinitely stuck on land, where (to paraphrase Foucault) dreams dry up, informers abound and a police state is in action.^{iv} The interest of this article in the boat as a space of heterotopia stems largely from the way the notion of this 'place without a place' highlights, by contrast, the desolate condition of those that are left behind, i.e. who do not embark on the fights or flights that ships can offer, on a symbolical and material level. Jorge provides testimony (the first condition for testimony is survival) as he does not embark with the group of his friends Zé Ramos and Macedo, who alongside Spanish men opposed to the *alzamiento* (caught by surprise while vacationing in Portugal, including the two harboured in secret by Jorge's uncle) travel by boat to Galicia in order to fight on the Republican side in the Spanish conflict; later in the novel, he sees Luís embark, from a distance, to a new life, having escaped from his father's house in Figueira da Foz; finally, he hears through rumours and newspapers about the exemplary punishment exacted by the *Estado Novo* regime on the 'red sailors' (*O Marinheiro Vermelho* ['The Red Sailor'] was the title of the Communist Party's publication directed at members of the armada).

Jorge's status as a witness is intricately linked to his becoming a poet – the emergence of poetry takes place within the context and as a response to events, emotions and reflections

triggered by the effects of the Spanish civil war. Jorge, very much like Jorge de Sena, will create a poetic diary of sorts which, at different points of the novel, processes and/or foreshadows what takes place. Jorge's poetic diary, in stark contrast with, but clearly referring to, the boats' heterotopic 'lieu sans lieu' ['place without place'] (Foucault 1984), is very much localized in an aporia. The *poiesis* does not 'appear' as much as grow from what Jorge calls the 'podridão e lixo' [rot and waste] of the civil war, acting as a testimony to the civil war that rages the *polis* through the conventional means of injustice, inequality, and oppression when not through the more exceptional military manoeuvres. Jorge's 'ver navios' (a colloquial expression which means, literally, 'to see ships' and connotes 'see events passing you by') bears more of a politically affirmative connotation than the idiomatic commonplace might suggest. It is no surprise then that, later in the novel, Jorge composes poems from the shore, amidst stranded, dismantled ships and that the novel ends with Jorge flippantly telling his mother that he is going into the street to 'ver navios' and he ends up by observing his fellow citizens the morning after the rebellious ships are sunk. The beach, the stranded boats or sunken ships offer the possibility of addressing the past and the present and of thinking otherwise what is to come.

By the same token, the apparition of the first verses ('Sinais de fogo...') coincide with Jorge's stroll by the beach in Figueira da Foz, as he watches struggling fishermen preparing their boats to sea. Similar verses emerge again once Jorge is back in Lisbon, alone, in his room, figuratively placed in an imagined boat, with references to a vertical beach ('praia vertical' [vertical beach]), seasickness ('tontura agoniada' [agonizing dizzy spells]), sound of waves ('batimento cadenciado' [rhythmic beat]), and floating ('flutuando') (Sena 1981: 423).

Jorge will eventually feel compelled to write and does so intentionally (see Carvalho 2010: 377) after being awakened from the temporary hedonistic slumber in which he and Luís indulge during their first days in Lisbon at his mother's suggestion they should go to the

beach ('Praias, barcos, mortes e desapareções, tudo havia sido suprimido por tácito acordo' (1981: 427) [Beaches, boats, deaths and disappearances – we had a tacit agreement not to mention any of these things] 1999: 420). The urge to (re)write the verses is triggered specifically by Jorge's argument and fights with Almeida, Mercedes' ex-fiancé, whose engagement was part of a plan to lure Almeida to captain the boat with the Portuguese and Spanish loyalist sympathizers. Similar lines emerge:

Sinais de fogo, os homens se despedem,
exaustos e tranquilos, destas cinzas frias.
E o vento que estas cinzas nos dispersa
não é de nós, mas é quem reacende
outros sinais ardendo na distância,
um breve instante, gestos e palavras,
ansiosas brasas que se apagam logo. (Sena 1981: 440)

[Signs of fire, the men bid farewell/ weary and placid, to these cold ashes./ And the wind which blows these ashes away from us/ is not ours, but is the one who relights/ other signs burning in the distance,/ a brief moment, gestures and words,/ anxious embers which soon die out. (Sena 1999: 433)]

The boats mentioned in previous versions of the poem (Sena 1981: 113: 'os barcos desta vida'; Sena 1981: 424: 'os barcos de outra vida') are erased from the third version of the poem, but very present, once again, in the meta-reflexive discourse which seems to situate Jorge at sea or on the shore:

Parei relendo o que escrevera. Faltava qualquer coisa. O que faltava? Não conseguia lembrar-me. Vi então um papel flutuando entre duas águas, vi águas tremulantes de reflexos, e vi uns barcos que deslizavam sobre elas. Os barcos de outra vida. Que outra vida? Que barcos? Não faziam sentido os barcos ali, e agora. (Sena 1981: 440)

[I stopped and read again what I had written. There was something missing; I couldn't remember what. Then I saw a paper waving between two waters, I saw waters shimmering with reflections, and I saw some ships gliding over them. Ships from another life. Which other life? Which ships? Those ships didn't make sense, there, at this time. (Sena 1999: 433)]

Jorge picks up his pen once again during his visit to the Torre de Belém [Belém Tower], a (poorly kept) remnant of 16th century Portugal's maritime glories, in which surroundings he finds poverty and decay.^v Once Jorge decides to get up to visit the Torre de Belém, he attempts to write (the novel describes the process of writing the poem, including discarded lines) yet another poem – this one addresses explicitly not only what Jorge has known (in Figueira da Foz, what he can imagine happened in Porto) but also what lies ahead (the wrecks that he will encounter during his visit to the tower and the fort. The final result reads:

Nas vastas águas que as remadas medem,
tranquila a noite está adormecida.
Deslisa o barco, sem que se conheça
que espaço ou tempo existe noutra vida,
em que os barcos naufragam, e nas praias
há cascos arruinados que apodrecem,

a desfazer-se ao sol, ao vento, à chuva,
e cujos nomes se não vêem já.

Ao que singrando vai, a noite esconde o nome. (Sena 1981: 482-83)

[In the vast deeps measured by the rowers' stroke,/ The night is asleep, peacefully./
The boat slides by, all unaware/ That space or time exist in another life./ In which
ships are wrecked and on the beaches/ There are the ruins of hulls, going rotten,/ And
falling apart in the sun, the wind, the rain,/ Their names no longer to be discerned./ Of
which, ploughing through the seas, the night hides the name. (Sena 1999: 477-78)]

As Jorge is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to visit the Torre de Belém by several minor figures of authority imbued with a belligerent authoritarian attitude in the Forte and in the Torre, he is confronted with decrepitude and misery. Prompted by the precariousness and poverty of the seaside houses and shacks, Jorge mulls over the issues that are central to the novel's concerns (sexuality, love, economic inequality, social exclusion, political apathy and/or oppression, authoritarianism/order, resistance, in/justice). Jorge then opts to go to the beach and walk among the stranded boats; after sitting on the edge of one of the said boats, he catches sight of a large structure, looming unrecognizable from a distance, which turns out to be two large, dismantled iron boats that seem to grow from the beach ('menos pareciam cravar-se na areia que nascerem da praia' (Sena 1981: 493) [not so much to be rooted in the sand as to have been born out of the beach (Sena 1999: 488)]. Jorge sits next to the two stranded ships in the sand and the eerie atmosphere, synaesthetically invoked, provokes a 'ligeiro mal-estar' (Sena 1981: 493) [slight sense of unease (Sena 1999: 489)], which – as was the case in the room in Lisbon – place Jorge in an allegorical ship journey:

Foi um instante apenas que isto durou, e, entreabrindo levemente os olhos, tive a impressão de que as proas dos barcos deslizavam uma contra a outra, para tombar sobre mim. No céu que empalidecia, as formas recortadas deixavam um rasto branco dos seus contornos: e era como se os barcos navegassem intersectando-se, num avançar estático de que eu fosse o rumo.

Levantei-me exausto como de uma grande viagem. (Sena 1981: 494)

[This lasted but an instant and half opening my eyes gingerly I had the impression that the prows of the two ships had slipped one against the other, about to topple down on me. Against the sky, as the colour drained from it, the silhouetted shapes left a white wake of their outlines; and it was as if the courses of the ships had crossed each other, in some static movement of which I was the path./ I got up, weary as though from a long journey. (Sena 1999: 489)]

A vision of a naked female body follows instantly and seems to link to the final poem, on love and obligation, featured in the novel ('Quanto de ti, amor, me possuiu no abraço' (Sena 1981: 495); ['How much of you, love, did possess me in our embrace' (Sena 1999: 490-91)], an inspiration that comes to Jorge after he walks by the poor houses along the coast and witnesses the conditions (material and otherwise) of those who live there.^{vi} The poetic trajectory comes full circle, from uninvited, unpremeditated and unrecognized lines to a conscious evocation. The meditation on love evokes a much clearer and committed engagement to Mercedes (and, in a sense, to the society around both of them) than the first instance of 'apparition of poetry' at the sight of the boats on the beach, and significantly enough on the same place in which Jorge and Mercedes kiss, might have suggested.

The poem presents a conception of love that extends beyond – indeed, will thrive on putting at risk the very notion of – the personal, a conception of love that implies no rights or guarantees, only lack and risk. In this sense, it strikes a parallel with the ideas of community that are exposed. In the tripartite conception of the poem ‘Sinais de fogo...’, even Jorge recognizes how prescient the poem is, how it evoked the shipwrecks that came after – let us not forget that Jorge describes their community as ‘náufragos’ [‘castaways’] – and that there is more fire to come. The *mise en scène* of the writing of the poems shows that poetry is not an *other* place (heterotopia) but takes place in and towards the other, in a departure that often ends in *aporia*. Ships represent no escapism and guarantee no frictionless encounters; on the contrary, all of the figurative or factual journeys are without exception filled with risk and threatened by death and loss. The gradation of the figuration of the different scenes of writing (watching the boats, feeling seasick, finally feeling exhausted as if after a long trip and as if the shipwrecked boats are about to crush him) show that lyrical poetry not only can address the literal and symbolic shipwrecks, but also emerges from them: in similar terms to Jorge’s observation on the stranded boats, which appear to emerge from the beach. Throughout the novel, the reiterations of poetry emerge more and more from and in conflict (after a fight, after witnessing misery and deprivation). The climax is reached literally among the shipwrecks, as if after ‘a long journey’. It is not so much that poetry has to face up to reality, but that poetry is a facing up to reality, most notably to the reality of other(s).

Jorge’s war

Jorge’s first reaction when confronted with the division and conflict caused by the breakout of the Spanish civil war in Figueira da Foz is to ask himself: ‘Que tinha eu que ver com isso tudo?’ (Sena 1981: 90) [‘What did I have to do with all that?’ (Sena 1999: 71)]. It will not

take long for Jorge to realise that the construct of the *I* ('Que tinha *eu* que ver com isso tudo?') is much more relational and co-dependant than he had assumed. Jorge identifies himself as a catalyst (218) and point of liaison (295; 298; see 363-65). His community is less of a consistent 'community' in the traditional sense (they are defined, at a certain point, as 'um grupo de náufragos acumulados numa jangada estreita' (Sena 1981: 365) ['a group of castaways huddled on a narrow raft' (Sena 1999: 356)], and more of an open-ended chain of interchangeable links: 'Eu, a Mercedes, o Rodrigues, o Almeida, o irmão da Mercedes, os dois Macedos, os dois espanhóis, os meus tios, sei lá quem mais.' (Sena 1981: 218) ['Myself, Mercedes, Rodrigues, Almeida, Mercedes' brother, the two Macedos, the two Spaniards, my aunt and uncle, and who knows how many more besides.' (Sena 1999: 205)]; 'os Macedos, os Ramos, o Rodrigues, meus tios, o Rufininho, todos constituíam comigo um nó de substituições mútuas' (Sena 1981: 365) ['the Macedos, the Ramos brother and sister, Rodrigues, my aunt and uncle, Rufininho, they all made up, together with me, a knot of interchangeable parts' (Sena 1999: 356)]. Jorge's meditations on the 'community' seem to intuit what Roberto Esposito, departing from Martin Heidegger and in the wake of a long tradition of works on community, determined as the condition of debt (*munus*) of the individual,^{vii} as the poem 'Amor ...' suggests, which ties in to the '*esse as inter*' of any, 'communion' or 'community':

Si potrebbe dire che la comunità non è l'*inter* dell'*esse*, ma l'*esse* come *inter*: non un rapporto che modella l'essere, ma l'essere medesimo come rapporto. La distinzione è importante perché è quella che ci restituisce nel modo più evidente la sovrapposizione di essere e niente: l'essere della comunità è lo scarto, lo spaziamento, che ci rapporta agli altri in una comune non-appartenenza. In una perdita di proprio che non perviene mai a sommarsi in un bene comune: comune è solo la mancanza, non il possesso, la proprietà, l'appropriazione. (Esposito 2009: 92)

[We could say that community is not the *inter* of the *esse*, but the *esse* as *inter*; not a relationship that shapes being, but being itself as a relationship. This is an important distinction since it gives us back in the clearest possible way the superimposition of being with the nothing: the being of community is the gap, the spacing that relates us to others in a common non-belonging, a loss of what is one's own which never manages to be added up into a common good. Only lack is common, not possession, property and appropriation. (Esposito 2009: 27)]

The question asked early on in the novel, 'Que tinha eu que ver com isso tudo?' (Sena 1981: 90) ['What did I have to do with all that?' (Sena 1999: 71)], can be answered only negatively as the narrator, further on, moves from a point of view limited by the 'eu' to a naked observation on the limitations of the 'eu' as well as on the potential of a community unbound by the common:

Que tinha eu com aquilo tudo? Nada. Mas este nada é que era o tudo, como compreendi. O não ter-se nada em comum, senão as circunstâncias que nos juntam, é que é a verdadeira sujeição mútua. Muito maior e mais profunda que a que me ligava à família, aos companheiros de sempre, a tudo o que sempre tivera um lugar marcado e habitual na minha vida. Tudo isto não é a nossa vida, mas o pretexto em que nos refugiamos, para não sermos atacados por ela. A nossa vida é esse ataque vindo de fora, por mãos ocasionais, e que, descobrindo-nos que não somos 'nós-próprios' (com tudo o que, à nossa volta, nos dá essa segurança unitária), nos obriga a reconhecermos 'nós-outros', 'nós-múltiplos', conforme as ocasiões e conforme as circunstâncias. Eu não era eu, mas eu-Mercedes, eu-Rodrigues, eu-Macedos, eu e toda a gente que não fosse um passado sem tempo nem acontecimentos. (Sena 1981: 294-95)

[What had it all to do with me? Nothing. But it was exactly that nothing that was everything, as I understood it. Having nothing at all in common except the circumstances which linked us was the real, mutual bond. Much greater, much deeper than that which bound me to my family, to my day-to-day friends, to everything which forever had its habitual, well-marked, place in my life. All this is not our life but the veil behind which we shelter to avoid its attacks. Our life is these very attacks, coming from without, at the hands of chance, and which, in revealing to us that we are not ‘ourselves’ (along with everything else which, around us, gives us this unifying security), obliges us to realise that we are ‘all of us’, ‘we as many’, according to the occasion and the circumstances. I wasn’t just just an I, but an I-Mercedes, I-Rodrigues, I-Macedos, I and all those who were not a past beyond time or events. (Sena 1999: 282)]

The intersections of the articulation of self/community and poetry are clear; when Jorge, confronted with all the issues and conflicts brought about by the eruption of the Spanish civil war asks himself ‘what is it to me’, the answer is ‘nothing’. The Pessoaan intertext (‘O mito é o nada que é tudo’; [‘The myth is the nothing which is everything’]) is cleverly subverted when Jorge adds that that nothing was everything. *Sinais de fogo*’s subtle yet decisive nod to Pessoa’s aphorism on ‘myth’ (from ‘Ulysses’, in *Mensagem*, 1934) and to the notion of ‘fingimento’ (his assault on the understanding of the ‘individual’ as monolithic construct, which Sena evoked also *à propos* of his poetical diary) in the bringing out of the main character’s first-person narrative experiences and/or meditations on those conflicts pertaining to poetry, the self, and community; in no particular order, rather in their constitutive inseparability as literature and politics remain a constant point of tension and, given the novel’s focus on the writing of poetry – on *poiesis*, etymologically speaking –, that relation is

particularly cogent. Pessoa's undertones continue to surface in the wake of the meditation quoted above, after Jorge attributes these changes to the Spanish Civil War ('A Guerra civil espanhola fizera isso.' (Sena 1981: 295) ['This was what the Spanish Civil War had done.' (Sena 1999: 283)]), by framing 'his' war as a war against ideal and fictitious unities:

A minha guerra, como a dos que tinham partido (se é que tinham), começava agora. Contra quem? E em favor de quê? Isso não me aparecia claramente, mas sem dúvida do meu direito, e o dos outros, *de ser neles e por eles*, reciprocamente. Mas contra quem? Contra a exigência de ser, pura e simplesmente, uma unidade ideal e fictícia. (Sena 1981: 295)

[My war, like that of those who had already set off (if indeed they had) was beginning now. Against whom? And on whose behalf? This did not seem at all clear to me, but without doubting my right, and that of the other, *to project myself onto them and through them*, reciprocally. But against whom? Against the need to be, purely and simply, an ideal, fictitious union. (Sena 1999: 283)]

Recognizing the importance of nothingness, of a nothing which is everything, is crucial in politics and aesthetics, i.e. in the articulation of selfness, community, and art. It also shows alertness to the structural function of the trace. Later in the novel, in the aforementioned second visitation of poetry, set in some envisioned boat, as Jorge tries to come to terms with the particular traits of poetry, Jorge's statement will once again familiar: it is '[u]m tudo, que sendo nada, era ele mesmo o valor de que tudo dependia' (Sena 1981: 423) ['[a]n everything which, being nothing, was itself the value on which everything else depended' (Sena 1999: 416)]. 'Nothing' is not a value in itself, but rather what allows for self and other to be

articulated and to *communicate* (or in Nancyan terms *being-with*) albeit not being in common. The phrase and the poem ‘Sinais de fogo’, through its constant reiterations and formulation in the abovementioned poem and as the novel title, bring into play a consideration of ‘trace’ in the Derridan sense: the trace is that which remains after inscription and which is not possible to recover, to recapture, to retrace, which is not meaningful as such but a structural necessity for meanings to be generated. The reading of the poem anticipates Derrida’s proposition, in *Cinders*, that ‘cinder’ as ‘the best paradigm for the trace’, ‘what remains without remaining’ after the incineration (2014: 25). Signs of fire is also not a bad paradigm of the trace if, inseparably from the question of ‘communion’ or ‘community’, one addresses communication beyond recuperation, appropriation or ‘recognition’.

In this sense, both ‘Sinais de fogo, os homens se despedem’ and ‘Nas vastas águas que as remadas medem’ can be read as enactments of a movement of exposure to risk of obliteration, of producing meaning only by emptying the ‘self’ towards (the) other(ness). In the latter poem, a boat fulfils a *telos* (it goes somewhere) as identity (‘nome’) is subsumed by night and there is a reminder that all boats end up being consumed by the elements; in the former, the subjects (‘homens’) are rendered visible and meaningful to the extent they are being consumed by fire. The above-mentioned poems do not simply *remember* the events of the ‘revolta dos barcos’ in which ships (and sailors) were shot, burnt and sunk, they also reenact Jorge’s ‘community’ of fellow oppositionists. Jorge’s portrayal of the Figueira da Foz chain of people involved in the planning and execution of the boat escape as ‘náufragos’ (the drowned body of Ramos is discovered by Jorge and Mercedes, Ramos’ sister, in the beach) and Jorge’s identification of his situation with that of the sailors – which makes him feel part of their uprising even if he was not directly involved – puts forward the notion of a community of non-belonging which shares only not having anything in common. The ‘eu’,

the ‘nós’ (outros, múltiplos, próprios) have nothing in common and have no ‘proper’ to fall back to:

il comune non è caratterizzato dal proprio, ma dall’improprio – o, più drasticamente, dall’altro. Da uno svuotamento – parziale o integrale – della proprietà nel suo negativo. Da una depropriazione che investe e decentra il soggetto proprietario forzandolo ad uscire da se stesso. (Esposito 2006: xiv)

[the common is not characterized by what is proper but by what is improper, or even more drastically, by the other; by a voiding, be it partial or whole, of property into its negative; by removing what is properly one’s own that invests and decenters the proprietary subject, forcing it to take leave of itself, to alter itself. (Esposito 2010: 7)]

The *ipse* depends on (its) other(ing) – it has in common not having anything ‘proper’. The ‘eu’ is always already ‘outro’, ‘múltiplo’; always already ‘nós’, ‘outros’, ‘múltiplos’. In the context of the novel and the raging civil war(s), having the demand of being, purely and simply, and ideal and fictitious unity as the object of Jorge’s war may seem like displacement activity. But in Sena’s non-mythological view of community (thus conforming to Blanchot’s revision of community as *inavouable* [inoperative], and to its various reverberations), the attack on the demand for unity of the individual is an aesthetic and literary (poetic, to be more precise) objective and endeavour. The relation between *poiesis* and *polis* may best be defined chiasmatically, by using a formulation Sena employs in a text on his ‘encounter’ with André Malraux in Rio de Janeiro (1959), a subtle criticism of the author of *La condition humaine* and *L’Espoir*: ‘política é a estética da acção inter-humana, como a estética é uma política da comunicabilidade’ (Sena 1974) [‘politics is the aesthetics of interhuman action, in the same way aesthetics is a politics of communicability’].

In the preface to his translation of André Malraux's *La condition humaine*, Sena had emphasized the decisive nature, in global History, of the interwar period. In the preface, Sena (who does not fail to mention Malraux's *L'espoir* as one of the finest books on the Spanish civil war) takes issue precisely with Malraux's essentialist (i.e. a-historical, existentialist) perspective and finds that the novel's suggestion that greatness lies within, and within the grasp of, the individual is clearly insufficient:

Importará assim tanto a solidão de cada um, para que o mundo se transforme numa associação de solidões? Será assim tão precioso o incomunicável? Ou valerá principalmente aquela capacidade humana de sentir os outros lá onde eles próprios se negam ou se esquecem? (Sena 1958)

[Is individual solitude so important that the world should become an association of solitudes? Is the incommunicable that precious? Or is it the human ability to feel the others there where they themselves deny or forget which is truly valuable?]

Sena's criticism of Malraux's take on the individual as the end-all be-all strikes a chord with Roberto Esposito's above-reference critique of community and his refiguring of *communitas*, which questions the personal as the foundational stone for a thought on community and questions any views of community as a positive construct. Jorge, as mentioned, is left on several occasions and by the end of the novel high and dry. But he is not alone; or better still, it is his 'solitude' which binds him to the rest of the Portuguese population. However, they are not bound together, in an 'associação de solidões', merely each one of them is subject of and subjected to a double bind:

Era como se dois pares de olhos se levantassem de um jornal, ou se cruzassem para comunicar um silencioso acordo ou um começo de conversa, e logo recuassem a refugiar-se numa cauta reserva. Subitamente, senti que a solidão que era a minha, a de saber que sabia e não sabia o quanto sabia, não era senão um caso particular de outra solidão maior que se abatera sub-reptícia sobre tudo e todos, e a que todos se sujeitavam sub-repticiamente. (Sena 1981: 519)

[It was as if two pairs of eyes looked up from the paper, or met to exchange some silente agreement or the start of a conversation and then retreated back to their usual wary reserve. Suddenly I felt that that solitude of mine, that of knowing what I knew and not knowing how much I knew, was no more than a particular example of that other, greater solitude which falls surreptitiously on everything and everybody, and to which everybody surreptitiously submits. (Sena 1999: 516)]

Jorge's war within the civil war acts both as a call for, as well as a recognition of, the fact that in a community there are subjects only 'della propria mancanza, della mancanza di proprio. Di un'improprietà radicale che coincide con un'assoluta contingenza – o semplicemente "coincide": cade insieme' (Esposito 2006: xiv) ['of their own proper lack, of the lack of the proper. Subjects of a radical impropriety that coincides with an absolute contingency or just simply 'coincides': that falls together' (Esposito 2010: 7)]. Contingency, coincidence, the circumstances of the 'civil war' – to paraphrase Sena – are the true mutual subject(ion). The task of a writer is to resist by using the human capacity to 'sentir os outros lá onde eles próprios se negam ou se esquecem'. To know that (even if not what) he does not know. To educate above and beyond his/hers solitary self into a shared 'solidão' which supplements (and is therefore other) to their own 'caso particular'. The freedom that neither individual

‘solidão’ nor ‘associação de solidões’ can bring might be earned if the poet can ‘sentir (perchance, with a Pessoa twist, *fingir?*) os outros lá onde eles próprios se negam ou esquecem’. Sena’s response to Malraux’s ‘condition humaine’ is the ‘capacidade humana’ of feeling the others beyond themselves/their selves (‘onde eles próprios se negam ou se esquecem’).

Hence the heterotopic reserve of the imagination is held in check, in the novel, by the overload of references to the shipwrecks, the drownings, the sinking, the beach shores infested with stranded, decaying boats. As a matter of fact, they lay bare the violence underlying ‘paz podre’: José Ramos drowns and the success of the voyage and destiny of the rest of the escape party will remain unknown; even Luís, Jorge’s *protégé* and a young Sena’s second *alter ego*, may be departing for a career and a new life in the Merchant Navy but the close association between his departure and the brutal crushing of the uprising of the boats sends unnerving signals. Jorge, left behind watching ships go by (Sena 1981: 506), feels the impact of the crushed rebellion even if he witnessed nothing but the seeming indifference in the faces of his fellow citizens: ‘Praias, pessoas, fragmentos de falas, uma proa enorme, e Forte, tudo redemoinhava à minha volta, e afogados, de bruços, vogavam lentamente, deixando um rasto de fios de sangue que se dissolvia na água’ (Sena 1981: 516). [‘Beaches, people, snatches of conversation, a huge, powerful prow, all swirling around me, drowning, in a mist, slipping slowly by and leaving a trail of thin threads of blood which dissolved into the water’ (Sena 1999: 512)].

Community is never a destination, rather it is a point of departure towards what does not belong and may never belong.^{viii} Ship as heterotopia may provide escape for the imagination: yet a writer does not resist by escaping but by always departing to what is other in the other(s), by recognizing ‘nós-mesmos’ [‘ourselves’ (Sena 1999: 283)], as *Sinais de*

Fogo suggests, as ‘nós-outros’ (Sena 1981: 294) [‘all of us, we as many’ (Sena 1999: 283)].

And recognizing also that nothing(ness) can be everything.

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ⁱ Translations are my own unless where otherwise stated.

ⁱⁱ For an overview of Portuguese historiography regarding Portuguese involvement in the Spanish civil war, see Loff 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ Apart from the references to the Great War (and the Portuguese obscure participation in it, which exposes the wider imperial interests in which Portuguese nation and colonies are tangled - made even more evident by subservient Anglophile or Germanophile elites, as Tenente Justino denounces), there are constant references to revolutions. Discussion of previous revolutions feature prominently once again towards the very end of the novel when the uprising in the ships is repressed. Additionally, several characters in *Sinais de fogo* have Spanish, Catalan and even German ascendants and this is often the cause of open aggressiveness, petulant posturing or slightly ironic mistrust. The Spanish men taking refuge in Tenente Justino's house are from Asturias and the Basque country, which leads to several discussions about nationalism in the Iberian Peninsula with their Portuguese interlocutors.

^{iv} In view of this, poets critical of the regime, for instance, often produced in their poems an ambivalent imagery which simultaneously took up and undermined poetic (and nationalist) *topoi*. Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão's *Barcas Novas* (1967) is a case in point.

^v The area of Belém – with the tower as one of its crown jewels – will be redeveloped in the spirit of the patriotic, propagandistic vision which inspired the Estado Novo's 1940 'Exposição do Mundo Português' [Portuguese World Exhibition].

^{vi} The poem 'Gaiola de vidro' (Sena 1981: 481) [Glass Cage Sena 1999: 476] will emerge from Jorge's visit to the house of the Portuguese Republican eccentric who rescued Jorge and Luís from an angry mob outside the rally held in the bullring (Campo Pequeno) which officialized the Estado Novo's support to the Spanish rebels. The poem 'Gaiola de Vidro' provides in the novel poetic testimony of the experience provided by the encounter with the possibly well-intended but utterly innocuous and slightly ridiculous wealthy Republican man whose neutered views on poetry and politics (as Luís puts it, how do you resist by doing

nothing?; 1981: 457) help shape – in a purely negative way – Jorge’s resistance to the demands of fictitious and ideal unity.

^{vii} ‘I soggetti della comunità sono uniti da un ‘dovere’ – nel senso in cui si dice ‘*ti* devo qualcosa’, ma non ‘*mi* devi qualcosa’ – che li rende non interamente padroni di se stessi. E che più precisamente li espropria, in parte o per intero, della loro proprietà iniziale, della loro proprietà più propria – vale a dire della loro stessa soggettività.’ (Esposito 2006: xiii-xiv) [The subjects of community are united by an ‘obligation,’ in the sense that we say "I owe *you* something," but not "you owe *me* something". This is what makes them not less than the masters of themselves, and that more precisely expropriates them from their initial property (in part or completely), from the most proper property, namely, their very subjectivity’] (Esposito 2006: 6-7).

^{viii} ‘This movement of decentralisation can be recognized in the very idea of “partition”— which refers to both “condivision” and “departure”: community is never a place of arrival, but one of departure. It is even the very departure towards what does not and will never belong to us. Therefore *communitas* is far from producing effects of commonness, association, or communion’ (Esposito 2009: 27-28). [Questo movimento di decentramento è riconoscibile nella stessa idea di ‘partizione’ – che rimanda insieme a ‘condivisione’ e a ‘partenza’: la comunità non è mai un luogo d’arrivo, ma sempre di partenza. E anzi la partenza stessa verso ciò che non ci appartiene e che non potrà mai appartenerci. Perciò la *communitas* è ben lontana da produrre effetti di comunanza, di accomunamento, di comunione. (Esposito 2009: 93).