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**A Portuguese Literary View of the  
Mediterranean Culture(s):  
Peoples in Dialog under Manuel  
Teixeira Gomes' Point of View**

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## **A Portuguese Literary View of the Mediterranean Culture(s): Peoples in Dialog under Manuel Teixeira Gomes' Point of View**

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### **Abstract**

If rightly Portugal is considered a Mediterranean country and the Portuguese people regards itself as Mediterranean, and reference works such as that one entitled *Mediterrâneo. Ambiente e Tradição / Mediterranean. Environment and Tradition* (Lisbon, <sup>2</sup>1983), by a great Portuguese geographer and an exceptional writer called Orlando Ribeiro, leaves no doubt about this under a geographical and scientific point of view, the truth is that writers along the centuries have always looked mostly at the Roman and Greek legacy in the Portuguese cultural and literary tradition and have forgotten or dealt slightly with other contributions. However, in the 20.th century a former President of the Portuguese Republic, Manuel Teixeira Gomes (1860-1941), disenchanted with the political atmosphere in the country, after having resigned, left for a voluntary exile in Algeria, where he lived until he died. In his literary works, especially in the letters he wrote during this sojourn, but also in those composed when he travelled to Italy and Greece, he left to future generations one of the most complete and all-embracing images of the Mediterranean in the Portuguese literature, as the Arab, mainly the Tunisian and the Algerian cultures are put side by side with the others from Greece, Italy and Turkey, even though having always in mind his own, the Portuguese identity. So, starting from the study of some of his letters and his former literary compositions, here is intended to draw the fascination he felt for the South, the Mediterranean, and the respect he reveals regarding its cultural diversity and, at the same time, the ideas he considered unavoidable to promote the dialog among the Mediterranean peoples, configuring in their identity the ideal of tolerance.

### **Keywords:**

The Mediterranean; Portugal; Cultural Dialog; Manuel Teixeira Gomes; epistlography.

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## Introduction

Considered as the most Mediterranean writer of the Portuguese Literature, Manuel Teixeira Gomes is neither a well-known, nor a much studied author among us. Maybe he still carries the stigma the dictatorship (1933-1974) threw upon him, and that did not contribute to make of Teixeira Gomes a canonic writer. Indeed, he was a democrat, and only for democratic reasons he decided to leave the country in 1926, imposing himself a self-exile, as he understood totalitarian forces were conquering space in the public opinion and in the political field of the time. Only in the decade of the sixties, after the student movements, he started being read, esteemed and published.

In reality, his literary work responds to the new tendencies of that period, in which geography was regarded not anymore under a nationalist perspective, but under a comprehensive overview. It was then that Orlando Ribeiro showed a mixed picture of the Mediterranean landscape, in which he extolled the originality of its atmosphere, between tradition and development. In this regard, he points out its specificity of nature, the position of the sea among mountains, the seduction for the Mediterranean, its weather of contrasts, but also problems such as the degradation of the forest. When treating rural life, he emphasizes the agrarian patrimony and its dry and irrigated farming. Then he approaches the relation established between men and the land, the *latifundium* vs. the orchard, the intimate connection between the works of the field and the weather, and, among other subjects, its poor but creative gastronomy. Shepherds and herdsmen, the flocks and their close contact with the wilderness, the hinterland and the desert are discussed together with the sea life, coastline problems and fishing, especially stressing the limitations of this traditional activity, and the production of salt. Besides, he evaluates rural villages, composed of stone constructions, adapted to the environment and to the weather. They are studied too in their organic relations with towns and urban development, commerce and trade. Mediterranean civilizations, according to such a view, seem to swing between localism and universality, decline and fall, even though the resurgence of the Mediterranean with tourism is an indisputable fact (Cf. Ribeiro, <sup>2</sup>1985).

In this way, literary works such as those of Manuel Teixeira Gomes are an excellent field for new critical approaches, mainly coming out of the cultural studies<sup>1</sup> and imagology<sup>2</sup>, as literature becomes involved with other subjects, establishing intimate connections with different subjects, while at the same time, it projects images of our own and of different cultures and nations.

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<sup>1</sup> About this critical approach, cf. Guyard, <sup>3</sup>1961; Dyserinck, 1966; Rüdiger, 1971 ; Boerner, 1975; Dyserinck, 1980; Dyserinck, 1982; Dyserinck, 1988a; Dyserinck, 1988b.

<sup>2</sup> Many titles may be mentioned about the field of reasearch that Cultural Studies open and provide, but only at an introductory level, may be considered the following works: Mattelart & Neveu, 2006; and Sardar & Van Loon, 2010.

When reading Manuel Teixeira Gomes early works<sup>1</sup>, there are to be found all the main features that afterwards he is going to develop in his later works. There, all the Mediterranean scenery appears sometimes in association with his birthplace's landscapes; other times because his later recollections and memories establish a rich association of ideas with those beautiful places colored by the tints of nostalgia.

Taking into account then all these considerations for the study of Manuel Teixeira Gomes' works, we may say that he was a man of his own time: he was born on the 27.th May 1860, in Portimão, Algarve, the most southern province of Portugal, and died on the 18.th October 1941, in Bougie, Algeria. He was a remarkable diplomat, representing at the time the new republican regime in London, when the monarchists had still a large influence in the English milieu and was elected for President of the Portuguese Republic in 1923, developing his functions up to 1925. In his literary works, mainly of an epistolographic character, memory fulfils an important role, reconstituting his experiences of past times, especially when he used to journey not only through European countries, but also in the North of Africa and Middle East, during the days of his youth, then making also alive the aesthetic background he acquired and the erotic episodes he experienced during those travels.

Under the form of a letter or a novel, sometimes still of a sketch, he expresses a tasteful and aristocratic sensual fruition of the landscape (oft taking into account the land where he was born, Algarve), along with artistic objects, paintings, sculptures and even the human forms, either of the feminine or of the male body (Cf. Rodrigues, 1960). Being accused of a libertine immorality soberly rebuilt with a well composed social realism, the classical feature of his writing is found at the stylistic level, with the well chosen words, the complex structure of the sentences, the way he tasted his writing. In spite of the fragmentary appearance of the reality he experienced, exoticism, sometimes composed with a critical attitude or according the way he tried to analyze human behavior or social institutions, can be said to be taken from a *dilettante* point of view, an artistic posture of fascination in face of the Mediterranean *glamour*, considering either the physical or human landscape.

His Algarve was transformed therefore into a true classical Hellas, Greece of his dreams, recomposed in admirable pages of unrestrained emotion hidden behind sensual refinement and elegance, amoral eroticism and merciless narrative farces (Cf. Alves, 2001).

Teixeira Gomes represents then, in the Portuguese letters, the highest point of a dilettante aestheticism followed by an upper class circle, whose religion was the cult of beauty. All that generation had made his literary training under Fialho de Almeida's professorship and the same cultural attitude was also developed by António Patricio, the mundane figure of Júlio Dantas or even Aquilino Ribeiro (Cf. Canaveira, 1999). All of them substituted the old aristocracy in the republican regime, but considered themselves a selected

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<sup>1</sup> Among Manuel Teixeira-Gomes' early works, here are particularly considered *Inventário de Junho / June Inventory* (2010a), *Cartas sem moral nenhuma / Letters without any moral* (2010b) and *Agosto Azul / Blue August* (2010c).

circle based on sensibility and exquisite style (Cf. Aldemira, 1942). The Hellenic landscapes became then particularly insistent in their work, assuming a pedagogic reliability and symbolic balance of meaning. Greece was an ideal pattern, showing new paths for the development of society and culture, the progress of reason, and yet as a safeguard of immanent energies, in general. Indeed it constitutes in a large scope an abstract ideal that guided this generation thought and action (Cf. Saraiva & Lopes, 1996: 971-972).

Teixeira Gomes is focused, in his journeys accounts, in churches, museums, ruins, libraries, monumental and natural sights as his main points of interest. Either the almond trees in blossom in Tlémcen, the gardens in Fez, the smartness of the modern town of Alger, the ruins of Djemila in Constantina, the beauty of the Greek sculptures in Tunis, the pre-Roman remains in Carthage, or the Roman El-Djem Circus, the Kairuan Mosque, the Titians and the baroque churches in Naples, the Renaissance buildings of Florence, everywhere and everything seems to attract him and furnish him subjects to fill pages of serene, elegant, soft and harmonious visions, the composition of which for sure would also inspire congenial musical composers. Sometimes, mainly in Italy, he avowed he had to escape, because the persecution of beauty was so intense, he started suffering hallucinations. Therefore, he went on his aesthetical pilgrimage to Pisa, Viareggio, Livorno, Lucca, Carrara, La Spezia... in search of hints that could provide him informations about Shelley's travels and experiences, while at the same time he tried to revivify the English Poet's love affairs (Cf. Lopes: 213-215). On the other hand, his subsequent report relating his journey in the South of Italy, in Sicily and Naples, shows that only someone with a high standard of sensitivity could have written it, mainly the episodes regarding the town of Naples, Pompei, the Blue Cave and Capri Island, Posilipo, Salerno, Pozzuoli and Castellamare (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, *Agripina*, 2010a: 35-56). In *Orgulho dos Sentidos / Pride of the Senses*, the same can be said about the way he recollects the taste of the wine he drank in Miseno, in Vincenza, in the 'Campi Flegrei', eating at the same time *macaroni al burro* (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, *Orgulho dos Sentidos*, 2010a: 108-109).

Besides Italy and Greece, he always felt a strong predilection for the Maghreb, always having in mind the mystery he used to experience since he listened in his childhood the legends of the Moorish enchanted princesses, as Algarve is even today the Portuguese province where most Islamic traditions remained, where the language more Arab expressions display and where more Moorish uses are preserved too. Growing up in such a milieu, Teixeira Gomes felt he was well prepared to better understand the sensuality of the Arab poetry and culture (CF. Valdemar, 2005). That's the reason why he decided to change Portugal for Algeria in his last years of life, preferring the *albornoz* /burnouse, the long Arab tunic, and the turban because, as he used to say, they inspired him respect and veneration (Cf. Lopes, 1942: 218-219). From then on he felt as if he had always belonged to that atmosphere, dealing with the Bedouin, the Berber, North Africa Arabs of every race, in the labyrinthine streets of the Medina, surrounded by metal, silk, carpets, vases, spades, precious china from



different nations in a renewed and colorful exhibition (Cf. Lopes, 1942: 220). And late in the night at the moonlight, all his dreams seemed to become reality, especially when he started listening to the music coming out of a nameless window: in such moments it seemed the atmosphere of *One Thousand and one Nights* was deliberately being created specifically for his fruition (Cf. Lopes, 1942: 224-225).

The same fascination takes place when he starts talking about the beauty of women in North Africa: he defends that they are more gorgeous than everywhere, because there it was possible to mingle a great deal of races, the Italian, the French, the Spanish, even some Russian, with the Arab blood. Their eyes glimmer like stars and have the charm of dark almonds, while their voice, full of resonances, is either vibrant, or it fades away as if they were going to faint (Cf. Lopes, 1942: 282).

However, his ecumenical attitude is also to be found when he describes his visions of perfection. For instance, when Teixeira Gomes in *Inventário de Junho / June Inventory*, intends to express what he felt when he saw some horses running through the plains free as the wind. He compares them to the horses of Venice San Marco Cathedral, of the Parthenon here in Athens, somewhere else in Flanders, the horses of Bonn hippodrome, in Germany, others in Pavia, Sevilla, Toledo, Alcantara, Constantinople, Tanger, in Morocco, Tunisia, or Florence, swinging from real horses to their representation in artistic masterpieces (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, 2010a: 28-32).

Spain, too, could not be neglected in his wanderings and was regarded as the charming field right there, on the other side of the border. In *Cartas sem moral nenhuma / Letters without any moral*, he explains his aesthetic impressions in face of the natural sceneries he watches, but also in the sight of the monuments, mainly Sevilla cathedral, and side by side, his sensual and erotic adventures. Then, he follows to Canary Islands and from there to the Archipelago of Madeira. In this last island he still compares it to the beauties of Posilipo (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, 2010b: 302-303), in Italy. Afterwards, returning back, he still goes to Granada and there he ends that specific journey, as in the places of the town he visits, he finds the suggestive features that render him the decadence not only of the Arab civilization in Spain, but also of the Islamic culture in the Maghreb, at the time dominated by different colonial powers (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, 2010b: 347-349). Nevertheless, and in spite of all the feelings arisen, Teixeira Gomes is delighted with the sensations of beauty he is allowed to experience in such an environment, only possible of being compared with the landscapes of the Nile, Capri Island and the Lido of Venice (Cf. Teixeira-Gomes, 2010b: 292-293).

At a different level, it can also be seen how reality and the landscape was filtered by his large and deep culture. Greece was taken as the homeland of Gods, heroes, tritons and nymphs, positioned on fabulous rocks or swimming in the crystalline waters – and that mythical image configured the ideal pattern for his beloved Algarve (Cf. Alves, 2001). In his accounts and novels, the seaside is crowded with transfigured beings, half farmers, half fauns and nymphs, enabling him the vision of ancient divinities, such as Aphrodite and

Venus, swimming in the waters, allowing then the glimpse of pagan harmony, in a true pilgrimage of art and ecstasy. That is why so many mythological deviations are easy to find in his writings.

In his Algarve (Cf. Alves, 2001), he felt in himself the power of the Myth, and lived like a semi-god, surrounded by active and vigorous people, whose duty was to distract his spirit (Cf. Lopes, 1942: 289).

In this homology, and following his fancies, Myth was an inexhaustible source of inspiration and always possible to be updated: girls from the countryside undressing to swim recall nymphs by the water; fishermen watching them hidden in the bushes are compared to the fauns that persecute them (objectively this episode can even be seen as the modern translation of the myth of Sapho and Bilitis); the fight between herdsmen attain the dimensions of the heroes in the *Iliad*; the rude figure of Serafim is transformed into the wild Triton; Oedipus is the model for the young narrator that tells openly how his sexual initiation took place... and myth assumes the functions of a symbolic language that expresses what common words can not.

In this way, with the experience that twenty-five years of travels supplied him, Manuel Teixeira Gomes was able to create a literary work where the art of looking and watching is intensely connected with the noble skill of writing and expressing what he felt and recollected in the time of his exile. The Hellenic aestheticism tied to symbolist strategies become the tools used to expose how the Portuguese culture, having as a substrate the scenery of the writer's homeland in Algarve, is perfectly inserted into a superior cultural synthesis of the Mediterranean peoples, through their artistic manifestations, political events, historical confluence, fancy and imagination. In this way, Manuel Teixeira Gomes builds an identity of the Mediterranean culture, based on the dialog among the concerned peoples and on the ideal of tolerance, in spite of their deep diversity. Thus, he tries to establish connections not always easy to find among them, digresses from the architecture to music, from religion to everyday life, or even to the beauty of the human body. In the end, the Mediterranean may well be conceived, at least according the way he sees and expresses it, as the highest expression of his own utopia, of a man in love for mankind, for art and for the plenitude of existence that is to be found in the happiness and liberty of men.

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