

António Vieira's Empire of Word, Sea, and Sky

Vincent Barletta

In spite of the best efforts of modern researchers, much of António Vieira—whether by this name we refer directly to the man or point metonymically to his extensive and largely performative textual corpus—remains bathed in shadow. This darkness, the work of nearly four centuries of time, the vicissitudes of a life lived as much in Amazonian jungles as in European capitals, and more general problems involving the indeterminate nature of the linguistic sign, is by no means complete. Like a peculiar form of *chiaroscuro*, there do emerge small areas of light from so much shade and uncertainty, as though some piece of Vieira—a kind of authorial or, more accurately, oratorical presence residing latent in the text—were to appear to remind us of our inadequacy before the Word of God and the missionary project of His church.

The present introduction seeks to play a bit within the few fields of luminescence (as well as within the tense back-and-forth that exists between these and the oceans of darkness where almost nothing can be seen or shown with any certainty) that Vieira affords to us. I will first briefly examine Vieira's very subjective account of the events that took place immediately after his delivery of the "Sermon of Saint Anthony to the Fish" on June 13, 1654; of primary interest to this examination are the complex theories of language and verbal interaction—implicit and yet somehow always present, as if just below the surface—that Vieira develops within the various texts from which this account emerges. Having presented these theories, I will then turn to Fernando Pessoa's foundational twentieth-century reading of Vieira. This modern(ist) Vieira, separated from the light of revelation and Ignatian spirituality, is in many ways the Vieira that we have inherited and continue to engage at the beginning of

the twenty-first century, even as we labor now to separate ourselves from the ethical pitfalls of the millenaristic imperial framework within which Pessoa situates his predecessor.

AT SEA WITH WORDS AND THINGS

Three days after delivering his allegorical “Sermon of Saint Anthony to the Fish” to a bewildered and largely hostile audience of colonists assembled in the Igreja da Sé in São Luís do Maranhão, António Vieira set off for Lisbon. Vieira’s reasons for undertaking the dangerous sea voyage to Portugal in the summer of 1654 were relatively straightforward: he hoped to gain support at the Bragança court for his proposal to reform dramatically the structure of colonial government in Northern Brazil. A plan to consolidate the two captaincies general of Maranhão into one governorship (the idea being, as Vieira himself phrased it, that one thief would ultimately do less damage than two) was then being discussed, but Vieira had by early 1654 already thrown his weight behind the more revolutionary idea—expressed in the “Saint Anthony” sermon—that the indigenous population, as well as the evangelical mission that for Vieira justified Portuguese imperial expansion in the first place, would be better served if there were no colonial governors at all. He puts this point perhaps most succinctly in a letter to King João IV (1603-56) written on April 4 of that year:

Here there are men of good quality who can govern more transparently and also with more respect for authority. Even if they do work in their own interest, it is always with a great deal more moderation and, in any case, all of their profits remain here so that this land continues to grow in wealth. Should these men be granted estates, they would receive them as lords and not as leaseholders, as is the case with those that come here from Portugal. But, once the Indians are free from governors and this root—which is the principal and original sin of this province—is pulled up, all of the other sins that proceed from it will also cease, and God will have more reason to grant us mercy. (*Cartas do Brasil* 440)

As was the case with earlier colonial figures such as Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (1484-1566) and Vasco de Quiroga (1470-1565), Vieira’s sincere concern for the native population was mitigated only by the limitations of the Christian evangelical framework within which he worked and had been educated. It follows from this that his reference to “original sin” in

relation to the structure of colonial government in Northern Brazil should be understood as a complex declaration of both ethical and metaphysical principle. In strictly political terms, it should also not be passed over that Vieira's plan for native self-government at the regional level would effectively put the missionary work of the Jesuits at the very forefront of the Portuguese colonial enterprise in Brazil. As Thomas M. Cohen has argued, "Vieira's criticisms of Portuguese imperial and ecclesiastical institutions were deeply rooted in the pastoral thought of the Society of Jesus in general and of Manuel da Nóbrega, the founder of the Jesuit missions in Brazil, in particular" (2). In closing his April 4 letter to João IV, Vieira goes so far as to make his case for the Jesuits in an explicit and direct manner: "May Your Majesty free us [i.e., the Jesuit missions] once and for all from the petitions and claims of Your Majesty's ministers; because if we are not totally exempt from them, we will never be able to achieve the end for which we came—the conversion and salvation of souls—and it would be better for us to leave and focus solely on the comforting of our own souls" (*Cartas do Brasil* 440).

Whatever may have been the most important underlying motives for his petitions to the ailing Portuguese king (João IV, who suffered from acute gout, would be dead from renal failure less than two years after Vieira's arrival in Lisbon), Vieira set off for Lisbon on June 16 to help put these petitions into effect. He left behind him an extremely tense and dangerous situation in Maranhão, evidenced in large measure by the sharp content of the "Saint Anthony" sermon itself, as well as by his efforts to keep the details of his departure a closely guarded secret.

It took nearly five months for Vieira to cross the Atlantic and arrive in Lisbon. The principal cause for this long delay was a strong oceanic storm that struck Vieira's ship as it approached the Azores. Such storms were a relatively common occurrence in the Atlantic (underscoring the dangerous nature of these crossings and, as a result, the always precarious nature of colonial administration and commerce) and Vieira took the opportunity—in the middle of a sermon on Saint Theresa of Ávila—to convert his brush with death into a full-blown miracle narrative. Leaving implicit in the sermon the winds that were slowly tearing apart his ship and the waves that were by then coming over the gunwale (according to witness accounts, things had become so desperate that Vieira began to offer general absolution to the crew), Vieira describes his prayer to God and the guardian angels of the souls of the unconverted natives of Maranhão:

To whom had it ever happened, after his ship had turned over and everyone had been left hanging onto the broadside, that the ship remained still for the space of a quarter-hour, without the fury of the winds tearing it apart, without the force of the waves swamping it, and without the weight of the cargo and the water—from which the ship was half-submerged—sending it to the bottom? And to whom had it ever happened that after all this the ship should turn over yet again to right itself and allow back in all those that had been thrown outside? The angels of heaven, whose help I called upon at that time, are witnesses to this; and not all the angels, but only those responsible for the souls of the unconverted natives of Maranhão. “Guardian angels of the souls of Maranhão, remember that this vessel is on a mission to bring succor and salvation to those souls. Do now what you can and must do, not for the sake of we who do not deserve it, but for the sake of those helpless souls that are in your charge. Know that they are lost here today with us.” I spoke all this in a loud voice that was heard by all those present, and the worthiness of the cause compensated for the indignity of the orator. The angels set to work because God heard the prayer. And God could not help but hear it because it was the danger itself that spoke within it. God knows that no worldly interest, after I had come to know such interest and then leave it behind, would cause me to return to the sea except for the salvation of those poor treasures, each one of which is worth more than infinite worlds. And as the danger was undertaken for love of God and my neighbor, how could there not be security in the midst of so much danger? (Azevedo, *História de António Vieira* 1, 217)

In the end, the guardian angels of the unconverted natives of Maranhão sent along a Dutch pirate ship to rescue Vieira and his shipmates and transport them safely to the Azorean island of Graciosa (what could be saved of the ship’s cargo was transported to Holland to be sold). Vieira remained there for two months before proceeding to Terceira and then to São Miguel. On October 24, 1654, Vieira finally set off for Lisbon aboard an English merchant ship along with several other clerics and a cargo comprised mostly of songbirds. The ship passed through a series of tempests on its way to continental Portugal and Vieira, with his usual rhetorical élan, dedicates a section of his “Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (1655)” to a poetic description of the scene on the ship during these storms: “The birds sang because they lacked understanding; the heretics ridiculed us because they had no faith; and we who had both faith and understanding shouted to the heavens, struck our chests, and cried for our sins” (*António Vieira, O Chrysostomo português* 1, 469).

Vieira's various accounts of the dramatic maritime events that transpired just after his pronouncement of the "Sermon of Saint Anthony to the Fish" are significant in that they reveal many of the dominant features of his work as an author, orator, missionary, and historical figure. The foremost of these has to do with the implicit but by no means unsophisticated theory of language that informs Vieira's words and actions. Throughout his written work, Vieira consistently promotes the idea of a tight and complex correspondence between the verbal utterance and the objects of the world. This idea makes of textual exegesis and the sermon, as well as narrative itself, a practically endless commentary on God's created universe, as António J. Saraiva points out:

The equivalence between text and thing makes it so that any utterance is but a commentary on the inexhaustible verbal reality constituted by all that exists. For this reason, the term "lexicological discourse" defines skillful discourse very well. In fact, the rules followed by signifiers that do not possess more than a biunivocal relation with their signifieds are, at their core, those that correspond to grammar, lexicology, and rhetoric. Logical relations and those that stem from scientific laws are only applied to signifieds. It is for this reason, as we have seen, that classical discourse presupposes a definite distinction between text and what we call concept or "reality." If this distinction is abolished, what remains are only grammatical relations between words and the sets that they constitute. Commentary is verbal: it is the commentary of that great text to which everything that exists is reduced. For a skillful author such as Father António Vieira, everything is either Word or Speech. But Speech has no boundaries. (*O discurso engenhoso* 89)

Following this line of thought, Vieira's narrative account of the oceanic storms in both his "Sermon on Saint Theresa" and "Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Lent (1655)" constitute glosses on the *logos* presented at the beginning of the Gospel of John (*en archê ên 'o logos*) and so themselves explicitly possess literal, allegorical, anagogical, and moral levels of meaning. Beyond these more or less traditional Christian modes of interpretation corresponding to what Dante Alighieri describes as "polysemantic" discourse in his letter to Can Grande, Vieira's sermonic narratives of personal experience also possess the much more striking pragmatic capacity to forge relations of contiguity between the verbal sign and the context of utterance. In fact, due to the complex temporal relations that permeate and inform Vieira's theory of verbal discourse (and interaction) with

respect to the revealed word and created world of God, these narratives also work to forge relations of contiguity and co-presence with the context of the events recounted.

The wrecked ship at sea, which Josiah Blackmore has singled out as a fundamental trope for the Portuguese Empire during the seventeenth century, becomes for Vieira at once (and the multi-layered simultaneity of this image is a central aspect of his poetics) a commentary on colonial politics, the Counter-Reformation, the Jesuits' missionary project in Brazil, the torment of the human soul, and the role of language and speech within God's created universe. If words and things exist and operate on essentially the same plane for Vieira, it follows—in practice, in any case—that they bleed into one another to fashion a potentially endless and pragmatically charged proliferation of signification and praxis. It is, in fact, the perceived unmooring of rhetorical devices from their scriptural (and thus “real”) harbor that so vexes Vieira in his famous “Sermon for Sexagesima,” in which he attacks the Dominican preachers of the Portuguese court for their empty rhetorical flourishes. As Alcir Pécora puts it, for Vieira “the detachment of rhetoric from the theological-missionary project presupposed in analogy is intolerable. Absent this decorum and with form granted autonomy outside of reason, the public's applause constitutes a condemnation, given that it celebrates a ‘false testimony’ of God's word” (19). Such “false testimony” not only drifts off into artificiality but also, at a more basic level, sinfully posits for Vieira the very possibility of a breach between utterance and God's word.

From an anthropological perspective, the theory of verbal interaction that Vieira develops in his “Sermon for Sexagesima,” as well as in his “Sermon of Saint Anthony to the Fish” and others texts, provides surprisingly explicit and agentic roles for both speaker and audience (it in fact foregrounds the role of the audience, both piscine and human) and situates the verbal utterance within frameworks that are at once social, contingent, and, perhaps paradoxically, eternal. And all of this would be complex enough were it not also formed out of and developed to work within the settings of violent colonial discourse and practice that were central to the shaping of Vieira's life and work. As much as Vieira's intellect and rhetorical genius pull modern readers in the direction of various forms of decontextualized analysis, such explicitly interactional frameworks serve to remind us that it is ultimately within these settings that we must approach his written work, as well as the active reception of that work during the whole of the seventeenth century.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY TREMBLINGS

Fernando Pessoa, writing in the third cycle of his quasi-epic *Message*, famously effects a strange sort of poetic apotheosis for António Vieira: “Heaven fills the blue with stars and is majestic / He, who had fame and now has glory / Emperor of the Portuguese language / Was to us a heaven as well” (*Mensagem* 108). It should be pointed out that in referring to Vieira as the “Emperor of the Portuguese language” Pessoa is presenting something much deeper than a two-dimensional metaphor of Vieira as the greatest of Portuguese prose writers—a form of poetico-monarchic appellation more suited, in any case, to popular musicians and athletes (e.g., Amália Rodrigues as the “Queen of Fado,” Vicente “el Rey” Fernández, and George Herman Ruth as the “Sultan of Swat”). For Pessoa, Vieira was not only a great writer but also, in a very concrete sense, the high sovereign of a realm of existential authenticity and sublime—albeit linguistically mediated—reason in which Pessoa (if Bernardo Soares is to be believed) fervently desired permanently to reside. This, we might fairly believe, is much of what Pessoa (as Soares) means when in the *The Book of Disquiet* he declares: “My nation [*pátria*] is the Portuguese language” (225). This statement, which has found its way into everything from official state documents to language course syllabi, is no love letter to the Portuguese language (or, *a fortiori*, to Portugal); rather, Pessoa is engaged in the much deeper and more ambitious project of elaborating something analogous to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of language and placing Vieira at the very center of a system of expression, perception, and being-in-the-world. As dramatic and even reductive as such a reading might seem, it is not too much of a stretch to rephrase Pessoa’s declaration of linguistic citizenship and Vieira’s sovereignty over that domain as a reworking of Heidegger’s famous maxim regarding language as the house of being. As Pessoa might have put it: “Language is the house of Being, the Portuguese language is the house of *my* Being, and to that house António Vieira holds the key.”

In speaking of Vieira in this way, Pessoa is in large measure releasing Vieira’s own vision of empire—a spiritual, ecumenical, and ultimately utopian one, with Portugal at its evangelical center—from its Christian and Neo-Scholastic moorings so that it might float through the darker waters of Pessoa’s idiosyncratic modernism. Pessoa’s complex re-reading of Vieira’s theories regarding the central place of Portugal in what might be understood as something like a Catholic caliphate with the missionizing church (and the Jesuits) at its center, a utopian “Fifth Empire” built upon more

spiritual grounds than its Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman predecessors, is beyond the scope of this introduction. What does interest us here, however, is the place of Vieira's *oeuvre* within Pessoa's idiosyncratic form of nationalism and what it might mean now for our own readings of Vieira.

In the first place, the basis for Pessoa's posthumous coronation of Vieira is at once reasoned and deeply emotional. In essence, Pessoa invoked and altered Vieira's vision of spiritual empire and rooted it in the only sort of remembrance of things past that mattered to him (at least in his Soaresian avatar): those revolving around language and literature. Writing once again in the *Book of Disquiet*, Pessoa speaks of his first experience with Vieira's prose:

I weep over nothing that life brings or takes away, but there are pages of prose that have made me cry. I remember, as clearly as what's before my eyes, the night when as a child I read for the first time, in an anthology, Vieira's famous passage on King Solomon: "Solomon built a palace..." And I read all the way to the end, trembling and confused. Then I broke into joyful tears—tears such as no real joy could make me cry, nor any of life's sorrows ever make me shed. That hieratic movement of our clear majestic language, that expression of ideas in inevitable words, like water that flows because there's a slope, that vocalic marvel in which the sounds are ideal colors—all of this instinctively seized me like an overwhelming political emotion. And I cried. Remembering it today, I still cry. Not out of nostalgia for my childhood, which I don't miss, but because of nostalgia for the emotion of that moment, because of a heartfelt regret that I can no longer read for the first time that great symphonic certitude. (224-25)

Pessoa's sadness here is not triggered by Vieira's prose per se but rather by his inability ever to return to his first experience of it. In some sense, he has been relegated—through and due to time—to a relation of vicariousness with his own former self and, more tragically, with Vieira's revelational poetics. In a very practical sense, Pessoa continues to have contact with the "symphonic certitude" of Vieira's prose; however, he can only look back through the half-light of his memories to gain access, and then only partial access, to the powerful feelings—and inner movement, as though a key had turned in a lock and a door opened—that this prose first engendered. Like Saint Augustine shaken by the story of the life of Saint Anthony (of Egypt, not Lisbon) or reading himself to Christian conversion in a Milanese garden, Pessoa (once again, as Soares) offers his own sort of conversion

narrative, with Vieira—and Vieira’s Portuguese prose—at its very center.

Philosophical considerations aside, in playing a poetic Pope Leo III to Vieira’s Charlemagne, Pessoa places the seventeenth-century Jesuit priest at the pinnacle of a twentieth-century, openly millenaristic vision of empire built not upon military conquest and dominion, but upon the delicate foundation of the Portuguese language itself. Pessoa by no means developed this vision of Vieira and empire *ex nihilo*. Saraiva has described in great detail the “religious theory of Portuguese worldwide expansion” upon which much of Vieira’s writing is based, while also calling attention to the important place that the sixteenth-century poet, cobbler, and would-be Old Testament prophet Gonçalo Annes Bandarra (who, like Vieira, had been brought before the Portuguese Inquisition) has within Vieira’s prophetic vision of empire in general (“António Vieira” 32). Many of Vieira’s earlier sermons in defense of the Portuguese restoration and the ascension of the Bragança dynasty, in fact, involve a subtle redirection of the messianic discourse of *Sebastianismo* that leaves in place much of the structure of this diffuse and popular movement.

For Anglophone readers in the early twenty-first century, aware of the ominous postcolonial implications of Vieira’s evangelical and linguistic vision (Antonio de Nebrija’s late fifteenth-century maxim regarding language as the “companion of empire” cannot but ring in our ears), Pessoa’s coronation of Vieira can justifiably conjure up a great deal of ambivalence and even Conradian horror. Phillip Rothwell, in a book-length analysis of *lusofonia*, postcolonialism, and nationalism in the novels of the Mozambican novelist Mia Couto, makes this point about Vieira and Pessoa’s linguistico-imperial-messianic vision even more directly:

At the time [Pessoa] was writing, his attitude was remarkably progressive. However, in a postindependence era, his influence on the mindset of lusophone intellectuals becomes highly problematic because language, as Ngugi Wa Thiong’o points out, is one of the principal weapons of neocolonialism. If the language is deemed to be the homeland, a claim is made for metropolitan jurisdiction over the literary output of a diverse set of countries that happen to use the language in the postindependence era. (48)

This statement is not necessarily meant as any sort of indictment of postcolonial organizations such as the Comunidades dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (partial sponsors of the recently constructed Museum of the Portuguese Language in São Paulo), but it does problematize the some-

what romantic notion, even if seemingly liberating in its earliest enunciation, of the Portuguese language as a shared homeland for Africans, Brazilians, and Europeans alike. One imagines, at least, that if the guardian angels of the unconverted natives of Maranhão have any say in the matter, then a much more secure and less subjunctive homeland will find its way into being, at least for the indigenous communities of Northern Brazil. In any case, there can be little doubt that we are due for a renewed appreciation of Vieira's complex but still relevant place within the broader debate regarding the legal rights of the indigenous populations of Brazil and the Americas as a whole.

We would do well, also, to dig deeply into the “symphonic certitude” of Vieira's writing as we strive to understand the processes by which both Portugal and Brazil became independent, if poorly-defined nations (the former from the Habsburg dynasty in 1640 and the latter from Portugal in 1822) and then clawed their way toward modernity. Vieira's sermons echo still through the streets of Lisbon, even if no one but the mercury-addled rockling and cod of the Tagus estuary hear them. And in the Brazilian state of Maranhão, where the indigenous community has been reduced to less than one percent of the total population, Vieira's entire textual output takes on the calamitous tone of Old Testament prophecy. One might say that if it fell to Bartolomé de las Casas simply to make known the atrocities then occurring in Castile's American colonies, it was Vieira's much sadder fate to see the future with his own eyes and, Cassandra-like, have his warnings and visions fall on deaf ears.

Works Cited

- Azevedo, J. Lúcio de. *História de António Vieira*. 2 vols. Lisbon: Clássica, 1992. Print.
- Blackmore, Josiah. *Manifest Perdition: Shipwreck Narrative and the Disruption of Empire*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. Print.
- Cohen, Thomas M. *The Fire of Tongues: António Vieira and the Missionary Church in Brazil and Portugal*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- Pécora, Alcir. “Sermões: O modelo sacramental.” *António Vieira: Sermões*. Ed. Alcir Pécora. São Paulo: Hedra, 2000. 11-25. Print.
- Pessoa, Fernando. *Book of Disquiet*. Ed. and trans. Richard Zenith. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- . *Mensagem*. Ed. Caio Gagliardi. São Paulo: Hedra, 2007. Print.
- Rothwell, Phillip. *A Postmodern Nationalist: Truth, Orality, and Gender in the Work of Mia Couto*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2004. Print.
- Saraiva, António José. “António Vieira, Menasseh ben Israel et le Cinquième Empire.” *Studia*

Rosenthaliana 6 (1972): 25-56. Print.

———. *O discurso engenheiro: Estudos sobre Vieira e outros autores barrocos*. Lisbon: Perspectiva, 1980. Print.

Vieira, Antônio. *Cartas do Brasil*. Ed. João Adolfo Hansen. São Paulo: Hedra, 2003. Print.

———. *Antônio Vieira, O Chrysostomo portuguez: ou, O padre Antonio Vieira da Companhia de Jesus; Num ensaio de eloquencia compilado dos seus sermões segundo os princípios da Oratoria Sagrada*. 2 vols. Ed. Antonio Honorati. Lisbon: Mattos Moreira, 1878. Print.