

Ruth Rosengarten

## Love and Authority in the Work of Paula Rego: Narrating the Family Romance

### Introduction

For many viewers, to think of the artist Paula Rego's work is to conjure an inevitable pair of words: narrative, and Portugal. 'To paint,' begins John McEwen's monograph, 'Paula Rego must have a story; and her favourite way of telling a story is to paint' (McEwen: 2006: 16). 'The older Rego gets, the more stridently and obviously Portuguese her art becomes' writes Waldemar Januszczak (Januszczak: 2001: 6), without properly explaining what a 'Portuguese art' might be. The ends to which painting may use storytelling, and the sustained significance of being a native of Portugal are, indeed, two issues that any serious study of Rego's work has to tackle. It is Rego herself who reinforced this portrayal of her art, not only because her work embodies both a narrative impulse and a sense of ownership of Portuguese iconography, but also because she variously rehearses and reiterates these concerns in the way she verbally reconstructs her working process: on the one hand 'I can only work things out through stories' (Rego: in conversation), and on the other 'everything I paint comes from Portugal' (Pinharanda and Melo: 1987: 14).

While the conflation of Portugueseness and narrative has at times contributed to their mutual mythification and served to obscure the more challenging ambiguities in Rego's work, it also, like all clichés, harbours a truth. Yet the most enlightening comments on Rego's work – sometimes, though not always, her own – underline the self-subversive aspects of story-telling,<sup>i</sup> or the entirely subjective contours of 'Portugal:' when asked what it was like to return to Portugal from London in the 1950s, she quipped: 'Portugal was my house in the country' (Melo, 1988: 70).

Born in Portugal in 1935 to anglophile parents, Paula Rego studied fine arts at the Slade School of Art in London between 1952 and 1956. Here she met the man she was to marry: the artist Victor Willing. For the following two decades, together with Willing and their children, Rego divided her time between England and Portugal. Living and working in London definitively since 1976, and steeped in

the traditions of Western art, Rego continues to feel most at home when making images that in one way or another hark back to her childhood in Portugal. That 'Portugal' of her youth is filtered through memory, fabulation and political concerns, where the artist's own narrations of self play a significant role: narrations that underline the fetishistic dimensions of autobiography, its valuation of the minute and the graspable.<sup>ii</sup> Explicitly mimetic since the 1980s, Rego's work links subjectivity itself to a vivid and almost ethnographically specific Portuguese iconography, probing the visual culture that informed her childhood; asking how a turn of phrase in the Portuguese language might be performed as image; and exploring how the articulation of 'Portugueseness' and 'Englishness' might be constituted visually.

But it is above all in its many allusions to the *Estado Novo* – the authoritarian New State that, under António de Oliveira Salazar, held Portugal in its grip between 1933 and 1974<sup>iii</sup> – that Rego most consistently evokes 'Portugueseness': evokes it as both pastness and as trace, an indexical, physical vestige. But the past, in Rego's work, is not only a burden borne in the present: arguably, its very existence is elicited by, and projected from, present perception, as if to say: 'I remember it when I see it,' or 'I recognise it as I make it.'

Crucially, too, where iteration brings into focus something hidden but not entirely forgotten, Rego invokes not only the convoluted routes of historiography, but also the circuitous chronologies that inform the encounter between analyst and analysand in the scene of psychoanalysis. Such an encounter between past and present goes by the name of transference, a projection of affect from patient to analyst that brings to light an inchoate past. In their unfolding, the narratives brought into the analytic arena animate an anteriority immersed in immediacy, where current action stands in the place of a muffled memory. Rego's use of memory might gladly suffer the transference analogy: for her, the remembrance of political oppression is not only stirred by her probing of current formations of authority structuring private life and organising the home. It is also realised by a concrete and material exploration of homely motifs in the present tense, from the standpoint, in other words, of the contemporary. The revived – because pictorially performed – recollection of a political past becomes, in her hands, a vehicle for the exploration of the dynamics of authority framed by the home. And contrariwise, despotic power, while scaled down and mocked as that of the domestic tyrant or play-yard bully, nevertheless remains politicised.

The home in this context is not a prosthesis of the enveloping maternal body. It is, rather, the dwelling place of strategy and intrigue: an arena in which boundaries are delineated, negotiated, re-drawn, policed. If, for Freud, the uncanny – the *unheimlich* – is the name for everything that is unremembered but not forgotten, that ought to have remained secret and hidden but that has,

instead, come to light, then unnervingly, its opposite, the *heimlich* or homely is the condition in which all that is secret and hidden must persist so. The homely is the breeding place of secrets. And with secrets come alliances, collusions. Prototype to all subsequent triangles, the parents-child threesome, in other words, is nothing short of politics. Concealment and disclosure, sanction and reward, coercion and betrayal: these are plotted in the home and their intertwinement and articulation map the subject's relation to its primary caretakers, and via them, more broadly and abstractly to both love and authority. Crucially, since the object of love gains empowerment through the possibility for withdrawal (and this is how the object of love holds the subject to ransom), love and authority are ineluctably intertwined, rendering the loving subject always enthralled, by definition subjected. (Throughout this book, I use the term 'object' in the psychoanalytic sense, as the person or thing through which an instinct aims to be satisfied, as the recipient of the subject's fantasies, actions or desires.)

Constituting the backbone of this book, the relationship between love and authority links the public arena of history and politics to the private realm of domesticity. It is a relationship that, in Rego's work, plays itself out upon the body. The body not only mediates inside and outside, subject and world, but is also the site of their mutual impact. Concomitantly, in the home, Rego's figures also stage a political drama. Here, we see the staging of the relationship of subordinates to superiors, a relationship that, in Rego's work, paradoxically both endorses and reverses traditional gender roles. Conversely, the political finds its most apposite setting in the intimate relationship between two or three people. So in the reprises – always idiosyncratically transformed – of stories from Portuguese history, from folklore, or literature, Rego's art constantly rephrases a private question: what does it mean to love? And how does this adherence to an-Other form and affect the subject? What is it to be submissive or subversive, obedient or rebellious: as a citizen, as a mother or daughter, a wife or lover – and also as an artist? The question is an important one, yet the way it is phrased is, perhaps, specious. For to separate these roles is merely to schematise the overlapping and interweaving positions and forms of agency that any subject assumes, and it is their mutuality, the complex negotiations between them, that Rego's work powerfully embodies.

And so it is that while many of Rego's are staged in a domestic interior, the studio itself, more or less disguised, sets the scene for a considerable number of images, particularly from the mid 1990s on, when drawing directly from the model became crucial to the artist. Importantly, several paintings thematise the making of art, the labour in the studio, as a viable alternative to the family romance. From *Time – Past and Present* and *Joseph's Dream* (1990), through *The Artist in her Studio* (1993), to *Martha, Mary and Mary Magdalene* (1998) and *Border Patrol: Self Portrait with Lila, Reflection and*

Ana (2004), they posit production in the studio through the agency of a robust, generative female body. Such characterisation sets itself up in opposition to the male gendering of the painter's body in the canon of Western painting, signaling the equivalence between Culture and masculinity. But it also pits itself against twin ideals of the female body within that same canonicity: either as the fetishistic redress of a lack (she must appease even as she threatens), or as a vehicle of genealogical reproduction, borne out especially in the traditional iconography of the Madonna and Child. Both ideals had for centuries informed traditional representations of women, pandering to male anxieties of loss of mastery: the first by disavowing loss, the second by guaranteeing continuity.

As an imperative of patriarchal succession, the conflation of femininity with reproduction has proved useful to authoritarian regimes. The ideology of Nazism lent support to the formal, institutional and military power of men, while women were idealised as the bearers of more men. In the droll words of Claudia Koonz, 'the ideal Nazi man was a fighter; the ideal Nazi woman, his mother' (Koonz, 1977: 447). In Fascist ideology too, the cult of virile masculinity laid emphasis on the symbolic primacy of maternity as the vehicle of its own perpetuation. Maternity, then, was not only naturalised as the sine qua non of womanhood, but also served as the incubator of ideology itself, spawning an 'epidemic of familiarism', where the proverbial Angel in the House served as a 'link between patriarchy and fascist tyranny' (Macciocchi, 1979: 73). If one of the responsibilities of the state was to safeguard the family as a source of racial and social conservation, the family in turn served as a blueprint for the nation itself. As in Fascism, for the *Estado Novo*, the family, hierarchically structured around the moral authority of the father, operated as the seat of transmission and cohesion of the larger social unit. While it was within the bounds of the family that the symbolic and institutional power of paternity was privately embodied, it was also through the support of wide ranging social institutions (legal, educational, medical, religious, technological and so forth) that the actual father came to approximate the symbolic father and that paternal and political power became mutually representative. It is just such authority that Rego satirises and avenges in her political works of the late 1950s and 1960s, or in the tableaux of domestic revenge of the early 1980s.

While this relation of the female subject to male/paternal authority suggests that Rego might idealise maternity, even the most casual perusal of her work reveals ambivalence towards motherhood, figured not as the 'connivance' between a girl and her mother,<sup>iv</sup> but as the power to destroy. Indeed, the annihilating effectiveness of maternal power is more prevalent in Rego's work than any bond of feminine complicity. Whether across the generations or within them, women are as often as not competitors: the *Dancing Ostriches from Disney's 'Fantasia'* (1995) are preening and prancing, vying for the attention of men, while *Snow White and her Stepmother* (1995) are more

explicitly sexual adversaries. In the vindictiveness with which girls treat their canine custody in works of the mid 1980s, Rego not only exposes the imprinting of the maternal bond as the prototype for other attachments, but also explores the possibilities of aggression underpinning acts of nurturing. In the six works constituting the *Girl and Dog* series of 1984, the dog is an infantilised invalid. His ductile, passive body is cradled and supported; he is spoon-fed, exercised, shaved; medicine is administered. The vitality of the nursing figure is clearly empowering. The girl – in effect a little woman – is practical and kind, but she also delights in the delicious, collapsing weight of the dog/man/child. Disgust and anger lurk behind her manifest disposition of patience and compassion. The dog extending his neck to the shaving blade is exposed and vulnerable, at the mercy of his carer's clemency. For her part, she is the scarcely disguised bearer of an aggression whose *modus operandi*, as Maria Manuel Lisboa observes, 'is the simulacrum of a variety of stereotypical female nurturing roles', transforming the acts of nursing, feeding and shaving into 'preludes to murder' (Lisboa, 2003: 38).

The murder underlying family plots and the love stories that succeed them is clearly and famously articulated in Freud's formulation of the Oedipus complex. And it is Oedipus that structures Rego's explorations of the mutual imbrication of love and authority. Considering the series of four paintings constituting the *Snow White* series (1995), Fiona Bradley observes:

Rego's re-telling of the story is a variant on the story of Oedipus as enshrined in Sigmund Freud's identification of the Oedipus complex as a significant stage in the psycho-sexual development of an individual. [. . .] Rego investigates a female variant of Freud's hypothesis, the series examining, as do many of her earlier family narrative paintings, the struggle between the women of a family for the sexual attention of the male. A chain of women striving for recognition and attention from their father/husband links together much of Rego's work (Bradley, 2002: 79).

The Oedipus narrative is, as I shall attempt to show, profoundly embedded in the narrative structuring of Rego's work. Sophocles' drama served Freud and his followers not only as a paradigm for familial relations, but also as a prototype of how the subject's desire is engendered. For many feminists, however, adhering to the concept of Oedipalisation is an ideological position that would imply an acceptance of the patriarchal family: an acceptance through which the female might find herself crippled by a sense of inadequacy unless she adhered to the procreative model and aligned herself with 'the qualities of passivity, exhibitionism, and masochism which make her the perfect "match" for the properly Oedipalized male subject' (Silverman 1983:143). In line with such feminist readings of Oedipus – and it is important to note here at the outset that in fact it is perfectly possible to be a feminist *and* to acknowledge the process of Oedipalisation – Rego's numerous exegetes have

repeatedly stressed that underpinning her work is an intention 'not so much to reform as to wreak havoc' at the very 'heart of the established order' (Lisboa, 2003: 92), undermining its patriarchal tenets, thereby disqualifying the Oedipal model that structures relations of kinship and affinity.

I shall, in the following chapters, argue that rather than unalloyed subversion, Rego's work evinces an ambiguity with regard to the implications of patriarchy and the position of the female subject within it. My use of the term 'patriarchy' refers to the hierarchic system that structures, and indeed defines, the Symbolic Order as we know it. As a pay-off for anatomical difference, patriarchy safeguards the father's purchase on his offspring by consigning to it a symbolic value. But more concretely, it is the system of transmission of name and property – and with them, of symbolic capital – along the male line.

## Notes

- 1 See for instance Marina Warner's formulation that Rego's narratives spring from 'the *camera lucida* of the mind's eye,' (Warner, 2003: 8) or Memory Holloway's idea that in becoming 'a way of externalizing thought by making it material,' narrative for Rego is, in effect, an epistemology (Holloway, 1999: 7). Both Warner and Holloway remove 'narrative' from the empirical moorings that, in many other writings on the artist, bind it to the lived life.
- 2 Michael Sheringham has elaborated this useful analogy between autobiography and fetishism, where the small and tangible detail 'which can be dominated and possessed' stands as a substitute for an 'elusive and intangible object of desire' (Sheringham, 1991: 6).
- 3 The date for the start of the *Estado Novo* varies in different histories. The volume dealing with the regime in José Mattoso's substantial history of Portugal begins with the military coup of 1926 and ends in 1974 (Rosas, 1994). Some historians mark as the starting point 1928 – the year Salazar became Secretary of Finance; others say 1932, the year he took office as leader. 1933 is the year in which the regime was consecrated in a new constitution.
- 4 Julia Kristeva discusses the 'connivance of the young girl and her mother' as foundational of female subjectivity (Kristeva, 1979: 204-5). Similarly, Nancy Chodorow discusses the periods of prolonged symbiosis between mothers and daughters, whom they do not perceive as clearly Other (Chodorow, 1999: 109).
- 5 With the exception of Maria Manuel Lisboa's monograph (Lisboa, 2003), Rego has not been the object of any published, book-length academic study. Coming to Rego's work from the field of literary studies, Lisboa's approach is avowedly rooted in the theory and practice of New Historicism, seeking to situate Rego's work in relation to the historical forces that shaped it. Memory Holloway (Holloway, 1999 and 2001-2) and Ana Gabriela Macedo (Macedo 1999a and 1999b; 2000; 2001a, 2001b and 2001c; 2003a and 2003b; 2004) have dedicated

important analytic articles to the artist. The unpublished MA thesis of Ana Nolasco (Nolasco, 2004) is a significant contribution to the field, while Teresa Capucho's unpublished MA thesis (Capucho, 2001) focuses specifically on the drawings. John McEwen's monograph (McEwen, 2006) is an important generalised reference work, and Marco Livingstone has written on Rego's work with sensitivity and intelligence (Livingstone 2004, 2007, 2008). Catalogue essays and reviews in the popular press abound. One of Rego's most astute early critics was her late husband, Victor Willing (Willing, 1971, 1983).