

MAU TEMPO NO CANAL:
Woman, Nature, Plague and War

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ABSTRACT

This study invites readers to revisit *Mau Tempo no Canal* (MTC), the masterpiece of Azorean fiction written by Vitorino Nemésio and thought to be the greatest Portuguese novel of the 20th century, by considering the author's vision, the Azorean worldview, and feminist and ecocritical literary analyses, which highlight gender issues and perspectives on nature, two pressing matters at present and, though camouflaged at the time, during the period recreated in the text. MTC was published in 1944, 80 years ago, but it portrays the Azores of 100 years ago since the story takes place from 1917-1919. One century later, careful reflection reveals parallelisms between that period and the present. Like today, it was a time threatened by plague and war; like now, it was an era of profound social change and great instability coinciding with the first decades of a new century. Finally, this study considers these parallelisms, raising issues worthy of further attention.



Cover, 1st Edition, *Mau Tempo no Canal*, 1944.*

* Given the diverse pagination of the editions of *Mau Tempo no Canal* that are still in use today, the references to citations made in this study indicate first the chapter number – in the Roman numerals that Nemésio used in the novel itself – and then the respective page number. Example: (XXVII: 320).

THE WOMAN

Considered by many to be the model for analyzing Vitorino Nemésio's work, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, when critics gave greater attention to the Azorean author's opus, *Mau Tempo no Canal*, the book *Vitorino Nemésio: A obra e o homem*, by José Martins Garcia, came out in 1978. Obsessed with the lost-island metaphor and the return to mythic time, when analyzing the main character of Margarida in *Mau Tempo no Canal* (MTC), Martins Garcia first discards any similarities to reality, ascertaining that Margarida "isn't merely a young woman, with the sensibilities, frustrations, and dreams corresponding to a social class and time. She is much more." Having created suspense, he goes on to explain that she "is «unreality» itself with the visage of reality... as far as «realism» is concerned – as far as any rigorous correspondence between the milieu and the human being there produced – Margarida *doesn't exist*. In fact, she is as real as the lost island supposedly discovered by Fernão Dulmo" (85), the young woman's legendary ancestor. (Italics in the original. This and all translations that follow are mine.) It's on the next page that Martins Garcia reaches his discursive climax, saying that Margarida "is the «goddess» made in the image of the «god» who created the book" (86). *Ipsis verbis!*

Inherently errant because of its excessive enthusiasm, even for the time, this type of discourse was, itself, fanciful and exaggerated. However, the impact of this strain of analysis was so prominent that the real situation of women in Azorean society at the time, which Nemésio so expertly depicts, was relegated to the sidelines, even though some voices did refer to the significance of women in Nemésio's fiction (See Urbano Bettencourt.) and the central role of Margarida in MTC (See Lepecki.), and even though Martins Garcia himself, in the Introduction he wrote for the 7th edition of MTC, published in 1994 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the original publication in 1944, did highlight Nemésio's capable handling of the narrative voice "filtered" through Margarida's persona in the following manner:

The way the narrative voice is complicit with Margarida in this novel is the process whereby Nemésio combined his full capacity for capturing outer and inner reality, as well as his artistic mastery of the word. Indeed, Margarida is the character that understands most fully the island ambiance, the effects of atmospheric pressure on one's nerves, the impact of routine on anxiety, the impulses and the limits of evasion, of dreaming and daydreaming, as well as the condition of women, class prejudices, the decadent conceits of casts, the dilemma between the search for happiness and frustration (15-16).

In that year of 1994, in the review *Insulana: Commemorating 50 Years of Mau Tempo no Canal*, and again in 1998, in the compilation *Vitorino Nemésio: Twenty Years After* (the author's death), I presented the study "A pérola nemesiana" (Nemésio's Pearl) on the feminist

perspective implicit in the critical stance conveyed throughout the novel by Margarida, “the soul of the book” as Nemésio himself called her in an interview published in *Correio dos Açores* just after this monumental work appeared. Given the importance of this character, and of the novel itself, in 2015 I published a study of MTC done through text mining technology in the book *Mineração de Texto em Humanidades (Text Mining in Humanities)*, published by the History Center of the University of Lisbon. That same year, but at the University of Porto, I presented the study “Margarida in the novel *Mau Tempo no Canal: A Feminist and Ecocritical Analysis*” at the *International Conference: Voice and Choice of Women*. Then, in 2016, the study “Perspectives on the Nature of the Azores: An Ecocritical and Feminist Analysis” came out in the anthology *Percursos da História: Studies In Memoriam of Fátima Sequeira Dias (Pathways in History: Studies in Memory of Fátima Sequeira Dias.)* (All are available at rosasimas.com). Now, three decades after my first publication on Margarida, I return to the topic in this study, by expanding on previous feminist and ecocritical work (See also Guerra *et al*, 2015) and ending with a brief comparison of the situation in the Azores 100 years ago and the present time, both eras beginning a new century traumatized by plague and war.

Since names are so important, let’s begin with Margarida’s name. Lovingly called “Bidinha” at home and “pérola da Horta” (Pearl of Horta) in the town, *Margarida Terra Clark Dulmo* (XXXI: 361) is a name that Nemésio crafted with care: *Dulmo* evokes her illustrious ancestors and the heirs of an aristocracy in rapid decline; *Clark* belongs to a medium-high bourgeoisie and mercantile class in slow but sure ascent; and *Terra* (land, soil, birthplace), which she inherited from the grandmother who left her the enigmatic serpent ring (which lost one of its emerald eyes), evokes the soil of the Azores and the primordial lost island. Ahead of these inherited surnames, comes her given name: *Margarida*. Used in Portuguese to name a flower, (daisy** in English), the word *margarida* comes from *margarita*, which means “pearl” in Latin. Though considered a fine jewel, the pearl results from a painful process for the oyster, which is forced to react to foreign matter (sand, dirt) that has invaded its shell, much as Margarida, the so-called “Pearl of Horta,” is forced to react against the norms and practices of an oppressive patriarchal society that insists on making life difficult for her. Symbolic in nature, the notoriously deep and choppy Channel between Pico-Faial, locus of the *mau tempo* (stormy weather) in the title of the book, is a metaphor for the dissatisfaction and defiance she feels, i.e., for the existential *mau tempo* that makes her struggle and suffer as the story unfolds.

**A minor character in MTC is an English woman named Daisy Warren, probably an example of a play-on-words for Nemésio, who was a master linguist. Indeed, language is yet another possible approach, among many others, for analyzing MTC, a magnum opus like *Moby Dick*.

“Raised on the milk of a goat with long yellow fur and a stiff udder” (II: 25), Margarida is a twenty-year-old woman who is full of energy and life. On a boat, she knows how to go down steps “like a sailor” (XXVIII: 319) and, in life, she is searching for her own way within a closed, traditional society based on misogynistic codes of conduct. As such, Margarida is looked upon with reservations. According to her childhood friend, Damião Serpa, she is “the liveliest but the hardest girl to please in our town” (XXXVII: 459); in the eyes of her future father-in-law, the Baron of Urzelina, “she’s a bit flighty” (XXXIV: 399 & XXXVII: 472) and, to her own mother, she’s prone to having flights “of whimsy” (XXIV: 288 & XXXVII: 470).

Margarida herself also assumes a critical stance, but against the values of her society. She censors the pretense and phoniness while, at Mass: “Her mother was two steps from her, leaning on a *prie-Dieu*. Margarida thought of the foolishness of the name given to a kneeler at home. Half of her things had such false names” (XIII: 167-8). She denounces “the grand lords of the islands” who “did and made whatever they wanted”, including bastards (XXXI: 365), and critiques societies that oppress women, forcing them into marriage: “In a land where only inheritance and business count, what’s a girl worth? I’m a kind of property up for auction. I’ve already had my first communion and my confirmation. Now it’s getting on time for the orange blossoms” (XIV: 174-5). In this novel, which uses the term “patriarchal table” twice – first, in the context of the rural communities of Pico Island (XXX: 343) and, later, in the lordly ambience of the Baron’s manor in São Jorge Island (XXXV: 413) – the disparity between what Margarida wants and what society demands of her is so immense that, in order to save her father from financial ruin, she ends up marrying André Barreto, the son of the Baron of Urzelina. Before the marriage, however, when she ends up in São Jorge after an unexpected whaling experience, with no clothes to change into, and her future mother-in-law, the Baroness, has her try on the daughter Clarinha’s blouse, Margarida provokes “a big rip in the back” with a “quick, dry sound of revolt similar to the cry of a skin forced upon another” (XXXI: 356).

Soon after marrying the future Baron, Margarida runs into her friend Damião at the very end of the novel. While they talk, she considers the variants of love – of a daughter, of a friend, of one’s birthplace – and ends with a dire portrait of her situation as a married woman and a bitter, albeit realistic, evaluation of the impact of romantic love:

Being a married woman is like being one of those sailboats left to rot in Horta Harbor; or, on a tragic note, like a corpse that finds eternal peace in a family grave... Of course, whether spouses feel that kind of life-or-death-love that silly boys and girls believe in is really beside the point and each one’s business, but it doesn’t last much... like a burlap wick soaked in alcohol and lit... It burns hard and fast. (XXXVII: 458).

These words at the end of the novel seem to echo the rambling thoughts of João Garcia, the suitor she had left behind, midway in the book, as he reflects upon the “logic of love” and the myth of romantic love. This is when the narrative voice quotes the title of the novel within the text, connecting the “mau tempo no Canal” with the impact of romantic love “seen as myth”:

Love didn't depend upon revelations made at a windowsill, nor lyrical allegories of loving affection seen as myth, connected to the lava of the islands and nights of “mau tempo” on the Channel... Sitting in the chair, sad and oblivious, João Garcia's mind honed a precise thought, a solid substance that wasn't like a sentence: «Love of a myth is pure myth» (XV: 183).

Before marrying the future Baron, however, Margarida had developed a plan to go work in London, with the help of her uncle, Tio Roberto Clark, who lived there. Conscious of the freedom salaried work represents to a woman, she feels angry because “the stupid, conceited life of Horta decreed that a girl of her status could not earn a living. It was shameful for her to receive money for the sweat of her brow” (XXXV: 411). When developing her plan, however, she was so resolute and confident that she felt “an unknown force lifting her up like the araucaria in the yard, invincible, full of those green tentacles that cast a shadow over the house” (XIV: 178), a metaphor in which the vital, cyclical power of nature, symbolized by the araucaria tree, casts a shadow over the linear, patriarchal tradition of inheritance, represented by the family home. In this and other passages, culminating in the chapters where Margarida accompanies a whaling expedition in the Pico-São Jorge Channel and spends the night in a primitive cave on the coast of São Jorge, shocking behavior for a woman that set off the gossip network in Horta, Margarida partakes fully of the primordial, timeless power emanating from nature in the Azores.



The Araucaria Tree of the Azores.

NATURE

The natural environment of the Azores permeates the very warp of the narrative woven within the pages of MTC, from the high winds that swell up in the very first chapter, to the *cucumariid of the abyss* mollusk living in the depths of the Azorean seas into which Margarida throws her serpent ring on the last page of the novel. In essence, MTC is a living portrait of *açorianidade*, a treatise on Azoreanness, the concept Nemésio created in 1932, when he wrote that “geography is as important to us as history,” Portraying the worldview of a people who depend on the land and the sea in MTC, Nemésio reaps constant creative inspiration in the impact that the changing island climate and humidity have on the inhabitants (Azoreans, after all, are always talking about the weather.); in the scent of lava and black basalt stones; in the grey cotton sky and the cloud cover over Pico; in the power of the wind and the sound of the rain; in the sudden eruptions and dormant volcanos; in the colors and textures of the vegetation; in the choppy, then calm, waters of the Pico-Faial Channel; in the cyclical rise and fall of the tides. To create a novel that “projects the intensity and exuberance of nature in the islands” (Simas, 2016: 159), the author’s imagination and creativity reap sustenance from: the humidity and extreme variability of the weather (Tourists are now told that, in the Azores, the four seasons happen in one day.); from the land, which is “all broken up” (XXX: 347) and “moves like the a choppy sea” (XXXI: 364); and from the many configurations of the “eternal and necessary” sea. (In 1928, the 27-year-old Nemésio affirmed: “The islands are ephemeral and contingent; only the sea is eternal and necessary” [1929: 19]). In the end, the whole text is a complex, dynamic masterpiece woven from threads that join the natural environment of the Azores to the souls that live there, molded by misty islands in the vast North Atlantic.

In a novel that recreates the human and natural life of islands in the Atlantic Ocean, it is curious to note that the word “ocean” appears only three times: twice referring to the Arctic and whaling in that ocean, and only once in the term “Western Ocean,” an oblique reference to the Atlantic in the title of a history book mentioned in the text. The word *mar* (sea), in contrast, appears 129 times, which is equivalent to once every three to four pages. (Guerra *et al*, 2015 & Simas, 2015) and is the last word on the final page of the novel, where we read that Margarida “felt blind...blind like the serpent on her ring, which no fish would bring to land for human consumption and which lay, at that hour, like the *cucumariid of the abyss*, in the depths of the sea” (XXXVII: 473). All things considered, the prevalence of the word “sea” in this story of the Azores is an expression of the close, even intimate, relationship that Portuguese culture has to the word “sea,” even though science tells us that 70% of the earth’s surface is ocean (A mere 3% is not salty.), a fact that prompted the microbiologist, Ed DeLong, among other scientists,

to observe that the planet should be named “Ocean” instead of “Earth” (Helmreich, 2009). Also worthy of note is the fact that Nemésio concludes the 1928 talk, mentioned above, by citing the Portuguese historian, Alexandre Herculano, who does use “ocean” in the passage: “Because the wind and the ocean are the only two supreme expressions of the word of God, inscribed on the face of the earth when it was still called chaos. Only after came men and rot, trees and vermin, serenity and decay” (1929: 20). Still, in the 1944 interview on MTC, the author, just as in the novel, ends his one-sentence definition of the book with the word “sea” – “I feel that I’ve really created a novel of the islands – a novel about our people, our lava, our sea.”

Among critics who mentioned nature in relation to MTC, it was António Machado Pires who noted, in 2008, that the novel is “inscribed by the natural setting of these islands, which is, in its own way, also a character” in the narrative (71). Indeed, but along with being a character in constant interaction with humans in the story, the natural environment of the Azores is, in fact, the primordial force, a prehistoric persona that predates human life by many geological millennia. The narrator of MTC refers to this primeval essence of nature, for example, in relation to the whaling scene and “that corner of the world to where cetaceans, born much before there was human life on the Western Islands, had towed them with the pelagic power of the high seas” (XXX: 348), or by observing that the city of Horta, “facing Pico tinted purple by the late-afternoon clouds drifting in from the sea, felt that it was in the presence of a force born at the beginning of time, when there was no sign of humans on the islands” (XIII: 164).

Indeed, much before interacting with humans, nature was, and has been since the dawn of time and creation, based on the dynamic interaction of all its many elements and processes. This includes the interaction between islands themselves, which is implicit in the title of MTC – a Channel implies two masses of land, in this case Pico and Faial. Here it is obligatory to quote the conclusion Raul Brandão immortalized in his groundbreaking book on the Azores, *As Ilhas Desconhecidas (The Unknown Islands)*: “Now I understand that what makes an island beautiful and complete is the island facing it – Corvo and Flores, Faial and Pico, Pico and São Jorge, São Jorge, Terceira and Graciosa” (1924), an observation that Nemésio took special care to quote as a preamble to MTC. It is also important to remember that the young Nemésio, after leaving the Azores to study in Coimbra, sailed back every year to spend summer break on the islands and, in the summer of 1924, his travel companion was Raul Brandão himself, before he published *As Ilhas Desconhecidas* that same year. Two decades later, in 1944, Nemésio would also make the Azores better known through his narrative genius in *Mau Tempo no Canal*.

Interaction between islands, especially between Faial and Pico, is not only incorporated into the narrative, but is absolutely crucial to the very story. Simply put, *Mau Tempo no Canal*

could not exist without these two islands, and later, in relation to São Jorge, the third island of what is now called the *Triangle*— comprised of the three *Triangle Islands* – a designation I think Nemésio would have liked. In fact, as the story unfolds, and São Jorge is brought into the action when Margarida and the whalers are dragged to the pastoral island by the mighty leviathan just speared, the narrator creates an image that unites the three islands with two regional neologisms: *alvarozes* (overalls) and *angrim* (blue-jean fabric): “The fading remains of the day had turned the sea into a huge spread of blue-jean fabric, as if a giant had donned a pair of overalls and was preparing to sleep, one leg along the São Jorge Channel... another along the Faial Channel” (XXX: 342). Like it or not, this very bold image shows that Nemésio’s creativity knows no bounds and is in tandem with current fashion trends! In terms of islands relating to islands, is it farfetched to recall that the archipelago is located where three tectonic plates merge, where the North American, Eurasian and African plates come together and interact? Nemésio surely found inspiration in this geological dynamic, from the beginning of creation and still moving today.



A Map of the Tectonic Plates of Planet Earth.

Be that as it may, perhaps the most successful image connecting nature to islanders in MTC appears in a passage about Jacinto Garcia, the benevolent pharmacist, brother of the sinister Januário, and uncle/godfather to the gentle João, when the narrator evokes the “nights that were longer than a trip to Flores, by rowboat” that Jacinto spent tending to João when he was sick as a child, adding: “And Pico didn’t remove its cloud-cover cape during those grey afternoons when threads seemed to unite clouds and nerves” (XII: 157), webs in constant construction and deconstruction, threads that join the atmospheric pressure and clouds in the sky, to the nerves and “mágoas tamanhas” (huge hurts) on land (XXVIII: 322). Equally significant are the passages in chapter XXXI on the *mistérios* (lava mysteries) and *biscoitos* (lava biscuits) related to the 1808 earthquake in Urzelina, and on Margarida, as she “reads” the Baron’s orange grove and, after chipping a piece of stone and realizing she’s smelling lava:

“connects the volcanic scent, to the pungent smell she had noticed in her white garments. It was because the shirts and sheets were left to whiten overnight spread on the stones in the vineyard” (XXXII: 370). Among the many other passages connecting nature and humans that are also worthy of note is the description of the Azorean muggy weather known as *mormaço* on the last day of Margarida’s story, August 15, 1919 (Day of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven)

The grey cotton clouds in the heavens casts a shadow over the nine-island archipelago: muggy weather called «*mormaço*» erases the contours of sea and land, soaking pasturelands at a cost to owners and shepherds, dilutes and douses desires, making everything and man suffer from a malady of the soul which the English, ever mindful of wellbeing, labeled, just as one names a plant newly discovered in this old, arid world: *Azorean torpor* (XXXV: 434).

PLAGUE AND WAR

With Azorean muggy weather as a backdrop, plague and war are the final topics in this analysis of MTC. According to David de Morais in *Atlântida: Journal on Culture* (2011), the plague is caused by the bacillus *Yersinia pestis*, believed to have originated in the *hinterland* of Asia. Before the covid-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, there were three big pandemic waves:

1) The so-called “Justinian plague” started in 542AD and lasted about 220 years. As might be expected, the death rates were extremely high and devastated many regions.

2) The next pandemic, known as the “black death,” lasted from 1347 to 1351, a total of about five years, with very high death rates. Portugal, for example, had just over one million inhabitants at the time and lost about 350,000 lives, i.e., over a third of its total population.

3) The last wave of bubonic plague went from the end of the 19th century to the first decades of the 20th century. Official records in the Azores indicate that it reached Horta, Faial, and Angra, Terceira, in 1908, and Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, in 1920. It was accompanied by the pneumonic plague, which is also mentioned in Nemésio’s novel, along with a wave that, since it supposedly reached Portugal via Spain, came to be known as the “Spanish plague.”

It is this third pandemic wave that accompanies the years depicted in MTC (1917-1919), the period corresponding to the end of World War I, meaning that Nemésio’s narrative unfolds over the very troubled period of the early 20th century impacted by pandemic and war. As far as the plague is concerned, although I don’t have exact numbers, I would venture that, without counting proper names, *peste* (plague) is the next most common word in the novel, right after *mar* (sea). It is mentioned early in the story, in relation to Emília Garcia, the wife of Januário Garcia who was banished years earlier due to suspicions she had committed adultery (III: 38).

Two chapters later, Emilia's death is revealed while her sister-in-law, Henriqueta, who supposedly originated the allegations, is busy doing housecleaning, perhaps an ironic, indirect commentary on the "female" tendency to channel nervous energy into cleaning chores.

The ways Azoreans dealt with the plague are mentioned throughout the text. In case of death, the corpse was usually covered in whitewash (V: 78) and the mattress, clothing, and other belongings, as well as the shanties of the poor, were set ablaze and burned. While the person lived, rags soaked in vinegar were applied to the affected areas of the body and aromatic plants were burned to purify the air in the house (VIII: 108-9). These, and other examples, are accompanied by a passage from chapter XI, titled "Mortos e Vivos" (The Dead and the Living), conveying the beliefs and practices of islanders, as well as the ambiance on a cool April day of preparation for an excursion organized by Tio Roberto, against the will of Catarina, his sister and Margarida's mother, and of Catarina's father, who is Margarida's grandfather, of course:

The weather was still cold, and one would run into couples with the plague, shanties burned to the ground by Health Officials after another pneumonic attack. But Roberto insisted that contagion only happened when one was close to a person who'd caught the plague or touched infected clothing. Fresh country air, on the contrary, protected one from danger. Passing over the bunches of poplar and beech tree branches on the road filled one's lungs with protection; eucalyptus twigs were placed on the open hoods of cars. Besides, it wasn't a good idea to keep young people closed up inside, increasing panic. Either you lived life normally – or you abandoned town. People talked a lot about the open air in Pico. There had been only half a dozen cases in Madalena, all bubonic, and two deaths, all totaled (XI: 140-1).

References to the traumatic effects of the pandemic occur throughout and culminate in the contagion of two central characters: the humble servant Manuel Bana and the charismatic Tio Roberto. Manuel Bana comes down with the plague first (XXII: 262) while he is staying in Pico with Margarida and Tio Roberto. Both treat him with loving care. Though his recuperation is very slow, the faithful servant Manuel survives, an example of the strength and resistance of the humble but honest people of the Azores. Later in the story, when Margarida finds herself stuck in São Jorge after the memorable whale hunting experience, she begins to hear that Tio Roberto has been infected. After she manages to get back to Pico, Manuel Bana tells her that a dead rat had been the cause (XXXVI: 429), but by then, Tio Roberto had already died, symbolizing the end of Margarida's plan to emigrate to London, as well as the vulnerability of a rising bourgeoisie and mercantile class. Within the narrative dynamic of MTC, Manuel Bana's contagion is linked to Pico Island, guardian of the aura and essence of the simple people of the islands, while Tio Roberto's tragic contamination becomes associated to São Jorge Island,

symbolic bastion of inherited wealth dependent on the titles, privileges, and whims of a fading aristocracy, the world to which Margarida is sentenced as the novel ends.

Though mentioned less than the plague, references to the war and the post-war situation appear throughout the novel. These can be found, for example, in the concerns about the impact of the war on the prices of spermaceti and on the whaling industry in the post-war era (XIX: 227 & XXVII: 316); and in relation to João Garcia, a promising young military figure who gives lectures and, in his studies and writing, explores such topics as the philosophy of war: “*The pen got stuck on the sentences:... «between a people who consider the art of war as the intelligent and powerful defense of territorial heritage, and a people who see war as an organic need, born of poetry and the metaphor of expansion.»* (XVII: 198, italics in the original).

Tragically, such discourse echoes in this early 21st century, as the world confronts the harrowing impact of a pandemic and two wars with no end in sight. Locally, trying to tackle such distressing disasters and terrible tragedies, one might first wonder: What would Nemésio make of all this? To salvage a modicum of sanity, might this be an opportunity to reflect upon what has changed in the Azores in the 100 years since the era depicted in MTC? What remains the same, or nearly so? Ultimately, *Mau Tempo no Canal*, the opus of Azorean literature, is a love letter from Vitorino Nemésio to the Azores and the Azorean people, humans living on islands of black and green, shaped by *bruma* (mist) and *beleza* (beauty) and the deep blue sea.

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