

# **28 PORTUGUESE POETS**

A BILINGUAL ANTHOLOGY

## INTRODUCTION

**I**N THE 36TH POEM from *The Keeper of Sheep*, Alberto Caeiro makes fun of poets who assemble their verses like a carpenter his boards or a bricklayer his bricks, “making sure each one is right, and taking it away if it isn’t!” Against a poetics of careful construction, he says that poems should take shape in the same natural way that flowers grow and blossom. He has no use for poems conceived as buildings made of words, since “the only true house is the whole Earth”. Celebrating all things as they are immediately perceived by the five senses, Caeiro claimed to be “Nature’s only poet”. For shelter against the rain and cold, he lived in a simple white house on top of a hill.

Or perhaps half way up the hill. Fernando Pessoa — Portugal’s greatest Modernist poet — was undecided about where exactly to place the dwelling of Caeiro, an alter ego he invented in March of 1914. The shepherd-poet’s white house is mentioned in more than one poem, but its location on the hill varies. Several months after engendering bucolic Caeiro, Pessoa invented the classicist Ricardo Reis and the urbane naval engineer called Álvaro de Campos, all of whom wrote in very different styles and with different points of view about poetry, religion, politics, and how to live. Pessoa called these fictional poets “heteronyms”, endowed them with individuated biographies, and even cast their astrological charts.

Fernando Pessoa, unlike Caeiro, was a constructor. He was wary of spontaneous, unmediated expression and would have appreciated the Brazilian poet João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920-1999), whose second book of poems was pointedly titled *O Engenheiro* [The Engineer]. In a poem written some time after the death of Marianne Moore (1887-1972), Melo Neto praised her work for showing

that poetry is not on the inside  
but is, like a house, something outside,  
and before one lives inside it

it must be built — this something  
 one makes to make oneself able,  
 this crutch for the one who is lame.

He broadly divided poets into bleeders, whose writing is an overflow of what they intensely feel, and crutch poets like himself, who write to compensate for what they lack in feeling.

Pessoa, who assumed that all poets feel intensely, divided the waters of poetry along somewhat different lines. He distinguished between those who disclose their feelings directly, in their natural, unprocessed state, and those who convert feelings into an impersonal poetic construction. His byword for the latter method was *fingimento*, which means pretending, feigning, forging — not in the sense of lying or counterfeiting but in the sense of inventing and dramatically representing.

### “Here I’m not” vs. “Here I am”

Fernando Pessoa was a hard-core, proselytizing *fingidor*, since to reproduce in poetry what already exists in reality seemed to him a trivial ambition and since we don’t really know what, in reality, exists. Even Alberto Caeiro, the one great moment of spontaneity and directness in Pessoa, admits to being a pretender in the opening verses of *The Keeper of Sheep*:

I’ve never kept sheep  
 But it’s as if I kept them.

Álvaro de Campos, after years of voyaging around the world, living in various countries and doing his best to “feel everything in every way possible” (his motto), begins a poem with this ironic discovery: “I’m beginning to know myself. I don’t exist.” In the world according to Pessoa, there were no certainties. Everything was as if. It was not just to have fun with us, or with literature, that he divided himself into alter egos — including several dozen lesser heteronyms who wrote poetry and prose in

Portuguese, English and even French; it was because the notion of a coherent, solid-state I struck him as an illusion. No one is today what he or she was yesterday. We are in permanent flux.

While Pessoa quietly produced a diversified literary oeuvre founded on doubts about the nature of the world's and his own existence, Florbela Espanca wrote an exalted poetry that simply and insistently proclaimed "I am!" She also had her doubts, but she battled rather than indulge them. The battle was partly motivated, or necessitated, by her gender. Although there were plenty of women poets in Portugal, they were rarely taken seriously by the literary establishment, and Espanca — one of the few Portuguese women of her day to attend university — was taken only half seriously. She was considered the best of the female lot of poets, insofar as her well-made sonnets were a little less "female", able to be measured against the poetry written by men. Still, she was emotive and effusive, she used a lot of exclamation marks, and to this day her poetry is disregarded by some of the literature programmes at Portuguese universities. I too did not pay it much regard, I never really read it closely, until a scholar of Espanca's sonnets asked me to translate a group of them for a book she was co-authoring. Although the themes, images and technical features of her sonnets are not especially remarkable, I was impressed by the unusual concentration of feeling that they contain, or rather, consubstantiate. Without Alberto Caetano's discourse but as if following his recommendations, this poet took the whole world to be her house, and her sonnets are like large poetic flowers that seem to be generated organically. She is no poet of Nature, however. Hers is an unabashed song of the self.

The highly personal, subjectively expressive Espanca, who was born six years after Pessoa and died five years before him, probably from suicide, makes for a radical contrast with his poetics of impersonalization, but in the short run she had no influence. And the Pessoa performance, with its cast of diverse heteronyms, was a hard act to follow. In fact almost no poet with brio emerged in the last years of Pessoa's life or in the years immediately after his death, in 1935. The most notable exception was Vitorino Nemésio (1901-1978). Deftly fusing images and

scenes from his Azorean childhood and travels abroad with an impressive philosophical and literary erudition acquired in his university studies on the Portuguese mainland, Nemésio was a restlessly versatile, somewhat isolated virtuoso. (His exclusion from this anthology is due to my failure to produce translations of his poems that satisfy me.)

## The post-Pessoa diversity

The years during and after World War II saw a fresh flowering of Portuguese poets, who dealt with the dazzling and potentially intimidating legacy of Pessoa in different ways. Nearly all of them learned something from Pessoa, but only one of the poets presented here — the protean Jorge de Sena, who was also a novelist, playwright and literary critic — seems to have been in competition with him. Although he applied the lesson of *fingimento* for transforming personal feeling into material suitable for making works of art, Sena also countered it with a poetics of witness and testimony linked decisively to real life. His large output of poetry varied considerably from book to book, but without ever straying far from his concern for what it means to be individually, collectively and sexually human. One of the early and most illuminating interpreters of Pessoa's work, he devoted even more pages of criticism to the great Renaissance poet Luís de Camões (1524-1580), who was arguably the antithesis of Pessoa. An adventurer not only in his literary imagination but also in the flesh, Camões was a rapacious lover of life, with all the beauty, squalor, joy and violence it contains. Pessoa kept the world at arm's length. Sena shared Pessoa's taste for intricately intellectual pursuits, but he also — like Camões — spent his adult life on three different continents and whole-heartedly embraced the world and the experience of love. His "My Desired Tomb", with its seeming endorsement of sexual abuse and exploitation, might strike some as politically or socially incorrect, but it is actually a marvellous hymn to life itself.

Life itself was also at the centre of Sophia de Mello Breyner's poetic project, and in her case "life" included a manifestly

spiritual dimension. Pessoa is the subject of several of her poems, and she wrote a series of seven odes in the style of Ricardo Reis, but she had a different take on the world's endless multiplicity and the fragmented self. "Nature is parts without a whole", Pessoa ventriloquized through Alberto Caeiro, and he considered unity to be possible only in a work of art or a literary composition, and perhaps in a hazy spirit dimension that could not be directly apprehended. Sophia Breyner erased the distance between heaven and earth. God, or the gods, coexist with humans in her poetry, which used myth and mythology to suggest ways to repair a broken order, to connect the drama of the individual to the universal scheme of things — not only on the written page but in the life we all live. Her poetry sometimes has an oracular quality, with the verses demanding to be read aloud, one vatic word after another, and darkness and pain have their arcane, inevitable place in the luminous world those verses announce. The sea of Crete in which she swims, and which represents "primordial joy", is also where the Minotaur "darkly moves" (p. 63). There is nothing facile about her world view or religious faith.

Carlos de Oliveira's "Stalactite", a poem in 24 sections (only the first seven are presented here), is from a collection titled *Micropaisagem* [Microlandscape], and it's as if this poet used language as a microscope for seeing into things. His writing developed in the context of the Portuguese neo-realist movement, which emerged in the 1940s as a reaction to literature that failed to address the deplorable social and political conditions of a poor nation ruled by the claustrophobic regime of Salazar, and his five novels more obviously reflect the agenda of that movement. But Oliveira, along with certain other neo-realists, did not only critique capitalism and oppose tyranny; he also called into question entrenched forms of conceiving and making art, and particularly the individualistic consciousness as the centre point of literary productions. His novels anticipate the preoccupation of the French nouveau roman with objects and environments for their own sake, and this focus on objective reality is even more extreme in his poetry, where words seem almost inseparable from the things they describe. Or is it things that define words?

Oliveira's stalactite, finally, is the poem itself.

Like Sena and Oliveira, Eugénio de Andrade published his first book of poetry in 1942. (Breyner's first book saw print two years later.) The locus of his poetic investigations is the human body. It is a musical, sensual and glowing body, which walks through all the seasons and all weathers. The sun prevails, but this poetry is not only about illuminated vision. It engulfs the reader through all the senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. Andrade travelled to Greece with Sophia de Mello Breyner, whose observations of an ancient sculpture of Antinous or of a contemporary Greek workman muscularly negotiating a bulldozer (pp. 59 and 61) inspired poetic contemplations on the divine element in humanity. Andrade's observations of male bodies inspired poems that are idealized, exquisitely sensorial evocations of the body itself, or of the body and its aura.

Mário Cesariny was the most prominent poet of Portugal's late-blooming surrealist movement, founded in 1947. It was partly an exasperated response to the neo-realist movement, whose Marxian correctness came to feel like a new form of despotism for writers interested in other things besides economic reform and class struggle. An openly practising homosexual who was arrested more than once for immoral conduct, Cesariny insisted on the freedom to speak his mind and act on his desires. The obstacles to that freedom are powerfully evoked in "you are welcome to elsinore", where the Danish town made infamous by Shakespeare represents the Salazar regime but also human duplicity and small-mindedness. To produce poems such as "The ship of mirrors", Cesariny claimed to rely on the automatic writing method advocated by the French surrealists for bypassing the rational mind and connecting to the subconscious. But it was with the full use of his conscious mind that he dedicated an entire book of poems to parodying and deconstructing Fernando Pessoa and his heteronymic system, suggesting — on one level — that the great Modernist was too abstractly clever and sexually pent-up for his own good; on another level, the unruly surrealist wanted to shake up all that we his readers hold to be dear and sacred, including our literary monuments.

The poet Alexandre O'Neill introduced Cesariny to the writings of André Breton and other French surrealists, but after collaborating for several years with the Portuguese version of surrealism, he went his own way. He was suspicious of anything remotely mystical, including automatic writing's hotline to the subconscious, but he shared Cesariny's attitude of permanent revolt against convention and all forms of censorship. He thought that his fellow countrymen were far too well behaved, and he deliberately used a traditional, metrically obedient sonnet to indict them for taking comfort in a mythified past rather than rebelling against present oppression (in "Standing at Fearful Attention"). He was no cultivator of Portuguese *saudade*, a supposedly unique feeling of deep longing, yearning, nostalgia. Systematically sceptical, critical, and ironic when not downright sarcastic, O'Neill also had a profoundly tender side, which he indulged with caution.

António Ramos Rosa, astonishingly prolific, published dozens of books over the course of more than five decades. Although his work naturally evolved — early on he produced some notable poems of social protest — the lexicon, colouring and music of his mature style are remarkably consistent, to the point of obsessiveness. The six poems published here are all from *The Book of Ignorance* (1988), which is a meditation on and search for "animal intelligence", explicitly invoked at the end of the poem "Sometimes the middle of a grove". Another poem, "Calmness extends as we get old", affirms that we "can know nothing / by way of analysis", and the almost monotonic flow of this poet's verses reads to me like a Gregorian or Buddhist chant seeking to know — to penetrate — the heart of the world by way of an intensely focused verbal perseverance. The words are like polished pebbles now rolling, now pausing, on the bed of a pellucid stream.

## **1961: a heterogeneous generation**

Herberto Helder and Ruy Belo published their first books of poetry in 1961, and five other young poets — including Luiza



Neto Jorge and Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão — published chapbooks in a magazine called *Poesia 61*. It was also an important year in the political sphere, with wars for independence breaking out in several of Portugal's African colonies. The colonial wars, which soon spread from Angola and Guinea Bissau to Mozambique, aroused strong international and internal opposition, even within the Portuguese army itself, and hastened the downfall of Salazar's Estado Novo, or New State, which continued to rule the country for six years after ill health forced the prime minister to step aside, in 1968 (he died in 1970). Although some poems were made into effective song lyrics for a swelling protest movement, the wars and the latter decades of the dictatorial regime did not give rise to a significant body of political poetry. It must be stressed that the regime had little in common with the autocratic governments in Eastern Europe. The Portuguese could move about freely, censorship existed but information was not strictly controlled, and the State did not run the economy. The secret police monitored all political activity, however, and the climate was stifling for intellectuals and artists, many of whom left the country. (Many other people left in search of better paying jobs.) It is possible that some young Portuguese were attracted to poetry as a place of exile, but this is an attraction that always applies, regardless of one's personal or collective situation. Perhaps it was merely by chance that a cluster of good poets born and raised under the same political system began publishing at around the same time. Not united by any poetic programme, the one point in common for most but not quite all of these poets is their intimist approach to writing.

Magmatic, hallucinatory and alchemical are all useful words to describe the creative process of Herberto Helder, the most intriguing and most influential Portuguese poet after Fernando Pessoa, with whom he seems to bear little resemblance. Pessoa described his own performance as a drama divided into people (the heteronyms) instead of into acts. Helder titled his second book *Poemacto* [Poemact], and it is a song of the self, but a far larger self than the narrator of Florbela Espanca's sonnets. Rather than self-dividing into alter egos like Pessoa, Helder, as a

poet, is a continuously exploding I, and his entire output a never-ending poem-act. Maybe he is a throwback to Romanticism — not to the likes of Wordsworth and Keats but to poet-visionaries such as Blake and Hölderlin. His poetry, like the personal universe it ravenously explores, is all passion and transmutation, which to him are practically synonyms.

Herberto Helder folds the outer world into his metamorphic, darkly glowing poetry. Ruy Belo, on the contrary, seems to stretch out his poetic self across space and time, an expansiveness mirrored in his preference for rhythmically unemphatic lines that eschew punctuation, as if imitating gently rolling plains. In “Pilgrim and Guest on Planet Earth”, the narrator’s home is wherever he happens to be, and his friends “are the most recent ones”, whom he hardly even knows. His home is everywhere, and nowhere. This attitude is reminiscent of Álvaro de Campos’s desire to be everywhere and everyone, to possess the whole universe, but whereas the desire of Pessoa’s heteronym is a “boundless rage” for an all-encompassing sensation (p. 19), Belo’s narrator is motivated by a quietly insistent urge to be united to the rest of the world. Belo was a devout Roman Catholic who lost his faith, and much of his poetry chronicles and grapples with the transitory nature of human life, or even a dog’s life (“Requiem for a Dog”).

The “animal intelligence” idealized by António Ramos Rosa becomes a topic of awed inquiry in the verses of Fíama Hasse Pais Brandão, who begins one of the poems published here with the following admission of envy, or frustration: “I write like an animal, but with less / hallucinatory perfection.” Her inquiry proceeds, like the forms of life it engages, with steady persistence: wrapping around, scratching, pecking, penetrating like a mole, and occasionally opening like a flower. Sometimes she is a philosopher writing a Logic of Natural Things. Sometimes she is a disoriented psalmist, in relentless pursuit of the principle or origin responsible for the life her song exalts.

In Luíza Neto Jorge’s “Magnolia”, it is not the vision of the tree but the swelling sound of the word physically rolling off her tongue that stirs and startles the poet like lightning. Speech, and

poetry, are intimately related to the body, which for Jorge is always an erotic body. Her “Houses” personify experiences, attitudes and responses of female sexuality, and in “The House of the World”, a minuscule birthmark contains oceans and mountains of sensuality, all music, and the charged history of human relations going back at least to the Greeks and Romans. Single words such as “magnolia”, “birthmark” and many others in her poetry, when read slowly, throb with a hidden enormity of feeling and meaning.

Like the four poets discussed in the previous four paragraphs, Vasco Graça Moura published his first collection of verse in the early 1960s, but he did not come fully into his own as a poet until around 1980, and while his work has a highly personal side, marked by autobiographical anecdote (as in the poem “fanny”), I would not call it intimist. He was a multifaceted writer and especially proud of his poetic achievement — which included brilliant translations of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* and Shakespeare’s sonnets into Portuguese — but he was also deeply committed to public life, sometimes holding political office and heading up cultural projects and institutions. His manner of embracing life in its totality comes through in his poetry, which is about love, history, modernity and cultural issues. He deftly wielded formal kinds of verse but was equally fond of a conversational plain style, which was perhaps the best medium for showing off his intellectual verve, wit, and discernment.

## The 1970s and beyond

António Franco Alexandre’s poetic style and subject matter have changed dramatically from book to book, and each one is a stunning performance. Since each of his collections creates a new world, which the reader better appreciates by spending a little time there, the six poems translated for this anthology are all taken from a single collection: *Dwelling Places I & II*. The atmospheres generated by these poems are pristine, primitive, sometimes biblical. “I note / the exact emotion of the inexact curve,” says the narrator about birds in flight (p. 175), and this describes

well the central thrust of his vocation: to precisely record what is imprecise or hard to grasp. In another poem, someone offers the poet the following advice: “don’t choose words for themselves / but for how they stand at corners” (p. 171). Meaning resides less in individual words than in the edifice they form, but these poems are not the step-by-step, laboriously built houses that Alberto Caeiro inveighed against. They are strange dwellings, and it is better to roam through them and linger a while, without attempting to interpret too much.

Al Berto brought sex, drugs and rock-and-roll to Portuguese poetry, insofar as his writing was partly inspired by a lifestyle that experienced and experimented without boundaries. He calmed down as he got older, at least on the outside, but he remained a wanderer at heart, and was attracted to the shadowy dark underside of life as well as to sunlit exteriors. He told an interviewer that contact with sordidness helped him, by way of contrast, to understand beauty. His poetry is predominantly narrative and obliquely autobiographical, but not confessional. The sequence of poems translated here as “Salt Spray” is about sailing, desire, fear and sex, all of which are metaphors or motivations for Al Berto’s writing.

The seven translations of poems by Nuno Júdice are taken from a single collection, *Meditation on Ruins*, whose title seems to promise something neo-Romantic, and the poet delivers on the promise, but this is Romanticism in a modern mode, or, to put it another way, Romanticism itself is in ruins. The narrator still wants to be a visionary, but he doubts what he sees. Rather than Wordsworth’s “emotion recollected in tranquillity”, we are given unsettling observations in search of a coherent emotion. An awareness of the world’s fundamental chaos was part of the Romantic ethos, and it was up to the poetic ego to in a certain way transcend, without denying, the disparities. But Júdice’s poetic I, having fun with the poem in which Álvaro de Campos is served up a dish of cold tripe instead of the warm things like love that life might have given him (“Oporto-style Tripe”, p. 23), is served up a dish of himself, “a distant sensation” he finds “cold and tasteless” (“The Last Supper”). The world, meanwhile, is not after all so

chaotic; it has a natural order, which humans are helpless to grasp or change (“Pasture”).

Poetry, for Ana Luísa Amaral, is part of a balancing act that also involves her life as a woman and mother and her commitment to loving, understood both as amorous devotion and as solidarity with those people or groups of people she feels connected to. I don’t mean that she needs her daily life and her experience of loving as thematic material for her poetry, though she does indeed make use of them, but that she could not conceive of writing poems as an isolated act, apart from everything else. The notion of perfect or pure poetry would make no sense to her. Considering it philosophically, she might agree with the Caeiro dictum that “Nature is parts without a whole”, but this causes her no angst, and she is not drawn, like Breyner, or like a certain corner of Pessoa’s being, to the unity promised by the spiritual dimension. It is the secular human experience — biology, history, culture, language, passion — that demands her full attention. The ideal work of art would be a lived *Victory of Samothrace*, made of flesh and words and a constant readiness to fly.

Amaral’s poetry contains frequent allusions to literary predecessors as well as to art works. Adília Lopes, even more literarily allusive, often resorts to parody, particularly of the poets she most admires, and she can promiscuously incorporate other writers’ words into her own works, or complete what someone else left unfinished. Aware of themselves as women poets in a field that has long been dominated by men, Amaral and Lopes do not aspire to reconfiguring the poetic canon, but they want to open up a space in contemporary poetry — beginning with their own poems — for specifically female concerns and for a female way of being. Florbela Espanca had to fight just to be recognized as a valid poet in what was virtually an all-male club, and when she passionately wrote about wanting to get lost in love (“To Love!”, p. 37), it was not as a helpless woman without other horizons who necessarily depended on men; she was a self-confident lover, rejecting the reputedly female dream of a life built around a monogamous relationship. In Lopes’s take-off on Espanca’s sonnet, the narrator, who has no love relationships nor even any

casual sex, flaunts her fragility and defends her right to be sad not because of love's difficulties and frustrations (a common enough theme in Espanca) but because love is not even a part of her life, except as an impossible dream. Lopes's poem ("I want to fuck to fuck") also comments on the hypocrisy of revolutions that change laws and perceptions but not the power-based nature of human relationships, and it updates, urbanizes and ridicules Fernando Pessoa's idyllic view of a reaper who blithely sings while she works in the field (in Pessoa's poem titled "A Ceifeira" [The Reaper], not included here). Lopes has anointed herself a new and very different Florbela Espanca, without sex appeal or self-exaltation. Her poetry is part of the syllabus for feminist studies, and rightly so. But even more radically she is a poet of the lonely, the pathetic, the banal, and the unpretty. "God is the cleaning woman," affirms one of her poems (not included here).

The "small and useless suicidal / marvel called Europe" is a recurring topic in the poetry of Paulo Teixeira. He attributes that pithy description of a decadent Old World to Stefan Zweig, in the poem "Die Welt von Gestern," which is a kind of versified distillation of the autobiography completed by the Austrian writer the day before he and his second wife committed suicide in Brazil, where they were exiles from Nazi Germany. But Europe is just a symbol, the most immediate and obvious instance, of civilizational decline. The 813 siege of Baghdad is the backdrop for another poem featuring two lovers in a dying world — in this case two unidentified men, given over to each other's body and with desire as their only "genealogical tree". The narrator admits that the nearness of death, raging on the streets of the besieged city, is a "fascinating presence", and the imminent eternity predicted in the final verse seems to signify both the consummation of love and the arrival of death. Time and again, an awareness of life's tenuousness leads to the conclusion that only tender encounters are worth living for. Or is it that love itself seeks a symbolic transfiguration and immortalization in death, which obliterates distance? The poem "Auto-da-fé", on the other hand, posits the sacrificial death of poetry as the necessary condition for love. The word, like the world, is too little.

The poetic sensibility of José Tolentino Mendonça is in some ways the opposite to Teixeira's. Mendonça has this faith: "From land to land all of them connected / we're something that God touches" (from the poem "Strange Eyes"). Revelations are everywhere, even if we don't understand what they mean. And love can exist in a simple gaze exchanged with a stranger ("Calle Príncipe, 25"). The origins of Mendonça's faith — telluric and shakeable, like a seismic country — are described in "The Childhood of Herberto Helder", which is really about his own childhood. (Both poets were born on the island of Madeira.) If back then he found God in the vast skies and the empty wastes, now he finds the Deity in the minutiae of daily life. An admirer of Marianne Moore's predilection for acute observations of the mundane, he playfully "completes" her poetry with suggestions of an underlying (or interlinear) interest in metaphysics and some imaginary biographical details ("The Complete Poetry of Marianne Moore"). At the beginning of this Introduction I cited a poem by João Cabral de Melo Neto that praises Moore — a "crutch poet" — for patiently, capably building her own poetic house. Mendonça's poem reminds us that poetic house-building, whether or not the builders use crutches, is ultimately a community effort, which also includes the readers.

Luís Quintais both admires and actively emulates the work of another American Modernist, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955). The complex relationship between language, objective reality, consciousness and the imagination forms the crux of the Portuguese poet's investigations. Well aware that language and the human mind can represent but never fully apprehend the real world, he points out — in the poem "On Ice" — that the Freudian concept of the unconscious, useful as it is for explaining human psychology and even artistic creativity, is a recent product of evolution, which is the driving force of life as we know it and staunchly impervious to explanation. Nor can he be satisfied by philosophical contemplations and poetry's supreme fictions. In "The World as Representation", after initially wondering about the relationship of his mental image of a dog's howling to the dog's actual howling, the poem's narrator and would-be

disciple of Schopenhauer flings open the window, in search of the “preternatural dog” that exists in the dark night beyond his seeing. Real life matters for Quintais, whose “For Animals” forces us to re-examine our thinking about who has the right to take life away, and from whom, and by what means.

I hope that my brief reflections on the poets included in this anthology will help the patient reader to better appreciate their artistic singularity. This should be evident from the poems themselves, but the selections, I’m afraid, are a bit skimpy. In the case of Daniel Faria, however, just two or three poems would be enough to make even a distracted reader realize that something quite different is going on. The poet is on fire — not in the flames of poetry, like Herberto Helder (a crucial influence on Faria), but in the invisible flames of spirit. “I listen without knowing / If what I hear is silence / Or god” remarks Sophia de Mello Breyner in one of her poems (p. 57). Faria is completely given over to that silence, or God, and the poems he writes are the fruits of his attentive listening. “Close listening fills us with juice like a well in a courtyard” (p. 253). He is waiting to die so as to join up with the voice he hears, the silence that talks to him, and while waiting he reports on his soul’s journey, exhorting us to imagine what he knows so well by faith. However sceptical we may be, we are disarmed by “The Cycles of Bad Weather”, a poetic sequence in which he directly addresses us, pulls us in, takes our hand, exposes his and our fragility, and makes us glimpse with him the mystery of our common life, hypostatized in a magnolia tree, whose real presence (according to Faria) distinguishes it from the “pronounced” magnolia of Luiza Neto Jorge.

“The accuracy of the vernacular!” Marianne Moore once exclaimed in an interview, and we find that accuracy in the colloquially precise diction of the four free-verse poems by Margarida Vale de Gato translated here. This poet, who also makes frequent use of rhyme and traditional forms such as the sonnet, is attentive to the limitations and pitfalls of language (“The Romantic Image”) as well as to ethical issues facing the writer. Her “Medea” is not about the original mythological story but about how it is reworked (including in the self-same poem,



which changes a few details) and about how writers manipulate the feelings of readers, or spectators, making us sympathize with a mother who murders her children. The writer mentioned in the poem, not incidentally, is male, a detail that makes me think of another poem (not included here), in which Gato has Anna Karenina chiding Tolstoy for not having adequately understood her. A number of her poems enact the styles and sensibilities of women writers, with Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Christina Rossetti being brought in either as narrators or characters.

Like Gato, Daniel Jonas alternates between formal and free verse. Two of his six collections to date consist of sonnets; the free-verse style of his other collections takes many different shapes, while continuing to be marked by taut syntax. The poems from all his books are conceptually taut, and occasionally demanding on the reader. Their mood is frequently nostalgic, and part of that nostalgia may be for a different poetic milieu, since Jonas's work seems a little out of place in 21st-century Portugal. It would be equally out of place in earlier periods. Although firmly rooted in tradition (in the Eliotian sense), its roots extend far and wide. That said, the inspiration for his poem "Houses" is actually quite close to home (pun not intended, but welcome), since Portuguese poetry is a little obsessed by houses. For Luiza Neto Jorge they represent various attitudes of the erotic body (pp. 149–153). For Ruy Belo (p. 131) they have to do with stability and the need to belong. In Herberto Helder, whose "Preface" (p. 115) decisively put houses on Portugal's poetic map, they stand for various things, but mostly for poetry itself. Jonas's narrator dreams of living inside all of these houses but is deathly afraid of being trapped — whether that trap is a finite body, the feeling of definitively belonging somewhere, or a particular poetic trend, a particular poetic style. He visits houses for brief moments only, and flies onward, and sometimes backwards.

The abundance of literal and metaphorical houses in Portuguese poetry after Pessoa (this anthology could have included a number of other "house poems") may be connected to the fact that many poets spent long periods abroad or at any rate felt

alienated from their nation when it was ruled by an authoritarian government in which they had no voice. Or it could be a reaction to the Portuguese imperative to travel and emigrate that goes back to the Age of Discovery, when seamen and colonists were recruited in large numbers. “Sad the man who lives at home, / Content with his hearth,” decreed Pessoa in a poem from *Mensagem* [*Message*] that exhorted his countrymen to keep going abroad, imaginatively if not physically. (And many of them had to go abroad, for political or economic reasons.)

Although harshly critical of Portugal’s governing class and ambivalent about its colonial empire, Pessoa was proud of its maritime achievements, and the same can be said for Sophia de Mello Breyner, whose dozen or so poetry collections include one titled *Navegações* [Navigations]. But other poets converted the theme of voyage into a trope for very different kinds of discoveries, particularly sexual ones. In Breyner’s “Beach”, pine trees are nostalgic for the old days when they were used as masts for the navigators’ ships. But in Mário Cesariny’s “The ship of mirrors” (third stanza from the end) and even more obviously in the fourth stanza of the Al Berto selection presented here, the masts are phallic objects of homoerotic desire. Eugénio de Andrade’s “Voyage” is also about homoerotic attraction, or its aftermath, and homoeroticism shows up as well in poems by Paulo Teixeira (“During the Siege of Baghdad, 813”), by António Franco Alexandre (in poems not published here, except perhaps the last one in the group), and by older poets, including Fernando Pessoa. Women poets in this anthology, as already demonstrated, have asserted their right to be writers on a par with men, to be women who are not like men, and to be erotic women, whether or not men find them erotically appealing. These various affirmations of sexual freedom and this questioning of traditional sexual roles and attitudes occurred without marches or conspicuous movements to raise consciousness and challenge preconceptions. Such movements would have been hard to organize and promote before the democratic revolution of 1974. Or perhaps not so hard, according to a poet such as Alexandre O’Neill, critical of Portugal’s ruling oligarchy but even more critical of the people’s seemingly

endemic passivity. The nation's poets, at least in their writing, have been comparatively courageous.

Most of the poets in this anthology would not disagree with W. H. Auden's observation that "poetry makes nothing happen", but Portuguese poetry throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> has been a dynamic, wide-open territory, whose inhabitants have spoken with candour and been restlessly inventive, using language to embody their different sexualities, political and cultural preoccupations, amorous passions, religious passions, and in some cases just their yearning for solitude, or the pioneer's yen to pick up and move on, without really knowing to what end. Poetry makes nothing happen, but Auden also observed that it survives "in the valley of its making" and is itself a "way of happening".

## About the selection and translations

The modest title of this anthology was chosen to reflect the modesty of its scope. It embraces a number of Portuguese poets whose work I admire. The subjectivity of my selection becomes especially flagrant towards the end of the book, since there are many other youngish Portuguese poets ("youngish" here means at least forty years old) I might have included. An arbiter who relies largely on personal taste and aesthetic affinity must admit the somewhat arbitrary nature of his decisions. Few scholars and critics of Portuguese poetry would take issue with most of the names I have included on my list, but they would all feel that one or another poet was wrongly excluded. Another problem with anthologies like this one is the limited number of pages allotted to each poet. I referred above to the "artistic singularity" of the poets translated and published here. That singularity is usually composed of multiple facets, which cannot be adequately represented by four or five poems. On the plus side, an anthology can highlight the crisscrossing echoes and influences — as well as the variety and disparities — within a certain linguistic space over a given time period. But again, only some of those echoes and influences have made it into this anthology.

The idea for an anthology of Portuguese poetry in English translation originated with Bernardo Futscher Pereira, who met with me in 2012, shortly before taking up his post as Portugal’s ambassador to Ireland. I said fine, provided you can find an interested publisher. Dedalus Press was very interested, we discussed the general contours and characteristics of the anthology, and I asked Alexis Levitin if he would contribute some of his many excellent translations. He kindly agreed and would have been willing to translate work by other poets on my list, but I had most of them covered, and the time was short, so a large majority of the translations are my own. Here is a list of Levitin’s translations published here:

- Jorge de Sena: all except “Sigefried’s Funeral March”;
- Carlos de Oliveira: the entire section;
- Eugénio de Andrade: the entire section;
- Alexandre O’Neill (1924-1986): “The History of Morality”, “Turkey”, and “First Serious Warning”;
- Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão: all except “Song of Places” and “Song of Genesis”.

Many of Levitin’s and my translations have been previously published, but we have carefully re-examined and often revised them for this publication. Both of us are grateful to our Portuguese friends who helped clarify assorted doubts. Pat Boran and Bernardo Futscher Pereira closely read the final manuscript and made a number of helpful suggestions. Additional translations of work from poets in this anthology as well as from many other Portuguese poets can be found on two internet sites: “Poetry International Rotterdam” and “Poems from the Portuguese”.

My appreciation of Portuguese poetry, and parts of my Introduction, owe debts to a number of critics, some of whom are themselves notable poets: Cláudia Pazos Alonso, Fernando Pinto do Amaral, João Barrento, Gastão Cruz, António Guerreiro, Fernando Guimarães, Manuel Gusmão, Anna M. Klobucka, Oscar Lopes, Joaquim Manuel Magalhães, Rosa Maria Martelo, Fernando Cabral Martins, Pedro Mexia, Eduardo Pitta, Luís

Miguel Queirós and Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre. There are other fine critics, but these are the ones (the ones I happen to remember!) who have illuminated my understanding of poets in this volume, excluding Pessoa, for whom the list of critics would be too long.

Thanks are also due to the poets — or the poets' heirs — and their publishers for allowing their work to be included in this volume.

Richard Zenith  
Lisbon, June 2014