



ALEXANDRE O'NEILL

(Portugal, 1924-1986)

[Friday 1 July 2005]

His surname came from some Irish ancestors, but Alexandre O'Neill, born in Lisbon, was passionately Portuguese. 'Passionately', because he carried on a love/hate relationship with his country. He was passionate, as well, in his personal relationships – whether these were with family members, lovers, or friends. The son of a banker with whom he was always at loggerheads, O'Neill abruptly left home one day and refused to see his father for the next fifteen years. As an adult, similar ruptures occurred with long-time friends on what sometimes seemed like flimsy grounds. He fell madly in love with not one but a whole series of women.

According to Mário Cesariny, it was O'Neill who introduced him and others to the writings of the French Surrealists. In 1949, two years after its founding, the Grupo Surrealista de Lisboa held an exhibition that included work by O'Neill, who in the previous year had published *A Ampola Miraculosa* [The Miraculous Vial]. Designated as a 'graphic poem' but also as a 'novel', it consisted of fifteen images with no apparent relation to each other nor to the fifteen captions that accompanied them. A frontal attack against logical thought and the logic of literature, it was a quintessential product of Portuguese Surrealism. But in 1951, upon the publication of his first full-fledged book of poems, O'Neill parted company with the group.

Though his passion for Surrealism had ended, O'Neill's work continued to display some of its salient characteristics: a disrespect of conventions, both social and literary, an attitude of permanent revolt, playfulness with language, and the use of parody and black humor. These traits are not unique to Surrealism, of course, and O'Neill, whose early experiences included the production of *cadavres exquis* in collaboration with others, had clearly lost faith in automatic processes to arrive at a 'truer', more-than-real art. For the Portuguese Surrealists, poetry existed before the poem; for O'Neill poetry was ultimately a construction that took shape on the written page. It was, as for Cesariny, part of a lifestyle, but as a place of retreat, to help him make sense of his experience and to organize and reflect on his feelings, nearly always with sardonic detachment. He was a die-hard pessimist.

O'Neill was at continual war with Portugal. While Cesariny and other contemporaries wrote poems that inveighed against national life under Salazar, O'Neill's attack ran deeper. Poems such as 'Standing at Fearful Attention' and 'Portugal' suggested that the dictatorial regime was a symptom (the worst symptom) of graver ills – lack of courage and smallness of vision – woven into the nation's psyche. Other poems, such as 'Lament of the Man Who Misses Being Blind', seemed to hold religion and mysticism responsible for an obscurantism that made change difficult if not impossible.

A publicist by profession, famed for inventing some of the most ingenious advertising slogans of his time, O'Neill was unusually adept at manipulating words and using them in an efficacious manner, but he refused to put that talent at the service of a lyrically lofty, feel-good sort of poetry (see 'Simply Expressive'). Stridently anti-Romantic, concerned to keep humanity in its place as just one of earth's species, he did not believe that an especially harmonious world was possible, and he abhorred all attempts to escape the world, whether through mystical or poetical exaltations. His one hope, or consolation, explicitly stated in 'St. Francis's Empty Sandal', was in the connection (never entirely peaceful) he felt with other members of the species.

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POEMS

AN UNORIGINAL POEM ABOUT FEAR

CAT

DOOR TO DOOR

LAMENT OF THE MAN WHO MISSES BEING BLIND

PORTUGAL

SIMPLY EXPRESSIVE

ST. FRANCIS' S EMPTY SANDAL

STANDING AT FEARFUL ATTENTION

An Unoriginal Poem About Fear

Fear will have everything
legs
ambulances
and the armored luxury
of a few cars

It will have eyes no one sees
cautious little hands
almost innocent schemes
ears not only in the walls
but also in the floor
in the ceiling
in the gurgle of drainpipes
and perhaps even (caution!)
ears in your ears

Fear will have everything
phantoms at the opera
ongoing séances
miracles
processions
courageous words
model daughters
honest pawnshops
naughty brothels
various conferences
numerous congresses
excellent jobs
original poems
and poems like this one
utterly sordid projects
heroes
(fear will have heroes!)
real and unreal dressmakers
factory workers
(more or less)
office clerks
(lots)
intellectuals
(what you'd expect)
perhaps your voice

O poema pouco original do medo

O medo vai ter tudo
pernas
ambulâncias
e o luxo blindado
de alguns automóveis

Vai ter olhos onde ninguém os veja
mãozinhas cautelosas
enredos quase inocentes
ouvidos não só nas paredes
mas também no chão
no tecto
no murmúrio dos esgotos
e talvez até (cautela!)
ouvidos nos teus ouvidos

O medo vai ter tudo
fantasmas na ópera
sessões contínuas de espiritismo
milagres
cortejos
frases corajosas
meninas exemplares
seguras casas de penhor
maliciosas casas de passe
conferências várias
congressos muitos
óptimos empregos
poemas originais
e poemas como este
projectos altamente porcos
heróis
(o medo vai ter heróis!)
costureiras reais e irreais
operários
(assim assim)
escriturários
(muitos)
intelectuais
(o que se sabe)
a tua voz talvez

perhaps mine
undoubtedly theirs

It will have capitals
countries
suspicions like everybody
countless friends
kisses
green sweethearts
silent
passionate
anguished lovers

Yes fear will have everything
everything

(I think about what fear will have
and I'm afraid
that's exactly
what fear wants)

*

Fear will have everything
almost everything
and all of us in our different ways
are bound to come
almost all of us
to rats

Yes
to rats

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talvez a minha
com certeza a deles

Vai ter capitais
países
suspeitas como toda a gente
muitíssimos amigos
beijos
namorados esverdeados
amantes silenciosos
ardentes
e angustiados

Ah o medo vai ter tudo
tudo

(Penso no que o medo vai ter
e tenho medo
que é justamente
o que o medo quer)

*

O medo vai ter tudo
quase tudo
e cada um por seu caminho
havemos todos de chegar
quase todos
a ratos

Sim
a ratos

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From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Cat

What are you doing there, cat?
What ambiguity have you come to look at?
Master of yourself, cautious, you wend
your way, testy and always in disguise,
hiding what, in fact, you haven't got and I must
lend
to you, oh cat, nightmare slow and quick,
soft, puffy fur, ice cold eyes.

Of what obscure force are you the dwelling
place?
What crime have you witnessed and in what
spot?
What god gave you your sudden claw
that signs in red this hand, that face?
Oh cat, accomplice to a fearful law
still without words, without a plot,
who are we, your owners or your slaves?

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Door to Door

– Who? The infinite?
Tell him to come in!
It's good for infinity
to be in human company.

– Our help? He hobbles?
If the fellow is lame,
give him what used to be
Grandfather's cane.

– He wants money? No way!
I know the poor swine
wouldn't use it for bread
but for a bottle of wine.

– He insists? Who on earth
does he take himself for,

Gato

Que fazes por aqui, ó gato?
Que ambiguidade vens explorar?
Senhor de ti, avanças, cauto,
meio agastado e sempre a disfarçar
o que afinal não tens e eu te empresto,
ó gato, pesadelo lento e lesto,
fofo no pêlo, frio no olhar!

De que obscura força és a morada?
Qual o crime de que foste testemunha?
Que deus te deu a repentina unha
que rubrica esta mão, aquela cara?
Gato, cúmplice de um medo
ainda sem palavras, sem enredos,
quem somos nós, teus donos ou teus servos?

© 1960, Alexandre O'Neill
From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

De porta em porta

– Quem? O infinito?
Diz-lhe que entre.
Faz bem ao infinito
estar entre gente.

– Uma esmola? Coxeia?
Ao que ele chegou!
Podes dar-lhe a bengala
que era do avô.

– Dinheiro? Isso não!
Já sei, pobrezinho,
que em vez de pão
ia comprar vinho . . .

– Teima? Que topete!
Quem se julga ele

when a tiger ended up
as the rug on our floor?

– To go and see his mother?
Now I've heard it all.
He's not from up north,
and his mother's long gone.

– A victim of what?
Life is tough.
How can he be infinite
if he's not made of hard
stuff?

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se um tigre acabou
nesta sala em tapete?

– Para ir ver a mãe?
Essa é muito forte!
Ele não tem mãe
e não é do Norte . . .

– Vítima de quê?
O dito está dito.
Se não tinha estofo
quem o mandou ser
infinito?

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From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Lament of the Man Who Misses Being Blind

When I was blind I was famed
(what a lucrative game!)
for being able to tell the future.
It's what everyone claimed . . .

But now that I see perfectly
I use my eyesight to prophesy
and nobody wants to believe me,

since it's plain,
they say, for all to see!

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Lamúria do cego que antes o fosse

Quando era cego eu previa
(que freguesia!)
o que ia acontecer.
Era o que se dizia . . .

Mas agora, que bem vejo,
só agoiro do que vejo
e já ninguém me quer crer . . .

Porquê,
se todos os podem ver!

© 1965, Alexandre O'Neill
From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Portugal

If only, Portugal, you were just three syllables,
a beautiful view of the sea,
the green Minho, the whitewashed Algarve,
a tiny, tranquil donkey
trotting along the mountain ridge,
a mill swinging its arms at a wind as stubborn
as a bull but with padded horns and after all
friendly,
if only you were just salt, sun, the south,
the shrewd sparrow,
the meek colloquial ox,
the sizzling sardine,
the waddling fishwife,
the scribbler bundled up in pretty adjectives,
the silent, almondish complaint
of sharp eyes with black lashes,
if only you were just the buzzing of summer,
the buzz of fashion,
the decrepit asthmatic dog of beaches,
the caged cricket, the cagey customer,
the calendar on the wall, the pin on a lapel,
if only, Portugal, you were just three syllables
made of plastic, which would be cheaper!

*

Confectioners of Amarante, potters from
Barcelos,
lace-makers of Viana, bullfighters from Golegã,
your celebrated sweets don't hit my fancy,
no clay cock sings in color on my shelf,
no lacy whiteness trims my daydreams,
and no banderilla adorns my neck.

Portugal: an ongoing discussion with myself,
a soreness to the bone, an unrelenting hunger,
an attentive bloodhound with no nose and no
ducks,

Portugal

Ó Portugal, se fosses só três sílabas,
linda vista para o mar,
Minho verde, Algarve de cal,
jerico rapando o espinhaço da terra,
surdo e miudinho,
moinho a braços com um vento
testarudo, mas embolado e, afinal, amigo,
se fosses só o sal, o sol, o sul,
o ladino pardal,
o manso boi coloquial,
a rechinante sardinha,
a desancada varina,
o plumitivo ladrilhado de lindos adjectivos,
a muda queixa amendoada
duns olhos pestanítidos,
se fosses só a cegarrega do estio, dos estilos,
o ferrugento cão asmático das praias,
o grilo engaiolado, a grila no lábio,
o calendário na parede, o emblema na lapela,
ó Portugal, se fosses só três sílabas
de plástico, que era mais barato!

*

Doceiras de Amarante, barristas de Barcelos,
rendeiras de Viana, toureiros da Golegã,
não há “papo-de-anjo” que seja o meu derriço,
galo que cante a cores na minha prateleira,
alvura arrendada para o meu devaneio,
bandarilha que possa enfeitar-me o cachaço.

Portugal: questão que eu tenho comigo mesmo,
golpe até ao osso, fome sem entretém,
perdigueiro marrado e sem narizes, sem
perdizes,
rocim engraxado,

a spruced-up nag,
a dingy fair,
my regret,
my regret for us all . . .

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feira cabisbaixa,
meu remorso,
meu remorso de todos nós . . .

© 1965, Alexandre O'Neill
From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Simply Expressive

Make your verse flawed,
but do it for a reason:
with flaws that aren't mistakes,
in the fight against what's pretty.

Seize for me those perfectly
round rhymes that are
the sweet rolls of fools
and break their necks,

as someone else demanded
that we do to eloquence.
And if there's an Excellency
who screams "This isn't poetry!",

tell him that no, it isn't –
it's a stumbling, it's sandpaper,
the act of sawing, crushed glass,
shredded paper or a stone roll-

ing against a stone . . .
But you can also make use
of neat, regular rhyme,
for the rule is there's no rule

Bom e expressivo

Acaba mal o teu verso,
mas fá-lo com um desígnio:
é um mal que não é mal,
é lutar contra o bonito.

Vai-me a essas rimas que
tão bem desfecham e que
são o pão de ló dos tolos
e torce-lhes o pescoço,

tal como o outro pedia
se fizesse à eloquência,
e se houver um vossa excelência
que grite: – Não é poesia!,

diz-lhe que não, que não é,
que é topada, lixa três,
serração, vidro moído,
papel que se rasga ou pe-

dra que rola na pedra . . .
Mas também da rima "em cheio"
poderás tirar partido,

except for your own rule,
with your rhyme and rhythm,
to make it not simply pretty
but simply expressive . . .

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St. Francis's Empty Sandal

The apple tree's gratitude and the cat's amnesia
never governed the course of my days.

"Stay where you are!"

is what I ordered the apple tree and the cat,
both still well outside my fondness for them.

I saved them (and myself!) from a fable
whose moral could only have been me, the
chatty
friend of apple trees and companion of cats.

To spurn friendships in two kingdoms of nature
gives rise, I admit, to a certain uneasiness.
But it also gives me freedom.

I see figures on the far side of the valley.
They're running this way.
They're my fellow creatures.
I'll quarrel with them (without a doubt!),
but my idea of them
is still a link.

Let apple trees and cats rest in peace.

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que a regra é não haver regra,

a não ser a de cada um,
com sua rima, seu ritmo,
não fazer bom e bonito,
mas fazer bom e expressivo . . .

© 1962, Alexandre O'Neill
From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

A vazia sandália de S. Francisco

A gratidão da macieira e a amnésia do gato
nunca pautaram o curso dos meus dias.

"Fiquem onde estão!",

foi a minha ordem para a macieira e para o gato,
ainda bem exteriores ao meu fraco por eles.

Salvei-os (e salvei-me!) de uma fábula
cuja moral necessariamente devia ser eu, o
parlante
amigo de macieiras e conhecido de gatos.

Dá um certo desconforto malbaratar assim
amigos
em dois reinos da natureza.
Mas também dá liberdade.

Há uma gente que desponta do outro lado do
vale.

Está a correr para cá.

São os meus semelhantes.

Com eles vou desentender-me (mais que
certo!),
mas a ideia que deles faço
é ainda um laço.

Repousem em paz as macieiras e os gatos.

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From: *Poesias Completas*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

Standing at Fearful Attention

Standing at fearful attention, we're grateful
to fear, which keeps us from going mad.
Decision and courage are bad
for our health; life without living is safer.

Adventurers whose adventures are history,
standing in fear we struggle against
ironic ghosts in our ongoing quest
for what we never were and won't be.

Standing in fear with no voice of our own,
our heart ground up by our teeth, we are
the madmen, we're our own ghosts.

A flock of sheep pursued by fear,
we live so together and so alone
that life's meaning has disappeared.

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Perfilados de medo

Perfilados de medo, agradecemos
o medo que nos salva da loucura.
Decisão e coragem valem menos
e a vida sem viver é mais segura.

Aventureiros já sem aventura,
perfilados de medo combatemos
irónicos fantasmas à procura
do que fomos, do que não seremos.

Perfilados de medo, sem mais voz,
o coração nos dentes oprimido,
os loucos, os fantasmas somos nós.

Rebanho pelo medo perseguido,
já vivemos tão juntos e tão sós
que da vida perdemos o sentido . . .

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Good bio note, commentary, bibliography, poems.