



CARLOS DE OLIVEIRA

(Portugal, 1921-1981)

[Friday 31 December 2004]

The son of Portuguese emigrants to Brazil, Carlos de Oliveira was born in Belém do Pará in 1921. Two years later the family returned to Portugal, settling in a rural district northwest of Coimbra. It was in Coimbra that the writer went to high school and then on to university, graduating in History and Philosophy with a thesis titled *Contribution to a Neo-Realist Aesthetics*. That was in 1947, the fifteenth year of the by then firmly entrenched Salazar dictatorship.

Neo-Realism, which could also have been called Social Realism (were it not for the ‘socialist’ implications of this designation, unacceptable to the Portuguese censors), was the literary and artistic movement that prevailed in Portugal from the late 1930s and into the 1950s. Carlos de Oliveira’s novels – including *Uma Abelha na Chuva* [A Bee in the Rain] (1953), which was made into a movie – count among the highest achievements of Portuguese Neo-Realism, since the author’s concern to denounce economic and social disparities and to foreground the Marxian class struggle did not lead (as it did in some writers of the school) to Manichaeian simplifications of human psychology or to a compromise of artistic principles and ambitions.

Carlos de Oliveira, whose prose and poetry are marked by a melancholy tone, was never seduced by the optimism of hardcore Marxism. He was cautiously hopeful (see the ‘Sonnet’, written early on), he believed that it was worth fighting to transform the socio-economic system, but he had a tragic sense of life, a keen awareness of inherent human weaknesses and frustrations that no political revolution or reconfiguration could resolve.

The doomed struggle for perfection was vividly played out in Oliveira’s writing. Not prolific, he obsessively reworked what he wrote, publishing various versions of the same titles. His poetry, which he collected into a single volume taking up only 200 pages, was a constant pursuit of the right words, and of no more than the right words. His poems are an attempt to elaborate, with scientific precision, a linguistic replica of specific moments and realities from the outside world. They don’t aspire to conveying “the big picture” but delve,

rather, into the materiality and geometry of the world's constituent parts.

The most typical Carlos de Oliveira poem is a highly distilled composition which may include many sections but whose lines are quite short (see 'Lichens'). But he also wrote prose poems (see 'The Filling Station' and 'Dunes'), and his last novel (if 'novel' is the write word for it), the much acclaimed *Finisterra* (1978), could be considered a book-length prose poem. The writer, who also painted, died in Lisbon in 1981.

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POEMS

AFTERNOON
AN INSTANT
CHILDHOOD
COLLAGE
DUNES
FILLING STATION
FOG
LICHENS
MAP
SONNET

Afternoon

The afternoon was striving
without a sound
in the happy realm of its high clouds,
conjugating
shimmerings and shudderings,
rhyming
the tenuous vibrations
of the world,
when I
saw the poem put together on the heights
reflected here,
in rhythms, patterns, structures
of a syntax bringing forth bright
airy things – like wind and light.

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From: *Guernica and Other Poems*
Publisher: Guernica Editions, Toronto, 2004

Tarde

A tarde trabalhava
sem rumor
no âmbito feliz das suas nuvens,
conjugava
citrações e frémitos,
rimava
as ténues vibrações
do mundo,
quando vi
o poema organizado nas alturas
reflectir-se aqui,
em ritmos, desenhos, estruturas
duma sintaxe que produz
coisas aéreas como o vento e a luz.

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From: *Trabalho Poético*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

An Instant

This column
of firmer syllables,
this flame
on the summit of the dunes
flaring
for just a moment,
this balance
so close to beauty,
this poem
just before
the wind.

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From: *Guernica and Other Poems*
Publisher: Guernica Editions, Toronto, 2004

Instante

Esta coluna
de sílabas mais firmes,
esta chama
no vértice das dunas
fulgurando
apenas um momento,
este equilíbrio
tão perto da beleza,
este poema
anterior
ao vento.

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From: *Trabalho Poético*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

Childhood

Dreams
as large as cedars
that must
be brought from afar
on shoulders
to find
in the winter of memory
this crackle
of a flame:
your fragrance,
firewood
of melancholy.

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Infância

Sonhos
enormes como cedros
que é preciso
trazer de longe
aos ombros
para achar
no inverno da memória
este rumor
de lume:
o teu perfume,
lenha
da melancolia.

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From: *Trabalho Poético*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

Collage

*with lines from Desnos, Mayakovsky,
and Rilke*

Words,
could they be only myths
like the myrtle
of the dead?
Yes,
I know the power of words,
less than nothing,
less than trampled petals
in a dance hall,
and yet
if I were to call
who among men would hear me
without words?

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Dunes

To count the grains of sand in these
dunes is my present task. I never
imagined they were so similar, in their
imponderable minuteness, in the
scintillation of salt and gold that is wearing out
my eyes. My friend, the inventor of
games, found me practically blind. I hardly
recognized him in the radiant fog of the
beach. He spoke with his usual precision:

“What you need is a microscope. Get
one right away, transform those
imperceptible grains into great orographic
masses, into stars, and set yourself up

Colagem

*com versos de Desnos, Maiakovski e
Rilke*

Palavras,
sereis apenas mitos
semelhantes ao mirto
dos mortos?
Sim,
conheço
a força
das palavras,
menos que nada,
menos que pétalas pisadas
num salão de baile,
e no entanto
se eu chamasse
quem dentre os homens me ouviria
sem palavras?

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Dunas

Contar os grãos de areia destas dunas é o
meu ofício actual. Nunca julguei
que fossem tão parecidos, na pequenez
imponderável, na cintilação de sal e oiro
que me desgasta os olhos. O inventor de jogos
meu amigo veio encontrar-me
quase cego. Entre a névoa radiosa da praia mal
o conheci. Falou com a exactidão
de sempre:

“O que lhe falta é um microscópio.
Arranje-o depressa, transforme os grãos
imperceptíveis em grandes massas orográficas,
em astros, e instale-se num

on one of them. Analyze its valleys, its mountains, take advantage of the energy of its brilliance, like that of shattered glass, to send to Earth firm scientific data. After that choose a comfortable patch of shade and wait for the astronauts to wake you up.”

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deles. Analise os vales, as montanhas, aproveite a energia desse fulgor de vidro esmigalhado para enviar à Terra dados científicos seguros. Escolha depois uma sombra confortável e espere que os astronautas o acordem.”

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Filling Station

I place my leisurely hand on the hoods of these cars like someone stroking the mane of a horse. They come in dying of thirst. I imagine that they've been lost in the desert and that their destiny is just to be in a rush. In this job I listen to the sound of the gears, the subtle movement of the world accelerating bit by bit. Who am I, meanwhile, what scale do I have for weighing without error my life and the dreams of those who are passing by?

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Posto de gasolina

Poiso a mão vagarosa no capô dos carros como se afagasse a crina dum cavalo. Vêm mortos de sede. Julgo que se perderam no deserto e o seu destino é apenas terem pressa. Neste emprego, ouço o ruído da engrenagem, o suave movimento do mundo a acelerar-se pouco a pouco. Quem sou eu, no entanto, que balança tenho para pesar sem erro a minha vida e os sonhos de quem passa?

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Fog

The city falling
house by house
from the sky down to the hills,
from top to bottom built
by rain and fog,
found
that other city rising
from the ground, with a moonlight
of gleaming windows,
and in the air
the shock destroyed them
silently,
so that all that could be seen
was the city that did not exist.

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Nevoeiro

A cidade caía
casa a casa
do céu sobre as colinas,
construída de cima para baixo
por chuvas e neblinas,
encontrava
a outra cidade que subia
do chão com o luar
das janelas acesas
e no ar
o choque as destruía
silenciosamente,
de modo que se via
apenas a cidade inexistente.

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Lichens

I

Somewhere,
in memory's
coldest
corner
but clear-cut
like a square centimeter
of snow
that begs
from inner frozenness
its very light,
a landscape
of lichens
rises up,

II

the slow workings
of metamorphosis
between the algae
and the poisonous
bell jar
of the toad stool

Líquenes

I

Algures,
no lugar
mais frio
da memória,
mas
nítido
como um centímetro
quadrado de neve
que pede
a própria luz
à algidez interior,
surge
a paisagem
de líquenes,

II

o lento trabalho
da metamorfose
entre a alga
e a campânula
venenosa

[protosponge
engorged
in caverns,
in acidic shadows],
cryptogamic
sleep
incapable of dreaming
the shaping of a flower

III

right there
upon the clarity
so intensely vitrified
by memory
that it seems to come from
an infra-childhood
the sudden
square centimeter
of snow and light
where the lichens rise up
now
monomicro-
cryptomaniac,

IV

meticulous
in the dampness
that they make
di
lut
ing in it,
and it
for its part
excretes them
slowly
in each
exhalation
[more each moment
than before]

V

so similar
in the scale
of this book

do míscaro
[protosponja
que se embebe
nas grutas,
na sombra ácida],
o sono
criptogâmico
incapaz de sonhar
a forma duma flor

III

mesmo
sobre a nitidez
vitrificada tão
intensamente
pela memória
que parece provir
da infra-infância
o súbito
centímetro quadrado
de neve e luz
onde os líquenes surgem
agora
monomicro-
criptomaníacos,

IV

meticulosos
na humidade
que fabricam
di
luin
do-se nela,
e ela
por sua vez
segrega-os
devagar
em cada
exalação
[sempre mais
do que eram]

V

tão semelhante

to the meticulous
respiration [?]
of slime
producing
not flowers
but more slime,
sleep as well
dreamless
spreading
through the transparency
of the water:

VI

this is how
the gradual
eclipse
over the square
centimeter that
the lichens
cover
in memory
comes to pass,
this is how
light and snow
hide themselves
bit by bit, this is how
all is forgotten.

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From: *Guernica and Other Poems*
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na escala
deste livro
a respiração [?]
minuciosa
do lodo
produzindo
não flores
mais lodo,
sono também
sem sonho
alastrando
na transparência
da água:

VI

assim
se cumpre
o eclipse
gradual
sobre o centímetro
quadrado que
os líquenes
cobrem
na memória,
assim
a luz e a neve
se ocultam
pouco a pouco, assim
se esquece.

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Map

I

The poet
[the cartographer?]
gazes
at his
calligraphic islands
surrounded
by a tideless
sea,
an archipelago
bereft of
wind,
fauna, flora,
and the misty breath
of foam,

II

thinking
that
perhaps some
straying bird
will bring
to the solitude
of the map,
to the empty reefs,
a quiver,
a flight,
if it is possible
to fly
over such
aridity.

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Mapa

I

O poeta
[o cartógrafo?]
observa
as suas
ilhas caligráficas
cercadas
por um mar
sem marés,
arquipélago
a que falta
vento,
fauna, flora,
e o hálito húmido
da espuma,

II

pensando
que talvez alguma ave errante
traga
à solidão
do mapa,
aos recifes desertos,
um frémito,
um voo,
se for possível
voar
sobre tanta
aridez.

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Sonnet

I'm accused of being bitter, inclined
to despair, as if my poetry's pain
weren't your flesh, O scattered men,
and my sorrow your sorrow, O mind.

Beauty? One day I will sing of it,
when the light I don't disbelieve in falls
on the dark that hems us in like a wall
and you reach, O joy, your kingdom.

In the meantime let me speak:
let sadness be the revenge I drink
until the wall cracks and the night bursts.

My voice of death is the voice of struggle:
those who, trusting, delve into their suffering,
have a hope whose glory is of higher worth.

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Soneto

Acusam-me de mágoa e desalento,
como se toda a pena dos meus versos
não fosse carne vossa, homens dispersos,
e a minha dor a tua, pensamento.

Hei-de cantar-vos a beleza um dia,
quando a luz que não nego abrir o escuro
da noite que nos cerca como um muro,
e chegares a teus reinos, alegria.

Entretanto, deixai que me não cale:
até que o muro fenda, a treva estale,
seja a tristeza o vinho da vingança.

A minha voz de morte é a voz da luta:
se quem confia a própria dor perscruta,
maior glória tem em ter esperança.

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From: *Trabalho Poético*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

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