



CESÁRIO VERDE

(Portugal, 1855-1886)

[Saturday 1 August 2009]

Son of a prosperous hardware dealer based in Lisbon, Cesário Verde was destined to take over the family business. He probably attended a commercial school and was also enrolled, for at least a few months, in the capital city's Course of Arts and Letters. This young businessman, who handled the correspondence for his father's firm, was to publish the first great modern poems in Portuguese when he was scarcely more than twenty years old.

Not many years later, at age thirty-one, Cesário Verde died from tuberculosis and without a book to his name. The poems he had published in newspapers and magazines had gone virtually unnoticed, and the scant critical attention they garnered was almost always negative. This was true even for his most famous work, the long poem *O Sentimento dum Ocidental* (The Feeling of a Westerner), published in 1880 as part of a newspaper commemorating the tercentenary of the death of Luís de Camões. In a letter to a friend, Verde complained that his poem “did not receive a considered glance, a smile, a note of scorn, an observation”, except on the part of a Spanish critic who wrote that its verses “cut a poor figure in those pages imbued with such lofty national spirit”. Indeed the poem – which describes with an abundance of realistic detail an oppressive, asphyxiating and unhealthy city – was not in keeping with celebratory spirit of the publication in which it appeared. The poet himself explained to the editors that he wanted to depict “the present state of our great Lisbon which, in relation to its glorious past, seems but the corpse of a city”. This sombre vision is attenuated throughout the poem, however, by virtue of the poet's acutely focused gaze, not because he romanticises what he sees but because his dazzling, unexpected associations of images – juxtaposed according to a method suggestive of techniques employed decades later by expressionist cinema – confer a precarious transcendence on what would otherwise be merely a crude picture of human misery in a city entering into the industrial age and with a population growing at an unprecedented rate.

The kind of “social concern” evinced by this poem is atypical for its time, and somewhat atypical for any time is the poem's marvellous unconcern to be so concerned. In its 176 verses there is not the slightest hint of

condescension. The narrator is a *flâneur*, in the manner of Baudelaire (a poet read and much admired by Cesário Verde), wandering through Lisbon's older neighborhoods as the evening falls and gradually gives way – by the poem's fourth section – to the deep, “dead hours” of night. Many of Verde's poems, set in the rural outskirts of Lisbon, are illuminated by the clear light of day, but here he visits Lisbon's darker, nocturnal side, for no other reasons than to “show and examine what's real”, to “seek and attain the perfection of things”, and to record the feeling of a visually and emotionally alert westerner who happens – without a program, without a mission – to hope for a better future.

Given that *The Feeling of a Westerner* is widely regarded as the greatest Portuguese poem of the nineteenth century, a masterpiece on a par with some of the best lyric poetry of Camões and the great odes of Fernando Pessoa, who spared no praise for the work of his precursor, it may seem strange that it had to wait until now – almost 130 years later – to be rendered into English. This is no doubt due in part to the difficulty of the task. Without obvious poetical raptures, the poem's plethora of concrete references and images, organised into tightly metered and rhymed stanzas, pose an unusual challenge to the translator. Richard Zenith, while foregoing end rhyme, has made free use of internal rhymes, assonance and alliteration. And rather than replicate the unusual stanzaic structure of the original – quatrains consisting of a decasyllable followed by three alexandrines – he has adopted tetrameter throughout, in an effort to sustain the poetic momentum.

In his brief life Cesário Verde wrote about forty poems. Soon after his death, a friend named Silva Pinto published close to half of them in a volume he entitled *O Livro de Cesário Verde* (The Book of Cesário Verde). Since he surely had nothing like a finished manuscript at his disposal, we may assume that Silva Pinto was responsible for structuring the book and for introducing various changes in the poems. Almost all of those changes are, remarkably, right on the mark, leading critics to suspect that the friend and posthumous editor had some special information, or had discussed the poems closely with their author.

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POEMS

THE FEELING OF A WESTERNER

The Feeling of a Westerner

I

VESPERS

When evening falls across our streets
And sullen melancholy fills the air,
The Tagus, the tang, the shadows and bustle
Bring me an absurd desire to suffer.

The sky hangs low and seems all hazy;
The gas from the streetlamps makes me queasy;
The tumult of buildings, chimneys and people
Is cloaked in a dullish, Londonish hue.

O Sentimento dum Ocidental

I

AVE-MARIAS

Nas nossas ruas, ao anoitecer,
Há tal soturnidade, há tal melancolia,
Que as sombras, o bulício, o Tejo, a maresia
Despertam-me um desejo absurdo de sofrer.

O céu parece baixo e de neblina,
O gás extravasado enjoa-me, perturba;
E os edifícios, com as chaminés, e a turba
Toldam-se dum cor monótona e londrina.

Oh lucky travellers in hired coaches
Now hieing to the railway station! Countries
And exhibitions file past me: Madrid,
Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg, the world!

The timber frames of future buildings
Resemble cages for keeping animals;
Like swooping bats the carpenters leap
From beam to beam at the sound of the bell.

Clusters of callous, tar-smearred caulkers
Return from the slipways, coats on their
shoulders;
I wander through alleys that lead to the river
Or walk by the wharves where boats are
docked.

I evoke the ocean chronicles: the Moors,
Old vessels and heroes – all resurrected!
Shipwrecked Camões swims his book to shore!
(1)
Great carracks that I'll never see ride the
waves!

The twilight inspires, and also disturbs me!
An English battleship launches its cutters
While swank hotels on land bedazzle
With china and flatware clinking at dinner.

Two dentists argue inside a streetcar;
A clumsy clown is struggling on stilts;
Children flit, like cherubs, on balconies;
Hatless, bored shopkeepers wait at their doors!

The shipyards and workshops are emptying out;
The river glints thickly, the workwomen hurry;
And a black school of Herculean fishwives
Bursts out of nowhere, joking, laughing.

Wagging sumptuous hips they come!
Their manly torsos remind me of pillars;
And some, in the baskets on their heads,
Rock sons who'll one day drown in storms.

On frigates – barefoot! – they unload coal (2)
From dawn to dusk, then crowd together
In a neighbourhood where cats meow
And the rotting fish breed infection!

Batem carros de aluguer, ao fundo,
Levando à via-férrea os que se vão. Felizes!
Ocorrem-me em revista exposições, países:
Madrid, Paris, Berlim, S. Petersburgo, o
mundo!

Semelham-se a gaiolas, com viveiros,
As edificações somente emadeiradas:
Como morcegos, ao cair das badaladas,
Saltam de viga em viga os mestres carpinteiros.

Voltam os calafates, aos magotes,
De jaquetão ao ombro, enfarruscados, secos;
Embrenho-me, a cismar, por boqueirões, por
becos,
Ou erro pelos cais a que se atacam botes.

E evoco, então, as crónicas navais:
Mouros, baixéis, heróis, tudo ressuscitado!
Luta Camões no Sul, salvando um livro a nado!
Singram soberbas naus que eu não verei jamais!

E o fim da tarde inspira-me; e incomoda!
De um couraçado inglês vogam os escaleres;
E em terra num tinir de louças e talheres
Flamejam, ao jantar alguns hotéis da moda.

Num trem de praça arengam dois dentistas;
Um trôpego arlequim braceja numas andas;
Os querubins do lar flutuam nas varandas;
Às portas, em cabelo, enfadam-se os lojistas!

Vazam-se os arsenais e as oficinas;
Reluz, viscoso, o rio, apressam-se as obreiras;
E num cardume negro, hercúleas, galhofeiras,
Correndo com firmeza, assomam as varinas.

Vêm sacudindo as ancas opulentas!
Seus troncos varonis recordam-me pilastras;
E algumas, à cabeça, embalam nas canastras
Os filhos que depois naufragam nas tormentas.

Descalças! Nas descargas de carvão,
Desde manhã à noite, a bordo das fragatas;
E apinham-se num bairro aonde miam gatas,
E o peixe podre gera os focos de infecção!

II

AFTER DARK

Prisoners bang on the bars of their cells –
A sound that rattles my nerves with shame!
The Aljube jail, for old women and children,
Rarely encloses a titled lady!

I feel so ill as the lights come on
I worry I might have an aneurysm;
The sight of the jails, crosses, cathedral,
Fills and sinks my heart with tears.

One floor after another lights up,
And cafés, restaurants, tobacco and other shops
Spread like a sheet their white reflections.
The moon brings jugglers, the circus, to mind.

On an ancient square two churches raise
The clergy's black, funereal spectre;
I sketch there a lonely, dour inquisitor,
Daring to extend myself into History.

In quarters which the earthquake flattened
Equal, straight buildings wall me in; (3)
Everywhere else I face steep streets
And the tolling of pious, monastic bells.

But gracing a common, public square
With lovers' benches and lithe pepper trees
A war-sized monument cast in bronze
Stands, on a pillar, for an epic that was! (4)

And in this assemblage of stunted bodies
I think of the Fever, imagine the Cholera;
Returning soldiers look sombre as ghosts;
A gleaming palace stands opposite a hovel.

Mounted patrolmen set out from the archways
Of army barracks that once were convents;
The Middle Ages! Others, on foot,
Range through the capital, now turning cold.

Sad town! I dread you'll arouse a dead passion
In me! I mourn upon seeing your elegant
Ladies so white in the lamp-lit distance,
Leaning and smiling at jewellers' windows.

II

NOITE FECHADA

Toca-se às grades, nas cadeias. Som
Que mortifica e deixa umas loucuras mansas!
O Aljube, em que hoje estão velhinhas e
crianças,
Bem raramente encerra uma mulher de “dom”!

E eu desconfio, até, de um aneurisma
Tão mórbido me sinto, ao acender das luzes;
À vista das prisões, da velha Sé, das Cruzes,
Chora-me o coração que se enche e que se
abisma.

A espaços, iluminam-se os andares,
E as tascas, os cafés, as tendas, os estancos
Alastram em lençol os seus reflexos brancos;
E a lua lembra o circo e os jogos malabares.

Duas igrejas, num saudoso largo,
Lançam a nódoa negra e fúnebre do clero:
Nelas esfumo um ermo inquisidor severo,
Assim que pela História eu me aventuro e
alargo.

Na parte que abateu no terremoto,
Muram-me as construções rectas, iguais,
crescidas;
Afrontam-me, no resto, as íngremes subidas,
E os sinos dum tanger monástico e devoto.

Mas, num recinto público e vulgar,
Com bancos de namoro e exíguas pimenteiras,
Brônzeo, monumental, de proporções
guerreiras,
Um épico doutrora ascende, num pilar!

E eu sonho o Cólera, imagino a Febre,
Nesta acumulação de corpos enfezados;
Sombrios e espectrais recolhem os soldados;
Inflama-se um palácio em face de um casebre.

Partem patrulhas de cavalaria
Dos arcos dos quartéis que foram já conventos;
Idade Média! A pé, outras, a passos lentos,
Derramam-se por toda a capital, que esfria.

Coming down from the department stores,
The florists and dressmakers wrench my gut;
They're hardly able to hold up their heads,
And many are walk-ons and chorus girls.

Even in sordid human tableaux
I, with my pince-nez, find subject matter:
I enter the beerhouse; at the immigrants' tables,
Harshly lit, they laugh and play dominoes.

III

BY GASLIGHT

And I go back out. The night's weight crushes.
Impure women roam the sidewalks.
O languid hospitals! Ill-clad shoulders
Shiver from drafts where streets open up.

Warm shops surround me. I think I'm seeing
Flanking candles, rows of chapels
With saints and the faithful, flowers, more
candles,
More saints, in a vastly long cathedral.

The bourgeois women of Catholicism
Slip on the ground that's tunnelled by
drainpipes.
To me they recall, with their whining pianos,
The nuns who, fasting, died of madness.

An aproned knife maker, working the lathe,
Redhotly wields his blacksmith's hammer;
And bread, still warm, from the baker's oven
Sends forth its honest, wholesome smell.

And I, whose goal is a book that galls,
Want it to show and examine what's real.
Boutiques shine with the latest fashions;
A street urchin gapes at their window displays.

O long descents! Could I but paint
With skilled, sincere, salubrious verses
The delicate shimmering of your streetlamps
And all your romantic moonlit pallor!

That sensual, corseted creature selecting
Printed shawls – she moves like a snake!
Her excellence is a magnet amidst

Triste cidade! Eu temo que me avives
Uma paixão defunta! Aos lampiões distantes,
Enlutam-me, alvejando, as tuas elegantes,
Curvadas a sorrir às montras dos ourives.

E mais: as costureiras, as floristas
Descem dos magasins, causam-me sobressaltos;
Custa-lhes a elevar os seus pescoços altos
E muitas delas são comparsas ou coristas.

E eu, de luneta de uma lente só,
Eu acho sempre assunto a quadros revoltados:
Entro na brasserie; às mesas de emigrados,
Ao riso e à crua luz joga-se o dominó.

III

AO GÁS

E saio. A noite pesa, esmaga. Nos
Passeios de lajedo arrastam-se as impuras.
Ó moles hospitais! Sai das embocaduras
Um sopro que arripia os ombros quase nus.

Cercam-me as lojas, tépidas. Eu penso
Ver círios laterais, ver filas de capelas,
Com santos e fiéis, andores, ramos, velas,
Em uma catedral de um comprimento imenso.

As burguesinhas do Catolicismo
Resvalam pelo chão minado pelos canos;
E lembram-me, ao chorar doente dos pianos,
As freiras que os jejuns matavam de histerismo.

Num cutileiro, de avental, ao torno,
Um forjador maneja um malho, rubramente;
E de uma padaria exala-se, inda quente,
Um cheiro salutar e honesto a pão no forno.

E eu que medito um livro que exacerbe,
Quisera que o real e a análise mo dessem;
Casas de confecções e modas resplandecem;
Pelas vitrines olha um ratoneiro imberbe.

Longas descidas! Não poder pintar
Com versos magistras, salubres e sinceros,
A esguia difusão dos vossos reverberos,
E a vossa palidez romântica e lunar!

The finery piled on mahogany counters.

And that old dame with coiled plaits!
Her train with its vertical, two-tone stripes
Mocks a spread fan! Her Mecklenburg horses
Wait with the carriage, pawing the pavement.

Decorative plants wilt on the tables
Where clerks unroll their foreign fabrics;
In clouds of satins they bow and smile;
Rice powder hovers and chokes the air.

But all grows weary! Slowly, like stars,
The storefronts' hanging lights go dim;
The glittering buildings become mausoleums;
A lone, hoarse voice hawks lottery tickets.

And there on a corner: "Please, sir! Take pity!"
Whenever I pass him, that little old man,
Bald and eternal, begs for alms:
The teacher at school who taught me Latin!

IV

THE DEAD HOURS

The lofty ceiling of air, of oxygen,
Runs between the facing rooftops;
The stars' tired eyes shed tears of light;
Blue dreams of transmigration exalt me.

Below all that, what portals! What streets!
I hear, in the dark, a screw hit the ground,
The clacking of shutters, the jangle of locks;
And the bloodshot eyes of a buggy scare me.

I follow, like lines on a music stave,
The stately double row of façades
While pastoral notes from a distant flute
Trill, in the silence, a gloomy warning.

Oh, if I'd never die! If forever
I'd seek and attain the perfection of things!
I lose myself envisioning wives
Who chastely nest in clear-glass mansions!

Dear sons! What swift dreams, alighting,
Will bring sharp clarity to your lives!
I want the mothers and sisters you love

Que grande cobra, a lúbrica pessoa,
Que espartilhada escolhe uns xales com
debuxo!
Sua excelência atraindo, magnética, entre luxo,
Que ao longo dos balcões de mogno se
amontoa.

E aquela velha, de bandós! Por vezes,
A sua traîne imita um leque antigo, aberto,
Nas barras verticais, a duas tintas. Perto,
Escarvam, à vitória, os seus mecklemburgueses.

Desdobram-se tecidos estrangeiros;
Plantas ornamentais secam nos mostradores;
Flocos de pós de arroz pairam sufocadores,
E em nuvens de cetins requebram-se os
caixeiros.

Mas tudo cansa! Apagam-se nas frentes
Os candelabros, como estrelas, pouco a pouco;
Da solidão regouga um cauteleiro rouco;
Tornam-se mausoléus as armações fulgentes.

"Dó da miséria!... Compaixão de mim!..."
E, nas esquinas, calvo, eterno, sem repouso,
Pede-me esmola um homenzinho idoso,
Meu velho professor nas aulas de latim!

IV

HORAS MORTAS

O tecto fundo de oxigénio, de ar,
Estende-se ao comprido, ao meio das trapeiras;
Vêm lágrimas de luz dos astros com olheiras,
Enleva-me a quimera azul de transmigrar.

Por baixo, que portões! Que arruamentos!
Um parafuso cai nas lajes, às escuras:
Colocam-se taipais, rangem as fechaduras,
E os olhos dum caleche espantam-me,
sangrentos.

E eu sigo, como as linhas de uma pauta
A dupla correnteza augusta das fachadas;
Pois sobem, no silêncio, infaustas e trinadas,
As notas pastoris de uma longínqua flauta.

Se eu não morresse, nunca! E eternamente

To live in luminous, fragile homes.

Ah! Like our grandfathers' fleets, like fervent
Nomads, like the ruddy race to come, (5)
We'll go and explore every continent
And sail across the watery expanses!

But how, if we live enclosed by stone
In a dark and treeless valley of walls?
I think I see knives flash in the shadows
And hear a strangled cry for help.

And along these murky corridors
The taverns, if I peer in, appall me.
Some sorry drunks are staggering home
And sing, arms joined, for old time's sake.

But I'm not afraid of being robbed;
The dubious characters fall behind me.
The scrawny and mangy dogs don't bark;
They look a little like yellowish wolves.

And those keepers of keys, the night watchmen,
Scan with their lanterns each entryway;
Above them loose women, in scanty robes,
Smoke and cough at the balcony windows.

And looming out of that jagged mass
Of tomblike buildings tall as hills,
Human Pain, like a baleful sea,
Seeks vast horizons for its bitter tides!

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1) When shipwrecked at the mouth of the Mekong River, Luís de Camões managed to save himself and his epic-in-progress, *The Lusíads*.

2) Apart from their main activity, Lisbon's fishwives did other sorts of labour, unloading coal being a particularly common one.

3) Lisbon's downtown district known as the Baixa was completely levelled by the 1755 earthquake. This and other neighbourhoods were rebuilt with perpendicular streets lined by buildings of the same height.

4) Refers to the statue of Luís de Camões, in the middle of the square that bears his name. 'The Feeling of a Westerner' was published in 1880, in a pamphlet celebrating the tercentenary of Camões's death.

5) This seems to allude to when the sea-goddess Tethys, addressing Vasco da Gama and his crew in Canto X of *The Lusíads*, "prophesies" the coming of other great Portuguese navigators.

Buscasse e conseguisse a perfeição das cousas!
Esqueço-me a prever castíssimas esposas,
Que aninhem em mansões de vidro
transparente!

Ó nossos filhos! Que de sonhos ágeis,
Pousando, vos trarão a nitidez às vidas!
Eu quero as vossas mães e irmãs estremecidas,
Numas habitações translúcidas e frágeis.

Ah! Como a raça ruiva do porvir,
E as frotas dos avós, e os nómadas ardentes,
Nós vamos explorar todos os continentes
E pelas vastidões aquáticas seguir!

Mas se vivemos, os emparedados,
Sem árvores, no vale escuro das muralhas!...
Julgo avistar, na treva, as folhas das navalhas
E os gritos de socorro ouvir estrangulados.

E nestes nebulosos corredores
Nauseiam-me, surgindo, os ventres das
tabernas;
Na volta, com saudade, e aos bordos sobre as
pernas,
Cantam, de braço dado, uns tristes bebedores.

Eu não receio, todavia, os roubos;
Afastam-se, a distância, os dúbios caminhantes;
E sujos, sem ladrar, ósseos, febris, errantes,
Amareladamente, os cães parecem lobos.

E os guardas, que revistam as escadas,
Caminham de lanterna e servem de chaveiros;
Por cima, as imorais, nos seus roupões ligeiros,
Tossem, fumando sobre a pedra das sacadas.

E, enorme, nesta massa irregular
De prédios sepulcrais, com dimensões de
montes,
A Dor humana busca os amplos horizontes,
E tem marés, de fel, como um sinistro mar!

From: *O Livro de Cesário Verde*

Publisher: Silva Pinto, Lisboa

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Links

In Portuguese

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