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MANUEL ANTÓNIO PINA

(Portugal, 1943-2012)

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Manuel António Pina took a law degree, worked as a journalist for three decades and after that wrote regularly for newspapers as a columnist. His literary work, with more than fifty published titles, includes poetry, children’s literature, theatre, fiction, essays and commentary. His poetic debut, in 1974, featured one of the longest and oddest titles of Portuguese poetry: *Ainda Não É o Fim nem o Princípio do Mundo Calma É Apenas Um Pouco Tarde* (It’s Not Yet the End Nor the Beginning Calm Down It’s Just a Little Late). The laconic title of one of his last works – *Os Livros* (Books) – makes for a sharp contrast. Manuel António Pina won the prestigious Camões Prize in 2011.

Whether in the subversive tone and self-irony of his early works, or in the more circumspect register employed in his final collections, Pina’s poetry always takes up the same questions: Does it make sense to apply the singular pronoun ‘I’ to the countless persons we have been throughout our life, or even to the person we are at present? Is there anything we feel to be truly real that cannot be expressed in words, or are there only words, and are we ourselves made only of words that, perhaps paradoxically, are extraneous to us? And if everything is words, then won’t what we imagine and dream, what we thought of doing but didn’t do, and what we remember – perhaps inaccurately – of events and people (including our own selves), be every bit as real as objective reality, if not more so? Many similar sorts of questions could be added to this list. Pina doesn’t know the answers, but he knows that any answer to any question is also composed of words.

Some of the main themes of his poetry were introduced into Portuguese literature by the Modernist generation of Fernando Pessoa and Mário de Sá-Carneiro. But in Pina’s work there is none of those heroic explosions of the I, none of that wanting “to be everything in every possible way”, to cite the motto adopted by Álvaro de Campos. To Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre”, Pina might reply, “Yes, but *which* I is someone else?”

This absence of a stable, self-evident and recognisable I is not given a tragic dimension in Pina’s poetry. It is,

rather, a kind of unspoken ontological irritation, suggested by syntax more than by rhetoric – because grammar presupposes an I and ceases to function in its absence or uncertainty.

Pina's first books routinely sabotaged syntax and, as a deliberate consequence, undermined the very potential of his poetry to be eloquent. In his later books, the poet has opted for a more fluent prosody, and his poems have also assumed a broader, more noticeably ethical stance. But the same dilemma continues to haunt this poetry. On the one hand, there are too many words and everything has already been said, yet we cannot stop uttering them. "The impossibility of speaking / and of remaining silent / cannot stop speaking, wrote I or someone else," writes Pina in a poem from *Cuidados Intensivos* (Intensive Cares). On the other hand, it would be a good thing if words were lacking, since that lack would indicate the existence of a dimension whose primordial silence was still intact, untouched. A place, in other words (resorting to the title of one of Pina's books, *Nenhuma Palavra e Nenhuma Lembrança*), with "no word and no memory".

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POEMS

EXTREME UNCTION HIT AND RUN IN A STATION OF THE METRO VOICES [G.'S CONSOLATION TO PAULINE]

Extreme Unction

A brief and affable sorrow
surfacing in the eyes, a distant disappointment,
you died as if gently begging pardon
for making us lose time.

You were in a rush but didn't show it,
you feared that we were not prepared,
and, hovering above us, you waited
for us to say it all, and do what needed to be
done.

Dying is no reason to be proud,
but you were too exhausted to explain yourself.
And worst of all, it was July,
vacations set, relatives already gone.

Extrema-unção

Uma breve, amável mágoa à
flor dos olhos, um distante desapontamento,
morrias como se pedisses desculpa
por nos fazeres perder tempo.

Tinhas pressa mas não o mostravas,
receavas que não estivéssemos preparados,
e, suspenso sobre nós, esperavas
que disséssemos tudo, que fizéssemos o
apropriado.

Morrer não é motivo de orgulho,
mas estavas cansado de mais para te justificares.
Ainda por cima no mês de Julho,
com as férias marcadas, ausentes os familiares.

We had taken the children away,
made our phone calls, chosen our words.
The room was now in order, the bed remade
with freshly laundered sheets. Nothing missing,
but your death.

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Tínhamos levado as crianças de casa,
feito os telefonemas, escolhido os dizeres.
O quarto fora arrumado, a cama mudada
com roupa lavada. Só faltava morreres.

© 2001, Manuel António Pina
From: *Atropelamento e fuga*
Publisher: Asa, Porto

Hit and run

More than silence was needed,
what was needed was at least a screaming fit,
a nervous breakdown, a fire,
doors slamming, a rushing about.
But you said nothing,
you wanted to cry, but first you had to
straighten up your hair,
you asked me the time, it was 3 p.m.,
I don't remember now which day, maybe a day
when it was I who was dying,
a day that had begun badly, I had left
the keys in the lock on the inside of the door,
and now there you were, dead (dead and even
looking dead!), gazing up at me in silence
stretched out on the road,
and no one asked a thing and no one spoke
aloud.

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Atropelamento e fuga

Era preciso mais do que silêncio,
era preciso pelo menos uma grande gritaria,
uma crise de nervos, um incêndio,
portas a bater, correrias.
Mas ficaste calada,
apetecia-te chorar mas primeiro tinhas que
arranjar o cabelo,
perguntaste-me as horas, eram 3 da tarde,
já não me lembro de que dia, talvez de um dia
em que era eu quem morria,
um dia que começara mal, tinha deixado
as chaves na fechadura do lado de dentro da
porta,
e agora ali estavas tu, morta (morta como se
estivesses morta!), olhando-me em silêncio
estendida no asfalto,
e ninguém perguntava nada e ninguém falava
alto!

© 2001, Manuel António Pina
From: *Atropelamento e fuga*
Publisher: Asa, Porto

In a Station of the Metro

My childhood passed and I was not there.
Thinking of something else, gazing in another
direction.
The best years of my life lost to distraction.

Where is she now, Rosalinda, of the rosy
thighs?
Belinda, Brunhilda, Kriemhilda, who could they
be?
Teachers of German, most probably,
in some far-off middle school that lies

beyond our time and space. Long ago, today,
he would have loved them with a shameless
fire,
as in a dirty dream of wild love and teen desire
from which someone awoke the other day.

For all was memory, stray traces
of what happened years ago, and he,
remembering, was also just a memory,
a face now fading among other faces.

Seen from here, from recollection now,
my life's a multitude, a murky chain
where I, (who could he be?), seek in vain
my face, a petal on a wet, black bough.

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Voices

Childhood comes
step by step
climbs the stairs
knocks at the door

“Who’s there?”
“Your dead mother”
“Things of the past”
“No one’s there”

NUMA ESTAÇÃO DE METRO

A minha juventude passou e eu não estava lá.
Pensava em outra coisa, olhava noutra direcção.
Os melhores anos da minha vida perdidos por
distracção!

Rosalinda, a das róseas coxas, onde está?
Belinda, Brunilda, Cremilda, quem serão?
Provavelmente professoras de Alemão
em colégios fora do tempo e do espa-

ço! Hoje, antigamente, ele tê-las-ia
amado de um amor imprudente e impudente,
como num sujo sonho adolescente
de que alguém, no outro dia, acordaria.

Pois tudo era memória, acontecia
há muitos anos, e quem se lembrava
era também memória que passava,
um rosto que entre outros rostos se perdia.

Agora, vista daqui, da recordação,
a minha vida é uma multidão
onde, não sei quem, em vão procuro
o meu rosto, pétala dum ramo húmido, escuro.

© 1991, Manuel António Pina
From: *Um sítio onde pousar a cabeça*
Publisher: Author's edition, Porto

AS VOZES

A infância vem
pé ante pé
sobe as escadas
e bate à porta

– Quem é?
– É a mãe morta
– São coisas passadas
– Não é ninguém

So many voices beyond our own.
And what if it is we out there
knocking on the door? Or we who went away?
And are alone?

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[G.'s Consolation to Pauline]

“Those who, at the very end of life,
returned to their fortress,
now no longer have time
or space to offer death;
nor death to offer to themselves.
Seneca in his greenhouse, bleeding slowly
away,
sprinkled himself upon his slaves
like a gift of righteous life.
Can one be wealthy and righteous, too? Yes.
But can death bear
witness to life?

For it is so difficult, Pauline, to die in a minor
key,
without tragedy or explanations,
without searching uselessly to save
one's life
(since one's possessions remain in the hands of
the executor),
so unnecessary to leave it written,
and even worse so well written:
'Burn my corpse without any ceremony',
so disappointing, so disproportionate!

Others, less hopeless and more fearful,
watch the doctors with impatient eyes,
envying their splendid health and clean-shaved
cheeks,
and for another day of life,
of slow and painful life,
would be ready to trade in
fifty years of wealth and righteousness.
Those seem to me, since I am
no philosopher,
much more solid, irrefutable.

It occurred to me yesterday

Tantas vozes fora de nós!
E se somos nós quem está lá fora
e bate à porta? E se nos fomos embora?
E se ficámos sós?

© 1999, Manuel António Pina

From: *Nenhuma palavra e nenhuma lembrança*

Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

[CONSOLAÇÃO DE G. A PAULINA]

“Os que, ao fim da vida toda,
regressaram à sua fortaleza,
já não têm agora tempo
nem espaço para oferecer à morte;
nem morte para oferecer a si mesmos.
Séneca na estufa esvaindo-se em vagaroso
sangue,
aspergido sobre os escravos
como uma dádiva de recta vida.
É possível ser rico e ser recto? É.
Mas pode a morte ser
testemunha da vida?

Porque é tão difícil, Paulina, morrer em tom
menor,
sem tragédia e sem justificações,
sem procurar inutilmente a salvação
da vida
(já que os bens ficam ao cuidado do
testamenteiro),
é tão impertinente deixar escrito,
ainda por cima tão bem escrito:
'Queimem o meu cadáver sem qualquer
cerimonial',
é tão decepcionante, tão desproporcionado!

Outros, menos desesperançados e menos
amedrontados,
fitam com impacientes olhos os médicos
invejando-lhes a excelente saúde e a barba feita,
e por mais um dia de vida,
de penosa e vagarosa vida,
seriam capazes de trocar
cinquenta anos de riqueza e rectidão.
Esses parecem-me, a mim que
não sou um filósofo,
bem mais sólidos e irrefutáveis.

I hadn't seen the mail all week
and yet I'm neither happier nor unhappier for
that;
happiness certainly doesn't depend on things
like mail
or fear or desire,
it depends more, perhaps, at least for now,
on the certainty that one's papers are in order,
debts paid up,
the possibility of death still intact.
One of these days, if it makes sense,
I will write you about the discordant passion for
immortality.
It is late now, the killers
are already at my door.
Yours, Gallion."

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Ocorreu-me ontem que
não vejo o correio há uma semana,
e que nem por isso sou mais feliz ou mais
infeliz;
a felicidade não depende certamente de coisas
como o correio
ou como o temor ou o desejo,
depende talvez mais, pelo menos para já,
da certeza de que os papéis estão arrumados,
pagas as dívidas,
intacta ainda a possibilidade de morrer.
Um dia destes, se fosse caso disso,
escrever-te-ia sobre a discordante paixão da
imortalidade.
Agora é tarde, estão já
à porta os assassinos.
Teu Gallion."

© 1994, Manuel António Pina
From: *Cuidados Intensivos*
Publisher: Afrontamento, Porto

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