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MANUEL DE FREITAS

(Portugal, 1972)

[Thursday 1 November 2007]

Manuel de Freitas was born in 1972 and has lived in Lisbon since 1990, where he took a degree in Modern Languages and Literatures, majoring in Portuguese and French. He made his debut as poet in 2000, with *Todos Contentes e Eu Também*, and since then has published eighteen further books of poems and chapbooks, a number of essays on contemporary Portuguese poetry, as well as an anthology provocatively entitled *Poetas Sem Qualidades* [*Poets without Qualities*], in which he brings together some of the most significant names of his generation such as Rui Pires Cabral, José Miguel Silva and Ana Paula Inácio. He is also a translator, a literary critic for the weekly *Expresso* and runs the small Lisbon Publishing House, Averno, with Inês Dias, which not only publishes books by national and foreign poets, but also the most interesting Portuguese literary magazine to have appeared in a number of years: *Telhados de Vidro*. Considering the importance of his own poetry and also his activities as an essayist, critic and editor, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to predict that he will come to be considered the central figure in Portuguese poetry of the first decade of the 21st century.

Freitas has been indicated as a figure who has continued the work of those poets who, during the 1970s and 80s, wanted to direct poetry back to the real and to the disillusionment of living in a world given over to market forces and to quantity. Though it is not necessarily false, this affiliation silences something distinctly new that he has brought to contemporary Portuguese poetry. What makes Freitas different is, above all else, the fact that the author feels inescapably part of this reality, which others, before him, might denounce with the vehemence of an approach that could still refuse to entirely abdicate its own exteriority.

Still more equivocal would be to see in his poetry a kind of new social realism. Neo-realism, the name that the movement took on in Portugal, loved the workers and the peasants and believed in glorious tomorrows. Freitas prefers the drunks of Lisbon taverns and refuses to feed the illusion of changing the world. The most that he will bring himself to admit is that "Perhaps everything would be different / if the world had begun as well / as the Goldberg Variations." And even so, he is quick to qualify: "I don't know, I don't want to know, I

have no idea.” An indifference that, being real, is also a mask for rage. This “fury for life”, which, the less it is mentioned, the more intensely it is felt, gives the lie to that label of nihilism, by which the poems have as well been characterized.

In his preface to *Poetas Sem Qualidades*, he writes: “Of a time without qualities, like the one in which we live, the least we can demand are poets without qualities.” It is in this context that his poetry dispenses, in a large part, with metaphor and rhetorical ornament in favor of a risky prosaism, which Freitas knows how to balance, as though on a knife edge, on the one hand effectively avoiding prosodic blunders, and on the other repressing the temptation towards euphony, which is just as difficult.

It would seem that his is a poetry of the single theme, death, which serves as the dark backdrop to all the other subjects: music (from the Baroque to Pop and the music of Latin America), taverns, amorous encounters and evocations of childhood and early adulthood. Freitas knows that from the beginning everything is lost but sees himself condemned to the pain of continuing to lose that which he has already lost. This is his curse, which is only softened by the ephemeral sparkle of certain brief moments of happiness, during those instants when death itself is distracted, or his attention is diverted from death.

Perhaps one could say that, besides death, or in a kind of fragile counterpoint to it, this poetry has one other true subject: the work of Bach – an indescribable absolute that rests beyond the music, if not – though miraculously part of it – beyond this world.

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POEMS

ALL STRIPPED DOWN
BECHEROVKA
CAFÉ SCHILLER
FADO MENOR
ECCE HOMO
GRIMY BITS OF VINYL
HEILIGER TOD
POMPE INUTILI

ALL STRIPPED DOWN

Older man, bald and ungainly,
seeks someone to screw who can put up with
him
and believes (occasionally) in the resurrection.

Has never read books, spits a lot
and snores. Serious matter: not to die alone.

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ALL STRIPPED DOWN

Cavalheiro idoso, calvo e sem jeito
para foder procura quem o ature
e acredite (às vezes) na ressurreição.

Nunca leu livros, cospe grosso
e ronca. Assunto sério: morrer com alguém.

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From: *O Coração de Sábado à Noite*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

BECHEROVKA

Norwegian, tall, dubiously
dark-haired and forever smiling.
She begged me not to be
sad, as truly I was.
And I think she paid for my last drink
before asking me “what I do”.

Writing, about death, isn't
exactly a profession.
But that's what I answered,
while on some napkin or other
I summed up, just for her, my “work”.

I'll never know if she made out what I
scrawled,
if she bought my books, if she heard
what in my dreadful French I tried
to tell her that night, hopelessly lost.

Nearly every poem is this: an inexcusable
way of saying we didn't touch
the body that for once in our life was so close
and that didn't even leave us a fleeting name.

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CAFÉ SCHILLER

It was all in vain, again.
I was miles away from Amsterdam,
if you see what I mean, though I liked
the black stripes on the couches, the tarnished
metal of the lamps, the self-confident step
of the waitress who served the drinks.

Today this woman will enter
my past. I don't know her name
and don't care to know it. She smiled at me,
or I thought she smiled, while I paid
for two decafs, a sparkling water
and a Jameson that left me a bad taste, of

BECHEROVKA

Norueguesa, alta, de um moreno
duvidoso que sorria muito.
Pedia-me insistentemente para não estar
triste como deveras estava.
E pagou-me, creio, o último copo,
antes de me perguntar “o que fazia”.

Escrever, sobre a morte, não é
exactamente uma profissão.
Mas foi a resposta que lhe dei,
enquanto um guardanapo qualquer
abreviava, só para ela, a minha “obra”.

Nunca saberei se percebeu a letra,
se comprou os livros, se chegou
a ouvir o que em péssimo francês
lhe tentei dizer nessa noite, a mais perdida.

Os versos são quase sempre isto: um modo
inaceitável de dizer que não tocámos o corpo
que estive, por uma vez, tão próximo
de nós – e que nem um nome breve nos deixou.

© 2005, Manuel de Freitas
From: *A Flor dos Terramotos*
Publisher: Averno, Lisboa

CAFÉ SCHILLER

Foi tudo em vão, novamente.
Estava a muitos quilómetros de Amsterdão,
se é que me percebes, embora gostasse
das riscas negras dos sofás, do metal
antigo dos candeeiros, do andar
tão firme de quem servia as bebidas.

Esta mulher vai entrar hoje
no meu passado. Não sei como se chama,
nem me interessa sabê-lo. Sorriu-me,
ou julguei que me sorriu, enquanto eu pagava
dois descafeinados, uma água com gás
e um Jameson que sabia mal, a desamor.

lovelessness.
I'll ask her for my change in forgetfulness,
the short-lasting memory of the blouse that
squeezed
her breasts and conferred on her back
the unrepeatable impression of a prelude.

I, who am going to die, desired you.

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FADO MENOR

He got used to walking
under the plane trees, dissipating
hangovers and hazy memories.
The truth is they had little in common.

The first time they met they were
sitting on the same side
of a bar but on different ends.
She wore the most ardent
red he had ever seen,
under a brutal gray made
almost excusable by the January cold.

They didn't sleep together right away.
But he had her to thank for a trail
of happy sperm in the bed
where he died alone. Stretched out next to
Berkeley, Wittgenstein and Spinoza,
the pages of a course he didn't care for
and that at least didn't dirty his nights.

Within a few weeks they were walking
hand in hand through the garden
or along the streets near the bar.
Until the day she stopped coming.

Heart on fire, ashes everywhere
— there's no return from a red like that.

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Vou pedir-lhe de troco o esquecimento,
a curta memória da blusa que lhe comprimia
o peito e dava às costas
um jeito irrepetível de prelúdio.

Eu, que vou morrer, desejei-te.

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From: *Aria Variata*
Publisher: Alexandria, Lisboa

FADO MENOR

Habitou-se a caminhar
sob os plátanos, diluindo
ressacas e lembranças imperfeitas.
Pouco teriam em comum.

Foi num bar, o primeiro
encontro, em lados diferentes
mas não opostos do balcão.
Ela vestia o mais ardente
vermelho que já vira,
sob um cinzento agreste que
o frio de Janeiro quase desculpou.

Não dormiram logo juntos.
Mas ficou a dever-lhe um rasto
de esperma feliz, na cama
em que morria só. Ao seu lado,
Berkeley, Wittgenstein, Espinosa,
páginas de um curso que não queria
e que nem ao menos lhe sujava as noites.

Semanas depois, passeavam de mãos
dadas pelo jardim ou pelas ruas
mais próximas do bar.
Até ao dia em que deixou de vê-la.

Coração em brasa, cinza por todo o lado
– um vermelho assim não tem regresso.

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From: *Juros de Demora*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

ECCE HOMO

I'd never woken up in a place like that – a hovel
past
all imagining, near the gothic city of Santarém.
His house.
I'd met him at the Fandango
and knew only that a tearless sadness
lit up his afternoons and evenings.

This time it was different. I'd just broken
a glass in the only still open pub
(its name now expunged from my memory).
He came over and sat down, one drunk
facing another, united by the quasi-splendor
of their fall. He invited me to follow him and,
without knowing why, I followed. All the way
to the two rooms in which he lived,
without neighbors – an aluminum and plywood
shack that made the word despair
an inadequate euphemism. The dog,
at least, was glad to see us arrive.

Then he cried, over nothing. He merely wanted
a real shoulder where he could lean his head
which his wife and daughters would no longer
even kiss
in a dream. He needed no words or gestures,
just an ear to hear him share the unshareable
which perhaps (I don't quite remember) he
called sorrow.

He fell asleep that way, on my shoulder – and I
could have killed (but not him) for a beer
or the gin that, a few hours earlier, dropped too
soon
to the floor. In the morning, when I woke up, I
gently
shook him and said I really had to go. He kissed
my hand, thanking me with his rotted smile
for that nothing at all between two men
who won't ever see each other again. Outside,
a muffled light advised against any
lyrical attempt, dying among the cabbages
and junk that made his solitude less solitary.

I didn't recognize the city: dingy, dull, shoddy.
I shivered with cold and sleepiness while

ECCE HOMO

Nunca amanhecera assim, num inimaginável
barracão perto da cidade gótica.
A sua casa.
Conhecia-o do Fandango,
e sabia apenas que uma tristeza sem lágrimas
lhe iluminava as tardes e as noites.

Dessa vez foi diferente. Eu acabara de partir
um copo no único pub ainda aberto
(a memória já não me devolve o nome).
Ele veio sentar-se ao meu lado, bêbedo
contra bêbedo, unidos pelo quase esplendor
da queda. Convidou-me a segui-lo e eu,
não sei bem porquê, acedi. Acompanhei-o
até às duas assoalhadas em que morava
– sem vizinhos, numa barraca de alumínio
e tabopan que fazia da palavra desespero
um eufemismo inoportuno. O cão,
pelo menos, gostou de nos ver chegar.

Depois chorou, a troco de nada. Queria apenas
um ombro concreto onde pousar a cabeça
que a mulher e as filhas já nem por engano
beijavam. Não precisava de gestos ou palavras,
bastava-lhe ser ouvido, partilhar o impartilhável
a que talvez chamasse (não me lembro bem) a
dor.

Adormeceu assim, no meu ombro – e eu estava
capaz de matar (mas não a ele) por uma cerveja,
pelo gin que horas antes encontrara demasiado
cedo o chão. Ao amanhecer, abanei-o
levemente,
disse-lhe que tinha mesmo de ir. Beijou-me
a mão, agradeceu com um sorriso estragado
aquele nada de nada entre dois homens
que nunca mais se voltarão a ver. Cá fora,
uma luz amordaçada desaconselhava qualquer
tentação lírica, vinha morrer nas couves,
nos dejectos vários que lhe tornavam menos só
a solidão.

Não reconheci a cidade: pálida, desinteressante,
reles.

Tremia de sono e frio ao entrar no primeiro
autocarro e quase acreditei – por algumas horas

boarding the first
bus and almost believed – for a few hours –
that there was someone, after all, even sadder
than me.

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GRIMY BITS OF VINYL

It must have been the most-played record:
the Fifth Symphony, conducted
by Klemperer. The mornings
and afternoons promised a better
future, virtuous habits,
which I soon forgot. I was already eyeing
Ana's tavern,
which filled my bedroom window.
I feared the shadows, silence,
feeling in each footstep the monster
inside me. And I read, so as not to think,
discredited French writers.

I loved it so much that one day
I grabbed the record and broke it
to bits – tiny bits of vinyl –
so that they'd hurt even more.
I'm not sure why, but I kept
the stiff cardboard jacket,
that lugubrious allegory of childhood.
And the remains of the record ended up
in the stream next to my parents' house.

Later on the stream, flanked by weekend
vegetable patches, was strangled by an
implacable
housing development, the provincial version
of a gated condominium, in a world
with ever more doors.
As for Beethoven, buried like the frogs
by invisible killing hands,
he almost ceased to move me.

–
que existia, afinal, alguém ainda mais triste do
que eu.

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From: *Beau Séjour*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

PEDAÇOS DE VINIL COM LAMA

Devia ser o disco mais ouvido:
a Quinta Sinfonia, numa gravação
de Klemperer. As manhãs
e as tardes auguravam um futuro
melhor, prendados costumes
que depressa perdi. Já então olhava
para a taberna da Ana,
enchendo a janela do meu quarto.
Tinha medo da sombra, do silêncio,
adivinhando em cada passo o monstro
que me habitava. E lia, para não pensar,
desacreditados escritores franceses.

Um dia, de tanto o amar,
peguei no disco e quebrei-o
em pequenos pedaços de vinil
– para doerem mais, melhor.
Mantive, não sei bem porquê,
a dura capa de cartão,
essa fúnebre alegoria da infância.
E o que sobrou do disco foi parar
ao ribeiro junto à casa dos meus pais.

Mais tarde, o ribeiro com hortas
de domingo à volta foi sufocado pelo terror
de um aldeamento, versão provinciana
de condomínio fechado, num mundo
em que são cada vez mais as portas.
Beethoven, esse, quase deixou
de me comover, soterrado como as rãs
pelas mãos invisíveis de quem mata.

What moves me now, years
later, is to realize I did to that record
the same thing I do over and over
to the bodies I think I love:

I shatter them, very slowly, so that
they'll keep on hurting a little more.

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HEILIGER TOD

It's not an artistic photograph.
If it were, I wouldn't talk about it.
It's me next to my grandfather.
I look happy and so does he,
both of us smiling, together beneath
a bougainvillea. His happiness,
simple enough, is that of a grandfather
with an old felt hat just sitting there.
My happiness is holding
in my hand a box of Nazi soldiers
who either killed or were killed,
obeying an innocent decision.

Do toy soldiers still exist?
Nowadays, children the same age
as me in that photograph
tote guns and kill
just like that, with no intermediaries,
no pretending, no playful insinuations.
Perhaps they're right, I don't know.
They're surely more effective:
they kill instead of wanting to kill.
And we've always known that this arsenal
of dung called humanity is beautiful.

No one in the photograph has survived.

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O que me comove, passado tanto
tempo, é perceber que fiz a esse disco
o mesmo que faço e volto a fazer
aos corpos que julgo amar:

parti-los, muito devagar, para
que doam sempre um pouco mais.

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From: *Beau Séjour*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisboa

HEILIGER TOD

Não é uma fotografia artística.
Se fosse, não falaria dela.
Estou ao lado do meu avô,
pareço feliz e ele também,
encostados a sorrir debaixo
de uma buganvília. A alegria
dele é simples, muito de avô sentado
com chapéu de feltro antigo.
A minha, por sua vez, segura
na mão a caixa de soldados nazis
que matavam ou morriam,
obedecendo a uma inocente decisão.

Ainda existirão soldadinhos?
Agora, com a idade que
tenho na mesma fotografia,
pegam numa arma e matam
porque sim, dispensando intermediários,
simulacros, lúdicas insinuações.
terão talvez maior razão, não sei.
Têm, seguramente, uma eficácia maior:
matam em vez de quererem matar.
E é belo, sempre o soubemos,
este paiol de esterco chamado humanidade.

Ninguém, da fotografia, sobreviveu.

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POMPE INUTILI

Nobody's born; it would make no sense
to call the placental remains
enveloping a bunch of organs
whose action is all but predetermined
somebody.

Only the dead truly
exist. They wrote or didn't
write books, love letters,
diaries. No matter: they crossed
our paths, sometimes sat
at the same table, and even believed
in the sweet torture of love.
They had real hands when they touched
the pubescent face they were saying farewell to.
A kiss, though it kissed only wrinkles,
was able to make the mornings less cold.

The dead aren't very good at farewells,
even if they're precise and sincere
as never before in the moment they descend
into the earth and won't let us
partake with them a cigarette,
one last drink, a species of destiny.

The dead are frightfully real.
A whole life is insufficient
for us to kill them all, one
by one, as the most basic metaphysical
hygiene would surely recommend.
And yet they give us the necessary strength
to die more and more, to endure
our rented days, these homes not quite fit
to live in. Because the truth is that other
people are merely the imperfect dead.
They, like us, are a bit too alive.

But perhaps they'll one day write
a poem like this (and it might not even be
a poem, let alone like this) which denotes,
besides the obvious influences, what we might
call a penchant for horror.
For that's what it all comes down to.

POMPE INUTILI

Ninguém nasce; seria descabido
chamar alguém aos resíduos
de placenta que envolvem
um conjunto de órgãos
a tudo ou quase tudo predispostos.

Só os mortos, verdadeiramente,
existem. Escreveram ou não
escreveram livros, cartas de amor,
diários. Não importa: cruzaram-se
connosco, sentaram-se por vezes
à mesma mesa, acreditaram até
no terno suplício do amor.
E tinham mãos reais, ao tocarem
o rosto imberbe de que se despediam.
Um beijo, sobre rugas apenas,
conseguiu tornar menos frias as manhãs.

Despedem-se muito mal, os mortos.
Embora, por uma vez, sejam
exactos e sinceros – no momento
em que descem à terra e nos impedem
de partilhar com eles um cigarro,
o último copo, uma espécie de destino.

São terrivelmente reais, os mortos.
A vida inteira não chega
para que possamos matá-los a todos,
um a um, como decerto aconselharia
a mais elementar higiene metafísica.
Dão-nos, contudo, a força necessária
para morrer cada vez mais, tolerando
dias de aluguer, casas ligeiramente
inabitáveis. Porque os outros, na
verdade, não passam de mortos imperfeitos.
Estão, como nós, um pouco demasiado vivos.

Talvez um dia, porém, venham a
assinar um poema assim (e pode até não ser
um poema, muito menos assim), em que se
note,
além das influências óbvias, uma certa
– digamos – especialização no horror.
Pois é disso apenas que se trata.

The dead know.
Knowledge is useless.
Poetry too.

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Os mortos sabem-no.
A sabedoria é inútil.
A poesia também.

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