



MÁRIO CESARINY DE VASCONCELOS

(Portugal, 1923–2006)

[Friday 1 July 2005]

Mário Cesariny de Vasconcelos has remained, his whole life long, an ‘amateur’ of art and of life. A lover, not a professional. And so it seems like an accident that he stands out as one of Portugal’s major poets of the second half of the 20th century, as well as a notable painter. When I say ‘amateur’, I don’t mean that his literary and artistic activities were a sideline. They were, in fact, his full-time ‘profession’. But he didn’t pursue them with the care or ambition typical of a professional.

While studying Fine Arts as an adolescent in Lisbon, where he was born, Cesariny and several classmates began to frequent the Café Herminius. They and other young men who met at the café were initially adherents of Neo-Realism but soon came to feel that this doctrinaire aesthetic, in its orthodoxly Marxist opposition to Salazar’s oppressive regime, had itself become a source of oppression for nonconforming artists and writers. Cesariny invented a pseudonym called Nicolau Cansado [Weary Nicholas] whose verses parodied the relentlessly class-conscious productions of the Neo-Realists.

A short time later, in 1947, the Herminius group, joined by several others, founded Portuguese Surrealism, whose heroic phase lasted for about five years. One of the key players, António Maria Lisboa (1928-1953), died young, while others gradually dispersed (see the editorial for July 2005)*, leaving Cesariny to prolong the movement almost single-handedly, through his own creative output, his studies and theoretical texts, and the various anthologies he has compiled of Portuguese Surrealist writings. But I repeat: Cesariny has done all this as an amateur, in a spontaneous fashion rather than as the systematic defense of a cause, let alone the building of a career.

Surrealism, for this poet, was a lifestyle, one that constantly spat on conventions and pushed against the limits imposed by an autocratic political regime, by society at large, and by human reason itself. One of his most famous poems, ‘you are welcome to elsinore’, is a scathing indictment of Portugal under Salazar, whose small-minded and isolationist philosophy of government (“Proudly alone” was one of the dictator’s mottos for the nation) infected daily life itself, standing like an impassable wall “between us and words”,

making communication, poetry and love's free expression all but impossible.

For Cesariny, a homosexual, the open expression of love was especially problematic (he was occasionally arrested for 'immoral' behavior), such that love became almost a synonym for freedom. A number of his poems document both the liberating hope ('poem that can serve as an afterword') and liberating effect ('de profundis amamus') of love. Love and poetry, intimately related in this poet's experience, were not only a means for asserting his freedom in the Elsinore that was Salazarist Portugal; they were also vehicles for going beyond the confines of reason. Poems such as 'The ship of mirrors' were written, says Cesariny, according to the 'automatic' principles propounded by the French Surrealists to reach the unconscious by circumventing the rational mind.

In the 1980s Cesariny stopped writing poetry altogether, dedicating himself exclusively to painting. This, like poetry before it, has been a *vital* activity – his way of living day to day –, not the building of a personal monument to resist mortality. The refusal to separate art from life seems to be the distinguishing mark of Surrealism as understood and practiced by this poet.

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* see "Articles" section for the editorial mentioned

POEMS

A POEM THAT CAN SERVE AS AN AFTERWORD
BEING BEAUTEOUS
DE PROFUNDIS AMAMUS
POEM
THE SHIP OF MIRRORS
TO A DEAD RAT FOUND IN A PARK
VOICE FROM A STONE
WORDS TO PRINCE EPAMINONDAS
YOU ARE WELCOME TO ELSINORE

a poem that can serve as an afterword

streets where the danger is obvious
green arms of occult practices
corpses floating on the water
sunflowers
and a body
a body for blocking the day's lamps
a body for falling through a landscape of birds
for going out early in the morning and coming
back very late
surrounded by dwarfs and lilac fields
a body for covering your absence
like a bedspread
a place setting
a perfume

this or its contrary, but somehow gaping
and with many people there to see what it is
this or a population of sixty thousand souls
devouring scarlet pillows on their way to the
sea
and arriving, at dusk,
next to the submarines

this or a torso dislodged from a verse
and whose death makes everyone proud
o pallid city built
like a fever between two floors!
we'll home deliver
dirt for filling up candelabras
smoldering beds for erect lovers
slates with forbidden words
– a woman for the fellow who's losing interest
in life (Here, take her!),
two grandchildren for the old woman at the end
of the line (That's all we have!) –
we'll pillage the museum give a diadem to the
world and then require it to be put back in the
same place,
and for you and for me, favorably situated,
some poison to pour into the giant's eyes

this or a face a solitary face like a boat in search
of a gentle breeze for the night
if we're sand that's sifted
in a slack wind among painted bushes
if an intention is bound to reach its shore like
the ocean's currents shipwrecks and storms
if the man of hostels and boardinghouses lifts

poema podendo servir de posfácio

ruas onde o perigo é evidente
braços verdes de práticas ocultas
cadáveres à tona de água
girassóis
e um corpo
um corpo para cortar as lâmpadas do dia
um corpo para descer uma paisagem de aves
para ir de manhã cedo e voltar muito tarde
rodeado de anões e de campos de lilases
um corpo para cobrir a tua ausência
como uma colcha
um talher
um perfume

isto ou o seu contrário, mas de certa maneira
hiante
e com muita gente à volta a ver o que é
isto ou uma população de sessenta mil almas
devorando almofadas escarlates a caminho do
mar
e que chegam, ao crepúsculo,
encostadas aos submarinos

isto ou um torso desalojado de um verso
e cuja morte é o orgulho de todos
ó pálida cidade construída
como uma febre entre dois patamares!
vamos distribuir ao domicílio
terra para encher candelabros
leitos de fumo para amantes erectos
tabuinhas com palavras interditas
– uma mulher para este que está quase a perder
o gosto à vida – tome lá –
dois netos para essa velha aí no fim da fila –
não temos mais –
saquear o museu dar um diadema ao mundo e
depois obrigar a repor no mesmo sítio
e para ti e para mim, assentes num espaço útil,
veneno para entornar nos olhos do gigante

isto ou um rosto um rosto solitário como barco
em demanda de vento calmo para a noite
se nós somos areia que se filtre
a um vento débil entre arbustos pintados
se um propósito deve atingir a sua margem
como as correntes da terra náufragos e
tempestade
se o homem das pensões e das hospedarias

his damp cratered forehead
if the sun outside is shining more than ever
if for a minute
it's worth
waiting
this or happiness in the simple form of a pulse
shimmering amid the foliage of the loftiest
lamps
this or the said happiness the airplane of cards
that comes in through the window that goes
out by the roof
so does the pyramid exist?
so does the pyramid say things?
is the pyramid each person's secret with the
world?

yes my love the pyramid exists
the pyramid says many many things
the pyramid is the art of dancing in silence

and in any case

there are public squares where a lily can be
sculpted
subtle regions where blueness flows
gestures belonging to no one boats
underneath flowers
a song by which to hear you arrive

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being beauteous

My English friend who entered the bedroom
and drew the curtains with a single swipe
knew what he was drawing
I say he said you'll say it was shocking
it's that we were strangers strangers and
foreigners
and so close to each other in that house
but I see more widely more darkly inside the
body
and I've discovered that light is something for
the rich
those who spend their lives gazing at the sun
cultivating bees in their sex organs lyres in
their heads

levanta a sua frente de cratera molhada
se na rua o sol brilha como nunca
se por um minuto
vale a pena
esperar
isto ou a alegria igual à simples forma de um
pulso
aceso entre a folhagem das mais altas lâmpadas
isto ou a alegria dita o avião de cartas
entrada pela janela saída pelo telhado
ah mas então a pirâmide existe?
ah mas e então a pirâmide diz coisas?
então a pirâmide é o segredo de cada um com o
mundo?

sim meu amor a pirâmide existe
a pirâmide diz muitíssimas coisas
a pirâmide é a arte de bailar em silêncio

e em todo o caso

há praças onde esculpir um lírio
zonas subtis de propagação do azul
gestos sem dono barcos sob as flores
uma canção para ouvir-te chegar

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From: *Manual de Prestidigitação*
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being beauteous

O meu amigo inglês que entrou no quarto da
cama e correu de um só gesto todas as cortinas
sabia o que corria
digo disse direis era vergonha
era sermos estranhos mais do que isso:
estrangeiros
e tão perto um do outro naquela casa
mas eu vejo maior mais escuro dentro do
corpo
e descobri que a luz é coisa de ricos
gente que passa a vida a olhar para o sol
cultivar abelhas no sexo líras na cabeça
e mal a noite tinge a faixa branca da praia
vai a correr telefonar para a polícia

and no sooner does night touch the white strip
of beach
than they run and phone the police

And it's not so much the diamonds and
conveniences and housemaids
I mean the rich in spirit
rich in experience
rich in knowing how
semen flows out one side and feces out the
other
and in the sweet in-betweens
there's urine and libraries train stations the
theater
all that has been loved
and stored in the corner of an eye imploring
more light for it to have been true

My English friend remembered only
simple beginning gestures
and he drew the curtains and created
beyond the feeble kiss we can kiss
the endless voyage of no return

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de profundis amamus

Yesterday
at eleven
you smoked
a cigarette
I found you
sitting there
we stayed and missed
all your streetcars
mine
by their very nature
were missed

We walked
five miles
no one saw us go by
except
of course
the doormen
it's in the nature of things

E não bem pelas jóias de diamante os serviços
de bolso e as criadas
digo ricos de espírito
ricos de experiência
ricos de saber bem como decorre
para um lado o sémen para o outro a caca
e nos doces intervalares
a urina as bibliotecas as estações o teatro
tudo o que já amado
e arrecadado no canto do olho a implorar mais
luz para ter sido verdade

O meu amigo inglês não se lembrava
senão dos gestos simples do começo
e corria as cortinas e criava
para além do beijo flébil que podemos
a viagem sem fim e sem regresso

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Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

de profundis amamus

Ontem às onze
fumaste
um cigarro
encontrei-te
sentado
ficámos para perder
todos os teus eléctricos
os meus
estavam perdidos
por natureza própria

Andámos
dez quilómetros
a pé
ninguém nos viu passar
excepto
claro
os porteiros
é da natureza das coisas

to be seen
by doormen

Look
as only you know how
at the street manners
The Public
the crease in your trousers
is shivering
and four thousand people are interested
in this

It's all right hug me
with the perfectly blue circles
of your eyes
it will be this way for a long time
many centuries will arrive before we do
but don't worry
don't worry
too much
we have only to do
with the present
perfect
pirates with the
wonder-struck wondrous unique
eyes of an impassible cat
our strange verb
has no past or future

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poem

Light occurs when
shadows are eliminated
Shadows are what exist
shadows have their own exhaustive life
not on this or that side of light but in its very
heart
intensely loving insanely beloved
and they spread over the ground their arms of
gray light
that enter human eyes at the corners

On the other hand the shadow called light

ser-se visto
pelos porteiros

Olha
como só tu sabes olhar
a rua os costumes
O Público
o vinco das tuas calças
está cheio de frio
é há quatro mil pessoas interessadas
nisso

Não faz mal abracem-me
os teus olhos
de extremo a extremo azuis
vai ser assim durante muito tempo
decorrerão muitos séculos antes de nós
mas não te importes
muito
nós só temos a ver
com o presente
perfeito
corsários de olhos de gato intransponível
maravilhados maravilhosos únicos
nem pretérito nem futuro tem
o estranho verbo nosso

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poema

Faz-se luz pelo processo de eliminação de
sombras
Ora as sombras existem as sombras têm
exaustiva vida própria
não dum e doutro lado da luz mas no próprio
seio dela
intensamente amantes loucamente amadas
e espalham pelo chão braços de luz cinzenta
que se introduzem pelo bico nos olhos do
homem

Por outro lado a sombra dita a luz

doesn't illuminate objects really
objects live in the dark
in a perpetual surrealist aurora
which we cannot contact
except the way lovers do
with eyes closed
and lamps in our fingers lamps on our lips

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não ilumina realmente os objectos
os objectos vivem às escuras
numa perpétua aurora surrealista
com a qual não podemos contactar
senão como os amantes
de olhos fechados
e lâmpadas nos dedos e na boca

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Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

The ship of mirrors

The ship of mirrors
doesn't sail, it gallops

Its sea is a forest
serving as level plane

At dusk its flanks
mirror the sun and moon

That's why time loves
to lie down with it

Shipowners don't like
its clear and bright route

(To someone in motion
it looks stationary)

When it reaches the city
no wharf gives it shelter

Its bilge brings nothing
it departs with nothing

Voices and heavy air
are all it transports

And a species of door
in its mirrored mast

Its ten thousand captains

O navio de espelhos
não navega, cavalga

Seu mar é a floresta
que lhe serve de nível

Ao crepúsculo espelha
sol e lua nos flancos

(Por isso o tempo gosta
de deitar-se com ele)

Os armadores não amam
a sua rota clara

(Vista do movimento
dir-se-ia que pára)

Quando chega à cidade
nenhum cais o abriga

(O seu porão traz nada
nada leva à partida)

Vozes e ar pesado
é tudo o que transporta

(E no mastro espelhado
uma espécie de porta)

Seus dez mil capitães
têm o mesmo rosto

all have the same face

The same dark belt
the same rank and office

When one man revolts
there are ten thousand mutineers

(The way objects are reflected
in the eyes of a fly)

And when one of them ascends
and his body climbs the masts
and he scans the ocean depths

The whole ship gallops
(like the stars in space)

From the world's beginning
to the world's end

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(A mesma cinta escura
o mesmo grau e posto)

Quando um se revolta
há dez mil insurrectos

(Como os olhos da mosca
reflectem os objectos)

E quando um deles ala
o corpo sobre os mastros
e escruta o mar do fundo

Toda a nave cavalga
(como no espaço os astros)

Do princípio do mundo
até ao fim do mundo

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From: *A Cidade Queimada*
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

to a dead rat found in a park

Here this creature ended its vast career
as a dark and living rat beneath the starry
expanse
its diminutive size only humiliates
those who want everything to be enormous
and who can only think in human or arboreal
terms
for surely this rat used as well as it knew how
(or didn't know)
the miracle of its tiny feet – so close to its
snout! –
which were after all just right, serving perfectly
for clawing, scurrying, securing food or beating
a retreat, when necessary

So is everything as it should be, O “God of
small cemeteries”?
But who knows who can know when a mistake
has been made

a um rato morto encontrado num parque

Este findou aqui sua vasta carreira
de rato vivo e escuro ante as constelações
a sua pequena medida não humilha
senão aqueles que tudo querem imenso
e só sabem pensar em termos de homem ou
árvore
pois decerto este rato destinou como soube (e
até como não soube)
o milagre das patas – tão junto ao focinho! –
que afinal estavam justas, servindo muito bem
para agatanhar, fugir, segurar o alimento, voltar
atrás de repente, quando necessário

Está pois tudo certo, ó “Deus dos cemitérios
pequenos”?
Mas quem sabe quem sabe quando há engano
nos escritórios do inferno? Quem poderá dizer
que não era para príncipe ou julgador de povos
o ímpeto primeiro desta criação

in hell's central offices? Who can be sure
that this creation so disdained by the world
but with a world inside it
wasn't initially conceived to be a prince or
judge of nations?
The worries it aroused in housewives and
physicians!
Who are we to play at good and evil when
they're beyond us?
Some lad understood the uniqueness of its life
and ran over it with the wheel by which, eye to
eye,
the victim and the executioner love each other

It had no friends? It deceived its parents?

It ran all about, a tiny body that had fun
and now just lies there, gooshy, smelly.

What sort of conclusion does this poem,
without exaggeration, merit?
Romantic? Classical? Regionalist?

What end belongs to a brave and humble body
killed at the height of its lyrical powers?

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voice from a stone

I don't adore the past
I'm not three times a master
I made no pact with the underworld
that's not why I'm here
sure I saw Osiris but at the time he was called
Luiz
sure I was with Isis but I told her my name was
João
no word is ever complete
not even in German which has such big ones
and so I'll never succeed in telling you what I
know
unless by an arrow from the wind's blue and
black bow

irrisória para o mundo – com mundo nela?
Tantas preocupações às donas de casa – e aos
médicos – ele dava!

Como brincar ao bem e ao mal se estes nos
faltam?

Algum rapazola entendeu sua esta vida tão
ímpar

e passou nela a roda com que se amam
olhos nos olhos – vítima e carrasco

Não tinha amigos? Enganava os pais?

Ia por ali fora, minúsculo corpo divertido
e agora parado, aquoso, cheira mal.

Sem abuso
que final há-de dar-se a este poema?
Romântico? Clássico? Regionalista?

Como acabar com um corpo corajoso humílimo
morto em pleno exercício da sua lira?

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voz numa pedra

Não adoro o passado
não sou três vezes mestre
não combinei nada com as furnas
não é para isso que eu cá ando
decerto vi Osiris porém chamava-se ele nessa
altura Luiz
decerto fui com Ísis mas disse-lhe eu que me
chamava João
nenhuma nenhuma palavra está completa
nem mesmo em alemão que as tem tão grandes
assim também eu nunca te direi o que sei
a não ser pelo arco e flecha negro e azul do
vento

I won't say as someone else did that I know I
know nothing
I know that I've always known a few things
and that this counts for something
and that I hurl whirlwinds and see the rainbow
believing it to be the supreme agent
of the world's heart
vessel of freedom purged of menstruation
living rose before our eyes
The future city where "poetry will no longer
give rhythm
to action since it will march ahead of it"
is still far far away
Will there be an end to the preachers of death?
An end to the reapers of love?
An end to the torture of eyes?
Then pass me that jackknife
because there's a lot we need to start pruning
pass it don't look at me as if I were a wizard
entrusted with the miracle of truth
"the swinging of an ax and the goal of not being
sacrificed won't build anything under the sun"
nothing is written after all

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Words to Prince Epaminondas, a Lad with a Great Future

Strip yourself of truths
the great before the small
your own before any others
dig a pit and bury them
at your side
first those that they imposed on you when you
were still a docile child
and had no stain except for that of a strange
name
then those that as you grew you painfully put on
the truth of bread the truth of tears
for you are neither flower nor mourning nor
consolation nor star
then those you won with your semen
where the morning raises high an empty mirror
and a child cries between clouds and an abyss
then those they're going to place above your

Não digo como o outro: sei que não sei nada
sei muito bem que soube sempre umas coisas
que isso pesa
que lanço os turbilhões e vejo o arco íris
acreditando ser ele o agente supremo
do coração do mundo
vaso de liberdade expurgada do mênstruo
rosa viva diante dos nossos olhos
Ainda longe longe a cidade futura
onde "a poesia não mais ritmará a acção
porque caminhará adiante dela"
Os pregadores de morte vão acabar?
Os segadores do amor vão acabar?
A tortura dos olhos vai acabar?
Passa-me então aquele canivete
porque há imenso que começar a podar
passa não me olhes como se olha um bruxo
detentor do milagre da verdade
"a machadada e o propósito de não sacrificar-se
não constituirão ao sol coisa nenhuma"
nada está escrito afinal

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discurso ao príncipe de epaminondas, mancebo de grande futuro poema

Despe-te de verdades
das grandes primeiro que das pequenas
das tuas antes que de quaisquer outras
abre uma cova e enterra-as
a teu lado
primeiro as que te impuseram eras ainda imbele
e não possuías mácula senão a de um nome
estranho
depois as que crescendo penosamente vestiste
a verdade do pão a verdade das lágrimas
pois não és flor nem luto nem acalanto nem
estrela
depois as que ganhaste com o teu sémen
onde a manhã ergue um espelho vazio
e uma criança chora entre nuvens e abismos
depois as que hão-de pôr em cima do teu retrato
quando lhes forneceres a grande recordação

portrait
when you provide them with the great
remembrance
they all expect so anxiously expecting it of you
Then nothing, just you and your silence
and veins of coral tearing at our wrists
And now, my lord, we can proceed across
the naked plains
your body with clouds upon its shoulders
my hands full with a white beard
There, there will be no delay no shelter no
arrival
just a square of fire above our heads
a street of stone to the end of the lights
and the silence of death as we pass

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you are welcome to elsinore

Between us and words there's molten metal
between us and words there are spinning
propellers
that can kill us ravish us wrench
from our inner depths the most worthwhile
secret
between us and words there are burning profiles
spaces full of people with their backs turned
tall poisonous flowers closed doors
and stairs and ticking clocks and seated children
waiting for their time and their precipice

Along the walls in which we live
there are words of life words of death
there are vast words that wait for us
and other, fragile words that have stopped
waiting
there are words lit up like boats
and there are words that are men, words that
conceal
their secret and their position

Between us and words, without a sound,
the hands and walls of Elsinore

And there are words of night words that are
moans

que todos esperam tanto porque a esperam de ti
Nada depois, só tu e o teu silêncio
e veias de coral rasgando-nos os pulsos
Então, meu senhor, poderemos passar
pela planície nua
o teu corpo com nuvens pelos ombros
as minhas mãos cheias de barbas brancas
Aí não haverá demora nem abrigo nem chegada
mas um quadrado de fogo sobre as nossas
cabeças
e uma estrada de pedra até ao fim das luzes
e um silêncio de morte à nossa passagem

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you are welcome to elsinore

Entre nós e as palavras há metal fundente
entre nós e as palavras há hélices que andam
e podem dar-nos morte violar-nos tirar
do mais fundo de nós o mais útil segredo
entre nós e as palavras há perfis ardentes
espaços cheios de gente de costas
altas flores venenosas portas por abrir
e escadas e ponteiros e crianças sentadas
à espera do seu tempo e do seu precipício

Ao longo da muralha que habitamos
há palavras de vida há palavras de morte
há palavras imensas, que esperam por nós
e outras, frágeis, que deixaram de esperar
há palavras acesas como barcos
e há palavras homens, palavras que guardam
o seu segredo e a sua posição

Entre nós e as palavras, surdamente,
as mãos e as paredes de Elsinore

E há palavras nocturnas palavras gemidos
palavras que nos sobem ilegíveis à boca
palavras diamantes palavras nunca escritas
palavras impossíveis de escrever
por não termos connosco cordas de violinos
nem todo o sangue do mundo nem todo o

illegible words that rise to our lips
diamond words unwritten words
words that can't be written
because here we don't have any violin strings
we don't have all the world's blood or the air's
whole embrace
and the arms of lovers write high overhead
far beyond the blue where they rust and die
maternal words just shadow just sobbing
just spasms just love just solitude's dissolution

Between us and words those who are walled in,
and between us and words our duty to speak

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amplexo do ar
e os braços dos amantes escrevem muito alto
muito além do azul onde oxidados morrem
palavras maternais só sombra só soluço
só espasmos só amor só solidão desfeita

Entre nós e as palavras, os emparedados
e entre nós e as palavras, o nosso dever falar

© 1957, Mário Cesariny
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ARTICLES

Portuguese Surrealism:

Welcome to Portuguese poetry - July 2005

January 18, 2006

Did a true Surrealist Movement exist in Portugal? Even those who are reputed to be its leaders have disagreed on this point. The most enduring and prolific of Portugal's Surrealists, Mário Cesariny de Vasconcelos (b. 1923), prefers to speak of a Surrealist 'intervention' in his country's art, literature and society.

The Portuguese version of Surrealism was far more modest than the French original after which it was modeled, but it was inwardly and passionately felt by its practitioners – it wasn't just a cheap copy – and had a profound influence on art and poetry. Perfecto E. Cuadrado, one of the most dedicated scholars on the subject, convincingly argues that it had the characteristics of a genuine avant-garde movement, with an organized structure, publications, doctrinal statements and public manifestations. In this formal sense the movement was short-lived, but it has survived as an attitude still discernible in certain poets, such as Herberto Helder.

Portuguese Surrealism got going in 1947, when a small group of Lisbon artists and writers, including Cesariny and Alexandre O'Neill (1924-86), began meeting to discuss French Surrealism – as promulgated in André Breton's manifestos and chronicled in Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du Surréalisme* (1945) – and to try out several of its methods for creating without relying on reason: the *cadavre exquis* (a composition by any number of co-authors, each of whom writes a word or phrase without seeing but a fraction of what the previous co-author wrote) and automatic writing. These and other methods, with their visual art equivalents, aimed at producing, if possible, works of art and literature directly out of the unconscious.

Even before they delved into French Surrealism (founded already in the mid-1920s but ignored for several decades in Salazarist Portugal), Cesariny and his friends had arrived at its Dadaistic spirit of

iconoclasm and distrust of the rational. Violently opposed to any artistic expression associated with the political regime, they also fell out of sympathy with the prevailing school of opposition: Neo-Realism, whose economically determined socialist aesthetic had little room for the vagaries of a free-ranging imagination.

Cesariny traveled to Paris and met Breton in 1947, but the Grupo Surrealista de Lisboa had no official ties with its French prototype. In August of 1948 Cesariny and some of his friends broke with the Grupo Surrealista, which would organize an art exhibition in 1949 and publish five issues of a magazine before disbanding, in 1950. The splinter group, led by Cesariny and known as the Grupo Dissidente, or simply Os Surrealistas, promoted several exhibitions, published manifestos and organized conferences until the early 1950s, when it too dispersed. But writers and artists identifying themselves with Surrealism continued to meet in Lisbon cafés and to promote its doctrine until the early 1960s.

That doctrine was perhaps best expressed in a ‘communiqué’ of the Portuguese Surrealists written in 1950 but not published till much later. It reads, in part: “Man will only be free when he has destroyed any and every kind of political-religious or religious-political dictatorship and when he is universally capable of existing without limits. Then Man will be Poet and poetry will be Explosive Love. (...) Our last word to country, church and state will always be SHIT.”

In their struggle against socially imposed limits, the Portuguese Surrealists tried to bring art out of its isolation, to make it part and parcel of life. The ‘purest’ among them weren’t concerned to produce works of art for posterity but to live imaginatively, artistically, to integrate the human creative faculty into daily living. Freedom was the catchword that informed their work generally and their poetry most especially. Thematically this meant bitter opposition – through mockery, sarcasm and grotesque parody – to the repressive political regime and to a perceived smallness of the national spirit that allowed that regime to hold sway. Technically their poetry was characterized by free associations, seemingly irrational leaps, word plays, borrowings from other authors (sometimes placed in quotation marks), extravagant imagery and metaphors, and an occasionally transgressive syntax.

The two authors presented here produced the most significant bodies of poetry among the Portuguese Surrealists. But Mário Cesariny quit writing poetry many years ago, dedicating himself instead to painting, and Alexandre O’Neill dissociated himself from the movement already in 1951, almost at the beginning of his publishing career. Traits associated with Surrealism abound in O’Neill’s subsequent work, but we can wonder if they might have been there anyway, even if the movement had never existed.

In an interview published in 1982, Cesariny stated: “Surrealism was an invitation to poetry, love, freedom, personal imagination. Surrealism brought together Romanticism, Symbolism, Futurism, libertarian traditions and other movements, and gave them a meaning. That meaning isn’t going to disappear. What was called Surrealism has always existed.”

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A critical appreciation.