



# VASCO GRAÇA MOURA

(Portugal, 1942-2014)

[Thursday 31 March 2005]

**Born near Oporto but usually based in Lisbon, Vasco Graça Moura, who studied and for a while practiced law, seemed to be at least three men in one. As a public figure, he served as director of the Portuguese national publishing house, has held major posts in various cultural institutions, and is currently a deputy of the European Parliament as a ‘politically incorrect’ Social Democrat (the center-right party in Portugal). The second Vasco Graça Moura was Portugal’s most renowned translator of poetry, the winner of major prizes for his renditions of Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (1995) and the complete sonnets of Shakespeare (2002), and acclaimed as well for his translations of Petrarch, Gottfried Benn, Rilke, Seamus Heaney, and others. The third member of this energetic trio called Vasco Graça Moura was the writer, with over twenty titles of poetry to his credit, as well as novels and essays.**

The three persons were not after all very separable, particularly when we consider the poetry – a poetry we could call ‘public’, as if it felt a civic duty to reflect on culture and tradition. Some poems meditate on art and music, others take up historical and literary figures, and even the intensely personal poems connect with large, humanistic concerns. The poetic tradition, more than a thematic subject, is reflected in the poetry’s very manufacture, the poet having revitalized Renaissance metrical & rhyme schemes imported into Portuguese poetry from Italy. This was especially true in his earlier poetry, which often resorted to forms such as the *sestina*, *ottava rima* and the *sonnet*. Graça Moura cultivated these and other forms, his technical prowess having been honed on his highly accomplished translations of medieval verse, but his own poetry increasingly opted for a narrative, deliberately ‘prosaic’ style – the style for all of the poems published here.

A good place to start is ‘the coffee mill’, a poem that tells the story of how 20th-century Western art gradually deformed the image, until representation gave way to abstraction, an art perhaps better suited to the world’s increasing speed, disorder, uncertainty, and noise. The coffee mill of Cubist painting, used as a metaphor for the gradual grinding up of the world as we knew it, ends up becoming “a barrel organ”. It’s not

clear if the poet is lamenting the process that took place or if he's merely observing it. But it's fair to consider his poetry a sort of coffee mill in reverse. It's like a machine into which anything goes, and out comes a poem. The plain, narrative style, accentuated by the elimination of capital letters, has an equalizing effect, as if it doesn't really matter what goes in. And it doesn't, as long as the poet knows how to transform it.

In a poem published in 1996, Vasco Graça Moura boldly announced: "I transform everything into literature." He was a 'macho' poet, ready to take up any challenge. Like and unlike the coffee mill, he could reduce anything – not into powder but into words. His poetry is all-welcoming, but also all-devouring, all-transforming. Nothing that enters it will remain untouched. Poetry is power, it's violent, and literature is a metareality worth perhaps more than reality itself. In this sense Vasco Graça Moura's view of art was traditional: it's a war, and the artist is a warrior, fighting against the eroding effect of time, the fleetingness of all we hold dear, and the sad inevitability of death – a problem (death) that his poetry continually confronts.

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## **POEMS**

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## a dog for pompeii

rather than a pair of embracing lovers i propose  
a dog from pompeii. one that was no doubt  
frolicking next to the forum, in search of a  
bone,  
when friskier vesuvius caught and molded him

into pumice-stone. i insist  
on seeing him as a scrawny, neglected creature  
for whom poverty was a way of life. he skipped  
through peristyles, a stranger to luxury, to  
corruption

to astrology, and no poisoned morsel ever befell  
him  
from the triclinia, he never became  
a symbolic animal or barking myth.  
he was never found in any excavation, but we  
summon him now.

he was just a dog, un chien, who had fleas and  
raised his paw like all dogs  
and yelped and bit when necessary.  
he lived for today and, faun of street corners,  
for bitches in heat.

a sign no doubt read cave canem in tiny  
tesserae,  
making no mark in history, surviving only  
in expurgated books in latin, mixed up  
with the gallic wars and a few names of gods.

i sing of a dog without fable or pedigree, who  
didn't escape fate,  
an ordinary mutt belonging, let's say, to pliny  
the elder, who happens to have died nearby,  
perhaps screaming, a few days later.

“you're so cerebral,” said vexed and golden-  
haired chloe.  
“yes,” i replied cautiously, “but so are a lot of  
other people.  
and love and death have always been  
ponderable.”  
“besides,” i added, “what harm does it do the  
dog?”

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## um cão para pompeia

aos amantes enlaçados contraponho  
um cão de pompeia, decerto ele andaria  
a brincar junto ao forum, à cata de algum osso,  
quando o vesúvio o caçou, mais lesto,

para moldá-lo em pedra-pomes.  
insisto em vê-lo como um bicho magro e  
descuidado,  
de penúria diuturna. passou de leve  
pelos peristilos, alheio ao luxo, à corrupção,

à astrologia, e nunca dos triclínios  
lhe caiu um naco envenenado, nunca se tornou  
nem animal simbólico, nem mito que ganisse.  
nunca foi encontrado nas escavações, mas é  
para aqui chamado.

era um cão, just a dog, com pulgas e  
que alçava a perna como todos os cães  
e ladrava e mordia quando era preciso.  
fazia pela vida e, fauno das esquinas, pelas  
cadelas no cio.

alguma tabuleta diria cave canem em tésseras  
minúsculas,  
sem alaridos da história, e só sobreviveu  
nos livros de latim expurgados, misturada  
com a guerra das gálias e alguns nomes de  
deuses.

eu canto um cão sem fábula nem pedigree, que  
não fugiu aos fados,  
um rafeiro vulgar, digamos, de plínio  
o velho que, a propósito, morreu perto dali,  
talvez uivando, uns dias depois dele.

“você é um cerebral”, disse-me cloé, flava e  
enervada.  
“sim”, disse-lhe eu com prudência, “mas há  
tantos.  
e o amor e a morte sempre foram pensáveis”.  
e acrescentei “e depois? que mal faz isso ao  
cão?”

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From: *A furiosa paixão pelo tangível*  
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## a word in the heart

*. . . mit einer Hoffnung auf ein kommendes  
Wort im Herzen*

Paul Celan

when celan visited heidegger and they walked  
in the woods before it rained, on leaving he  
wrote  
in the visitors' book about his hope in a  
word to come in the heart. and in todtnauberg,

two years before dying, he again referred to the  
obscure  
phrase written in that book, about a hope that a  
word  
would come (to a thinking being? from a  
thinking being?)  
in the heart. in the heart, that place where

the word is able to reconcile since it's there  
beforehand,  
ardently waiting. to the heart would be less  
visceral.  
either it's already there, ready to come out, or  
there's no point  
in breaking the silence with so much  
expectation.

the roots of fire and of blood are the poem's  
same violent  
roots, in its convulsive magma of wondrous  
things  
or in a tenuous flame bluing into syllables  
delicate as wings. planted in the heart,

a word, an offering of music and wild plants,  
would come from out of the dew and bless, if  
not  
with forgetting, then at least with peace.  
that was all celan asked for and we don't know  
if he obtained it

or if he still sought it, one april night, in the  
seine.

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## uma palavra no coração

*. . . mit einer Hoffnung auf ein  
kommendes Wort im Herzen*

Paul Celan

quando celan visitou heidegger, e passearam  
pelo bosque antes da chuva, ao despedir-se  
escreveu  
no livro da casa sobre a esperança de uma  
palavra a vir no coração. e repetiu em  
todtnauberg,

dois anos antes de morrer, a referência obscura  
à linha escrita nesse livro, de uma esperança,  
então, de que,  
a um ser pensante?, de um ser pensante?,  
viesse uma palavra no coração. no coração, no  
lugar onde

a palavra reconcilia por lá se encontrar desde  
antes,  
esperadamente. ao coração, seria menos  
visceral.  
ou já lá estava pronta a vir ou não valia a pena  
fosse quebrado o silêncio em tanta expectativa.

as raízes do fogo e do sangue são as raízes  
violentas do poema, no seu magma revoltado de  
estranhezas  
ou nalguma ténue chama azulando-se em  
sílabas  
delicadas como asas. instalada no coração,

uma palavra, uma oferenda de música e plantas  
silvestres,  
viria a irromper do orvalho, benfazeja,  
transportando  
se não o esquecimento, a paz. uma palavra.  
tudo o que celan pedia e não sabemos se obteve

e talvez ainda procurasse numa noite de abril,  
no rio sena.

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From: *Laocoonte, rimas várias, andamentos graves*  
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## clara haskill

and there's always a human story that speaks to  
who we are,  
a narrative that prolongs the acoustics of our  
inner suns, destinies  
as the afternoon starts waning, for instance, at

age sixty-five clara haskill fell on the platform  
at the station in brussels and eventually died  
of complications from the fall. but she'd already  
had

problems with her eyes and her back. she'd  
already  
been forced to flee from germany. these notes  
are on the jacket of the record where she,  
mozart's

intermediary, plays the d-minor concerto, in an  
aura  
of grave densities. you're lying on the couch  
reading a book when i tell you this. i don't  
know

if you're paying attention or just smiling as the  
music demands  
and haskill would like. music is always  
autobiographical  
for the listener, an accelerated anguish  
exacerbating what

we dared to know. and an intimate pact with  
light  
and the ineffable part of experience make  
for the sublime in these marginalia of life.

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## clara haskill

e há sempre uma história das pessoas ouvida  
com o que somos,  
uma narração a prolongar a acústica dos sóis  
interiores, destinos  
quando a tarde esmorece, por exemplo, aos

sessenta e cinco anos, clara haskill caiu na  
plataforma  
da gare de bruxelas. veio a morrer  
das complicações da queda. mas antes já tivera

problemas da coluna e da vista, já  
tivera de fugir da alemanha. estas notas  
vêm na capa do disco em que ela, a  
intermediária

de mozart, toca o concerto em ré menor, numa  
aura  
de densidades graves. você está deitada no sofá  
a ler um livro, quando eu lhe digo isto. não

sei se presta atenção, ou se apenas sorri como a  
música requer  
e a haskill desejaria. a música é sempre  
autobiográfica  
para o ouvinte, uma acelerada angústia  
desmedindo o que

ousávamos saber. e uma íntima aliança com a  
luz  
e o inominável da experiência fazem  
o sublime dessas marginalidades da vida.

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## sentimental education

we often live according to a rash  
notion of stark contrasts between good  
and evil, greatness and wretchedness, the swift  
deeds  
of an avid heroism and the inexorable march of  
destiny,

melodrama being part of our deepest nature,  
obscurely but stubbornly nostalgic for the  
radical heart,  
which races at top speed in contradictory  
dreams,  
which engenders seductive images and thinks it  
lives in freedom,

but it's merely reckless and explosive, it  
stumbles  
into the world's snares, into unexpected  
treachery and death, or it must renounce in the  
face of the most  
sublime flashes. passion rudely lacerates people

attached to happiness. the obstacles we meet  
also have protagonists, scores to settle, cruel  
splendors,  
feverish pursuits. and in desperate cases of love  
there's no way out.  
from that unbearable failure is born lyrical,  
unbridled

melodrama, amid whirling, dizzying spurts  
of blood and memory, of dashed hopes and  
tragic music,  
in which someone dies, someone goes mad,  
and someone is saved, and maybe someone  
writes down

the story, and someone else adds music  
for the emotions to be more oppressive and  
perhaps more consuming  
and facile, and someone desires this, it makes  
someone feel a shiver  
of tingling banality, a voracious and

## para a educação sentimental

tantas vezes se vive de uma arrebatada  
noção dos contrastes mais fortes entre o bem e o  
mal, entre a grandeza e a abjecção, entre as  
rápidas  
peripécias de um heroísmo ansioso e o destino  
inexorável,

que o melodrama é da nossa mais funda  
natureza,  
nostálgica, obscuramente nostálgica do coração  
radical,  
do que vai à desfilada nos sonhos  
contraditórios,  
do que engendra imagens capciosas e julga  
viver em liberdade,

mas é só imprudente e explosivo, mas esbarra  
nas malhas deste mundo, nos imprevistos  
da traição e da morte, ou tem de renunciar  
perante os rasgos  
mais sublimes. a paixão dilacera bruscamente as  
personagens

apegadas à felicidade, os obstáculos  
também têm protagonistas, ajustes de contas,  
cruéis fulgores,  
perseguições, e nos casos desvairados de amor  
não há saída.  
desse falhanço insuportável nasce o melodrama,

lírico, incontido, entre golfadas de espiral  
vertiginosa  
com o sangue e a memória, com o que não tem  
remédio e a música trágica,  
em que alguém vai morrer, alguém se perde  
alucinado,  
e alguém se salva e porventura alguém escreve

a história e alguém lhe junta a música  
para as emoções serem mais opressivas e talvez  
mais devoradoras  
e mais fáceis, e alguém tem o desejo disso, um  
estremecimento

unconfessed thrill.

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### **the coffee-mill**

the coffee-mill shows up in various  
cubist paintings, along with the bottle, the  
newspaper and the pipe, all in  
browns and grays, reality

in its vital edges, the somber  
presence of reduced  
hallucinations. the coffee-mill  
turned everything into a finely ground

powder that clogged the most intimate  
mechanisms,  
those of passion and grief, as well as the linear  
calligraphies of fragmented profiles and cobalt-  
blue birds.  
next the coffee-mill ground up representation,

which became unintelligible and gave  
way to a music of spirals  
with less spin, to a memory  
less sharply defined, to contours

less indebted to cézanne, to a life  
less still – yes, perhaps to a life  
that was ready for the disorder  
of another nature, another kind of life.

the coffee-mill became a barrel-organ.  
the world speeded up,  
people's lives became less linear,  
and the clear waters turned cloudy.

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de arrepio e vulgaridade, um ávido prazer  
inconfessado.

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### **o moinho de café**

o moinho de café figura nalguns  
quadros dos cubistas, com o jornal, a  
garrafa, o cachimbo, tudo em  
castanhos e cinzentos. é

a realidade nas suas arestas vivas, a sombria  
presença das reduzidas  
alucinações: o moinho  
de café transformava tudo em fino pó

moído que encravava as engrenagens mais  
íntimas,  
as da paixão e do lamento, ou as caligrafias  
lineares de meios perfis e aves azul-cobalto.  
mais tarde o moinho de café moeu a  
representação

que se tornou irreconhecível e deu  
lugar a uma música de espirais  
menos rotativas, a uma memória  
menos angulosa, a uma periferia

menos grata a cézanne, a uma natureza  
menos morta, talvez seja isso, a uma  
natureza pronta para a desordem  
de uma outra virtualidade ou natureza.

o moinho de café tornou-se um realejo.  
o mundo acelerou-se,  
as vidas ficaram menos lineares  
e as águas de cristal ficaram pardas.

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## the road to ohrid\*

from the heights of the walls of ohrid  
to where he'd run upon hearing the screams  
of the look-outs, king samuel beheld his  
disfigured  
army dragging through the macedonian  
mountains.

the eyes of the fourteen thousand men had been  
gouged by order of the emperor, basil the  
second,  
who had instructed that one eye be spared in  
every  
hundredth man so that they could lead the  
return

of that blind herd. having crossed over the high  
snows  
they now came rushing down toward the lake,  
stumbling and grabbing on to one another,  
the torture mirrored in their facial contortions,

blood soaking their tattered clothes, and the  
king,  
seized by anguish, uttered a shout of grief and  
died  
on the heights of the walls over the hill and his  
forests and groves  
which the lake so peacefully reflected.

in that instant he understood just how  
ambiguous  
the blind force of destiny was, and in no  
monastery  
could the screens of icons have elucidated that  
cruel mystery:  
the saints, whose faces resembled fayumic  
portraits,

remained silent in their frescos amid the  
flickering  
flames, and the voices of the young monks,  
in their austere and unyielding chant,  
were lifting up a grave spring in the shadows.

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## o caminho de ohrid\*

do alto das muralhas de ohrid onde  
acorrera aos gritos desvairados dos vigias,  
o rei samuel avistou o seu exército desfigurado,  
arrastando-se entre as montanhas da macedónia.

aos catorze mil homens tinham sido  
arrancados os olhos por ordem do imperador  
e a um em cada cem mandara ele, basílio II,  
fosse poupado um olho para conduzirem o  
regresso

dessa manada cega. depois de atravessarem  
altas neves  
vinham-se agora despenhando para o lago,  
tropeçando, agarrados uns aos outros,  
a tortura espelhada nas contorções das faces,

o sangue a empapar-lhes os andrajos. e o rei,  
tomado pela angústia, deu um grito de dor e  
morreu  
no alto da muralha sobre a colina e os seus  
bosques e pomares  
que o lago placidamente reflectia.

nesse instante compreendeu como era ambígua  
a força cega do destino e em nenhum mosteiro  
podia a iconostase explicar-lhe esse cruel  
mistério:  
os santos, com feições dos retratos do fayoum,

entre as chamas trémulas emudeciam  
nos seus frescos e as vozes dos jovens monges,  
no seu canto austero e imperturbado,  
elevavam uma grave primavera na penumbra.

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\*O rei Samuel (976-1014) conquistou o trono búlgaro pela força, depois de uma rebelião contra o rei da Bulgária, e expandiu o seu império através da Macedónia, da Sérvia e da Bulgária, tendo sido o primeiro a rejeitar a dinastia dos reis búlgaros. Pediu ao Papa (não ao arcebispo de Constantinopla) uma nova coroa para o seu



\*King Samuel (976-1014) conquered the Bulgarian throne by force, after rebelling against Bulgaria's monarch, and he expanded his empire through Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria, having been the first to reject the dynasty of the Bulgarian kings. He requested from the pope (rather than from the patriarch of Constantinople) a new crown for his empire, whose seat was in Ohrid and Presa (two lakes in Macedonia), and this was yet another reason for the bloodthirsty hatred of Basil II, his lifetime adversary.

império, cuja sede era em Ohrid e Prespa (dois lagos da Macedónia), o que era também uma razão para o ódio encarniado de Basílio II, seu adversário de toda a vida

### **the support for music**

the support for music can be the relationship  
between a man and a woman, the staff  
of their hands that touch, of their  
eyes that meet, of their

vowels they discover to be reciprocally open,  
or of the obscure signs of understanding  
that grow between them like creeping plants.  
the support for music can be the appetite

of their ears and nose for all the ramifications  
between timbres, between scents,  
but it is also, as they know, an inner rhythm,  
a part of the cosmos passing close by

for a few fragile moments, concentrated  
in a minuscule, intensely luminous point  
that music, breaking forth, enlarges  
between familiarity and its ally, harmony.

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### **o suporte da música**

o suporte da música pode ser a relação  
entre um homem e uma mulher, a pauta  
dos seus gestos tocando-se, ou dos seus  
olhares encontrando-se, ou das suas

vogais adivinhando-se abertas e recíprocas,  
ou dos seus obscuros sinais de entendimento,  
crescendo como trepadeiras entre eles.  
o suporte da música pode ser uma apetência

dos seus ouvidos e do olfacto, de tudo o que se  
ramifica entre os timbres, os perfumes,  
mas é também um ritmo interior, uma parcela  
do cosmos, e eles sabem-no, perpassando

por uns frágeis momentos, concentrado  
numa ponto minúsculo, intensamente luminoso,  
que a música, desvendando-se, desdobra,  
entre conhecimento e cúmplice harmonia.

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## twilight

a woman lay in intensive care  
in a fog of bandages with tubes  
entering her nostrils and hands,  
which twitched, and it was all metallic,

but she, the cut and punctured,  
was just a question of tottering, uncertain time,  
just a voiceless moan when the troubled man  
leaned over in the countdown of seconds,

but she, the dripper,  
was a pure interlude on a weak frontier,  
just the weight of eyelids and thick night, when  
he, leaning over,  
murmured the words she didn't hear.

when the visit was over, a glance, the last one  
of that day, wrapped her in pensive silences.  
questioning and hope's negation are like the  
black rose  
of the conditions for hope.

he removed the obligatory white smock, slowly  
walked out,  
and tucked away the translucent face wrapped  
in thin gauze.  
how long ago was it? in what place, in what  
furtive morning of memory?  
who was the man? what words did he proffer?

i no longer know. it's like seeing from the street  
a figure  
through wind-blown curtains. sometimes i think  
it was me,  
but i also wonder if someone in my stead, in a  
fold of time,  
might have so softly murmured the forgotten  
words.

but if it wasn't me, how did i know about that  
choked voice  
that kept slipping until it could no longer be  
heard  
outside the heart? and if it was me, how could i  
have spoken so inwardly, in such a muffled  
tone?

because it's other rhythms i seek in the world,

## twilight

uma mulher estava nos cuidados intensivos  
enevoada em suas ligaduras  
e tubos nas narinas e nas mãos  
que se agitavam e tudo era metálico,

mas ela, a retalhada,  
era só tempo incerto, interrogado e trôpego,  
só gemido sem voz quando o homem ansioso  
se debruçava na contagem dos segundos,

mas ela, a gotejante,  
era um puro intervalo numa frouxa fronteira,  
só um peso de pálpebras e noite espessa,  
quando ele, debruçado,  
murmurava as palavras, as que ela não ouvia.

terminada a visita, um olhar de relance, um  
último  
desse dia, cercou-a de silêncios pensativos.  
a interrogação, a negação da esperança, são  
como a rosa negra  
das condições da esperança.

despiu a bata branca obrigatória, foi-se devagar  
e guardou-lhe o rosto translúcido envolto em  
gazes leves.  
há quanto tempo foi? em que lugar, em que  
manhã furtiva da memória?  
quem era o homem? que palavras proferia?

hoje não sei. é como ver da rua uma figura entre  
cortinas  
numa corrente de ar, às vezes penso que era eu,  
mas pergunto também, seria alguém por mim,  
numa curva do tempo,  
a murmurar tão baixo palavras esquecidas?

mas se não era eu, como é que soube dessa voz  
comovida  
a resvalar assim até ser inaudível  
fora do coração? e se era eu, como pude  
tão de dentro falar, tão apagadamente?

porque eu procuro outros andamentos do  
mundo,  
outros nós na garganta, mais pensados a frio,  
outras intensidades  
sacudidas, mais distantes da emoção imediata,

other,  
more coldly considered knots in the throat,  
other trembling  
intensities, more detached from immediate  
emotion,  
and i would never again say such obscure  
words.

who it was doesn't matter. the winds and seas  
have billowed and rolled, slowly eroding truths,  
circumstances.  
there was a woman in intensive care  
who in a fog heard the sounds she didn't hear.

© Translation: 1998, Richard Zenith

e nunca mais diria palavras tão obscuras.

não interessa quem era. os mares, os ventos  
rolaram e rodaram e foram erodindo verdades,  
circunstâncias.  
estava uma mulher nos cuidados intensivos  
e ouvia enevoada os sons que não ouvia.

© 1987, Vasco Graça Moura  
From: *A furiosa paixão pelo tangível*  
Publisher: Quetzal, Lisbon

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### **Fiction and Essays**

The author has seven novels to his credits, and various nonfiction books.

### **Link**

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