

Mário Cláudio



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A prolific writer, methodical and disciplined student of styles, and researcher into the Portuguese identity, Mário Cláudio re-examines Portuguese history and culture in a personal way, basing his fiction on facts while rejecting the label of "historical novelist".

A chronicler of contemporary life, he writes frequently about Oporto and Northern Portugal. He has worked in a wide range of literary genres (poetry, chronicles, theater, children's literature, and biography). He has received many prizes, including the *Pessoa Prize* in 2004. The jury cited his "mastery of language, devotion to history, attraction to biography, and exceptional narrative inventiveness".

He has published regularly since 1969 more than 50 plays, collections of poetry, short stories, novels and romances.



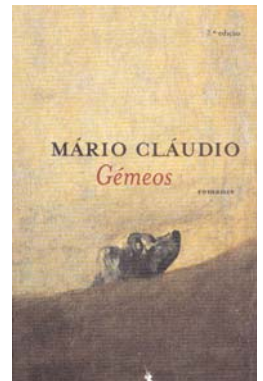
"What fascinates me in the writing of Mário Cláudio is the fact that we sense the untiring hand of the writer in his books. (...) This is when we see the hand painting the picture or, if we prefer, the very origin of literature. Because both things are present in this openly baroque world: a literature of origins constantly provides us with a view of the origin of origins, i.e., the origin of literature."

Eduardo Prado Coelho, 2005



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Gêmeos

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Dom Quixote, 2004

There he was that summer, then, ensconced in the peninsular city, supported by a problematic grant to study the painter's last period. For some time his abiding love of those late years had been nourished by their rebirth under the auspices of several cutting-edge movements, making an extended stay a foregone conclusion. So there he was in a pension that took up the top floor of a building in the middle of town, trying to get used to the shadows that turned his siesta into a hallway he could scarcely see to walk down. Now and then a shuddering jolt from the sluggish elevator shook him out of his torpor: it was like the gasp of an utterly exhausted creature condemned to the most unrelenting bondage. In the lounge, having glanced at yesterday's paper, the receptionist mused in silence, aroused from his boredom those three times each day when the telephone rang so softly it was almost inaudible. He was a retired man with hair as shiny as a beetle's >>



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shell. A keen observer could have sworn that dusty fans moved the air in the adjacent rooms, occasionally stirring underwear hung out on hangers. Almost exactly across the street, the director of the Museum was waiting for him in the office over which he ruled, where the air-conditioning murmured with discreet satisfaction. He was a well-dressed gentleman who turned the pages of his huge reference books with hands one would swear had been softened by talcum. He offered him a cup of inferior coffee, stared at him gravely while he spoke, and without smiling asked how he could be of assistance. The man handed him the cards he had brought along, squares of yellowing cardboard on which he had written the famous titles: "Parade", "Seizure", "Insane Asylum". There opened up around him another realm, however, with a touch of make-believe: cheesy shops that had survived competition from the chain stores and still offered tourists the splendor of Manila lace shawls formerly de rigueur around the pianos of fancy bordellos, and folding fans with flamenco scenes, snatched up by pre-adolescent girls in search of their first grown-up accessories. The most popular bars were the last remaining survivors of an era that ended with the triumph of the kind of sandals the poorest of the poor used to wear, bars where Spanish civil war correspondents used to rub elbows, editing clipped sentences of copy before drinking themselves blind. These characters had cleared out to make room in the 1950s for actors and actresses who used their devious sexuality to cultivate the company of bullfighters. Middle class couples still sauntered in early in the afternoon, usually forming platoons in which the wives walked ahead monitored by their respective husbands, resplendent in their masculinity. It was not until later that outlandish transvestites sashayed up and down the street like mobile altarstones crowned with combs and mantillas.

We had arrived with three pack mules and two old wagons full of the rest of our stuff. It was 5:40 in the afternoon, and it had cooled off a little, though I still heard - or thought I still heard - fat flies buzzing around my head. Madame Leocadia got down off the seat and proceeded to give orders all around with the self-confidence of one who assumes that a hypothetical discipline is active in the midst of the most intractable chaos. I remember how one of the mules, finally liberated from its packs, brayed triumphantly and casually emptied its bladder for what seemed an eternity.

Against the advice of friends, I had decided to ride a mare and as a result was hurting more than I had anticipated. It had not seemed appropriate for a man to take possession of his new country house shut up in a carriage like a bourgeois going out to purchase cheese for Sunday dinner. Despite my age I wanted to feel like the landowner I had never been, to take in the boundless expanse of my property in a glance, kicking dirt clods and rocks with the arrogance of one who does whatever he wants to the earth beneath his feet. The long ride, however, had been a disaster for my hemorrhoids.

The swaying of the mare, which seemed the epitome of elegance on the way in, had turned into a merciless aggravation of my suffering, and all I could think about was the sitz bath that would relieve the burning that was seeping into the seat of my wool trousers. Despite this I made an effort to give my companions the impression that I was entirely in control of the situation. Nothing detracts more completely from our dignity in the eyes of others than stains between the midriff and the knees, and nothing makes us more resistant in our own eyes to sympathy from our fellows.

I therefore asked someone to hold the bridle and stepped firmly to the ground with a self-assurance that surprised even me. There was the old man, then, going to meet his destiny. With my riding crop I struck the dust from my jacket, called for my high hat and prepared to take possession of the estate. In the light of that unusually warm February, the property had turned a crude yellow that I did not find particularly unpleasing. It was the yellow most people called "brown", though the more discerning would prefer "muddy". "Clay-colored" struck me as the most accurate description, unlikely to be mistaken for any other and impossible to disassociate from this place, where it was definitely the first thing one noticed about the landscape. I had become accustomed to this dominant hue, and when Simon the gardener came over to proffer a gesture of servile solicitude that always embarrasses me, I could think of nothing else to say but: "When they used to come this way on pilgrimage they left piles of lamb bones and melon rinds all over the place, and there were tangled stockings and filthy tissues left by those who had acted the most disgracefully".

Then I took in the view of the City, putting off my grand entrance into the house for later, because that would be an event of singular solemnity for me and for me alone. In the meantime I wanted to look at the meager, sinewy river that separated me from the Capitol, a mass that would most certainly be obscured by dust, through which one might be granted an unimpeded glimpse of timid gold and a sky constantly crisscrossed by falcons decrying the cruelty of the humans who languished in the shadow of their wings. And on the left, in the palace of endless columns, the King would be sitting in his favorite easy chair, his feet warmed by slippers full of holes, smoking the best West Indian tobacco in a long pipe with a porcelain bowl.

On my way to the house I spotted Madame Leocadia bustling about by the well, tending to a wall clock, a trunk, and two mattresses. Slowly I approached the garden, which was just coming back to life, graced by a reflecting pool with a spouting fountain. They had thrown open the shutters, giving the house the air of a ship with its sails furled en route to the sea. Even then I had no illusions about the decisive step I had taken at that advanced stage of my life. What does the home to which we have become accustomed symbolize, my good men, but the casket that awaits us in the end? A >>

sharp breeze pricked my neck. I entered the first-floor rooms, no longer with the boldness of an owner but with the apprehension of the eternal apprentice. And I swear that I had never heard a deeper silence than at that very moment.

Madame Leocadia had ordered lanterns lit in all the rooms, and the servants had begun closing the windows so the late afternoon breeze that blew from the denuded plateau would not put out their flames. The woman bustled about without seeming actually to acknowledge my presence, exaggerating the irritability (more affected than authentic) that she deemed a necessary adjunct of efficient command. She complained that a piece of furniture had been left outdoors, exposed to the elements. She demanded that a rug be beat and a fire lit. She ordered that the beds be made, lost as they were in the vastness of the guest quarters, like horses on a plain. She specified the sheets that were to be used but that no one was able to find.

Meanwhile I wandered through the various parts of the house, casting an enormous fool's silhouette on the walls, a hugely fat fool with a pumpkin for a head in which an enormous grin had been carved, one of those fools who make all the pilgrims laugh. I made up really ridiculous things about him: that he had a pair of bald witches's heads dangling from the castanets he was playing, that he was bullying some greedy fellow into carrying his own shriven body around with him, that he watched him eat and drink until he poked him with his finger, that it became necessary to save him from certain death by sticking a wooden spoon down his throat and making him throw up a stinking mess of rotgut and sausage.

Madame Leocadia disappeared briefly, then reappeared dragging a pine box, thinking in this way to instill a code of proper household management. The servants in her charge put on a distracted air in the face of the examples Madame was providing them, aware that St. Thomas's homily would be quite a bit heavier than the works in which his holiness was expressed. I tried to stay out of it, indifferent to the hubbub around me - in this way underscoring my identity as sole, undisputed owner of everything in sight. The estate had been bought with my money: more than sixty acres, a gabled house, a well and poplar trees and a garden in need of attention. It was my sole responsibility to decide the fate of all of this, which I had acquired at my own private expense.

In the dark of night I opened the second-floor rooms, coming across the most entertaining thing of all, Madame Leocadia's boudoir. She was still convinced that the care with which she applied her make-up had to somehow eventually enhance my future interest in her. There was a narrow little bench in front of a mirror in a golden frame grand enough to return the image of a princess in silk finery. There was an assortment of face powders, jars of kohl, and little boxes of rouge amidst countless pencils for tracing the thin line of her

eyebrows. What kind of monster did that creature expect to turn herself into? Had she forgotten that no ghosts disturb the sleep of the old? For years to come she would nevertheless sit there arranging a veil on her forehead beneath the gaze of the girl who looked after her like a governess, as unspeaking as I am unseeing and as fascinated as all young people are with the way the aging persist in wanting to be taken for youths.

Moving on to the bedroom I had chosen for myself, I found my nightshirt and cap rolled up in the sandstone jug next to the bed, alongside the basin for the impending sitz bath. If Madame Leocadia were there - if I thought well enough of her to let her watch me taking my treatment - she would entone: "If it burns, it cures - if it squeezes, it secures". I slowly undressed in the immense silence, only vaguely aware that the stress of a difficult day's journey was fading, imagining that the horses would be pawing the cinder of the courtyard with their hooves, their noses deep in the feedbags that were their reward, and that the sky would be filled with stars, announcing a beautiful tomorrow.

Soon Madame Leocadia would come, taking endless precautions, persisting in her belief in an innocence the world no longer recognized, the silver candle stick and lighted candle trembling in her hand as she searched for the warmth she thought was waiting for her. The vibrations of the flooring beneath her feet reached me where I lay, and I coughed to give her her bearings in the semi-darkness. I raised myself up a little, spat in the chamber pot at the right side of the bed, and dove back under the covers. When the light that penetrated my closed eyelids went out I realized that my companion had extinguished the candle that was lighting her way. And reassured by the knowledge that neither the yowling of cats in mid-winter heat nor the screeching of owls of evil omen would disturb my rest, I condescended to let Dona Leocadia try to warm my old man's feet with her own pitiful bony extremities.

It wasn't until early morning that I learned that Rosarito had slept under the same roof. There was the little girl by my bed, hugging one of her favorite dolls and staring at me with the blue eyes that were first thing anybody noticed in a face that her adoring teachers swore "looks like painted porcelain". Carefully forming the words with her lips so that the hard of hearing geezer she still called "uncle" could understand her, she blurted what she'd come to say: "Get up! We're going for a walk". Her mother Leocadia, an unrepentant early riser, had already given her a bath and freshened her with a sprinkling of perfume, sending her off to rouse the sleepyhead that I was turning into with the passing years. The child stepped forward with the silk cap I was getting into the habit of wearing and struggled to arrange it on my head so I would be ready to go out.

Each day Rosarito grew a little more inside me. She dispelled some of the clouds that obscured my memory and >>

illuminated my thoughts during our morning promenade. Some would have found her too lively, seeing in her the makings of a future vamp, an image unbecoming to a woman who wanted to command respect. Full of questions, she paid scant attention to the answers with which we tried to satisfy her endless curiosity. She was quick to imitate grownups. One minute she was saying how the velvet bodice she noticed on a notary's daughter was so cute, the next minute she was busily fanning herself with gestures she assumed were the height of elegance.

How very many times had I been almost entertained by Dona Leocadia's impatience with the little girl's affectations. She was less concerned about the erosion of moral behavior that these affectations betokened than she was jealous of the devoted attention I couldn't help giving her. Her mother yanked her arm, brusquely hushed her, undid the silk ribbons that graced her hair and began brushing her unruly locks so hard that it wasn't difficult to discern the intent to hurt. The poor thing was snuffling. She shot me a look that was a cry for help and finally pulled free to run away, dragging one of her dolls after her. "That girl's more stubborn than ever", Dona Leocadia complained. I wasn't listening, but she imagined what I would have said anyway and added: "And you're to blame, Mr. Francisco, because you spoil her terribly and do nothing to discipline her".

Last evening's turmoil had nevertheless died down, and whoever wanted to could hear the burbling of the terrace fountain, which spouted water from a spout adorned with a little stone angel. Madame Leocadia had gone off somewhere in her enthusiasm for never allowing the servants a moment's rest. Rosarito came up to me again, glued as always to her beloved doll. "If you want to go for a walk with me", I said, "get some other shoes: the trails are muddy, and your mother doesn't want you to ruin those, because they're new and they're made of satin". The girl went back the way she had come and returned with a pair of little calfskin boots. She took my hand, and we were on our way. She wouldn't talk at first, hugging her doll tight and taking great care to step where she was supposed to, acting far too formal than usual. And after a couple hundred yards she came to an abrupt halt and looked straight at me so I could understand what she was saying, which was: "My daddy who died wasn't an old man like you".

I thought it best not to answer. Initiating what would become our regular practice, with my cane I began pointing out things that were demonstrably worthy of her interest: a glistening slug, a shrivelled mushroom, a piece of pure quartz. But I never once stopped thinking about the poignant words she had spoken. I went on walking with the daughter I had never had, through her living a childhood that was becoming alarmingly real to me, drinking a life that was just beginning from the same cup that I had drained to the dregs. Rosarito entertained herself imagining other things. She might start

singing a song she had learned from one of the those young women who hung around the kitchen telling her things she couldn't yet understand, motivated by a shrewd pleasure in stirring up trouble in the house. "The rag doll is sick,/what shall be give him?/Snail water/that makes you grow horns". I'm sure that was what she was humming. Songs like that filled me with disgust and an overpowering urge to be by myself. Figuring that my old age might as easily be charmed by childhood as conceive an unbearable hatred of it, I heard myself blurting out, "Let's keep moving, Miss Rosario. It's cold, my knees ache, I'm tired, and damned if you still don't understand what I'm trying to get across to you".

There's nothing like fear, seductive fear, to spur a child's imagination. Tell her a good fairy tale about witches and she'll forget about playing, immobilized by an apprehension that is by turns hot and freezing cold. Rosarito ran right into that big sorceress when I went to the studio, which had not been completely set up. At the center of an old painting, the horrible woman held forth, presiding over a witches' sabbath. Two fluttering bats held the ends of her shawl suspended in the air: she was baring her remaining teeth, and burning coals issued from pupils sunk in the dark circles around her eyes while she stuck a slender needle into the back of a naked newborn. The girl was subdued by what I told her later, which I dare not reveal to any adult.

From then on, whenever she found the door ajar, Rosarito would sneak into the studio. She brought a great variety of things from the woods: poplar leaves and pebbles from the river, the desiccated skin of a mole, a button from a soldier's uniform dating back to the war with France. At the beginning I pretended not to notice these things, not knowing whether to receive them as silent offerings that gave her a chance to observe me or as mysterious assets she was in the process of consolidating. I would ask her to sit down quietly in her smock and hand her an illustrated story book, and when she was busy making up tall tales for her audience - a couple of farmer's kids who had been trailing behind after her - I hurriedly drew a fat oil crayon over the flat stone slab, shadows here, light there, thickness and transparency, youth bursting forth, the nearness of death. Rosarito gradually realized why I was keeping her there and seemed to apply herself to the job that she had been assigned with patience and a certain pride.

But there is no way to keep an active, sunny little kid quiet for as long as you need. Soon she was poking into the corners of my studio, poking into piles of things that hadn't been touched for years, like wood frames which the humidity had been busily warping and old cardboard folders which mildew had reduced to crumbs. Soon other enchantments attracted her attention: sheets of paper that I dipped in turpentine to make them transparent, the soot I ordered cleaned from the top of the chimneys, the names of the colors I was working with at the time - "burnt umber", "warm gray", "olive green". Rosarito curled up with her stones in her lap, >>

cleaning them with a wet cloth, and passing the time drawing on them whatever occurred to her, which I was happy to inspect.

What secrets of his art can an old man pass on to those he deems worthy to receive them? Let all those learn who come forward, however arrogantly they parade their untested wisdom, however sure they are that they have unearthed the ultimate technique! I wanted the little girl to botch her sketches, to ask me for help guiding the clumsy fingers that grasped the lead pencil. I wanted her to succumb to tears that would turn her drawing into a huge, embarrassing smudge. But she made a point of not taking me up on my offer. With her tongue between her teeth, she would draw a straight line with the intense focus that gives beginners a look of strength identical to that of a man about to fell an ox. "No, dear", I would think: "You'll never make it like this".

About midmorning I would be struck by an irresistible need to sleep. The brush moved more slowly across the broad surface, and the chisel grew too heavy for me to hold. So I stretched out on a sofa that the Duchess had given me one Ascension Thursday and was soon on my way to the other side. Rosarito was there, but she wasn't herself: she was a bratty kid sticking out her almost beastly lips and demanding

that the old man, who continued napping, go with her into the future. The elderly gentleman tried to drag her by a harness attached to her back while the young thing threw an endless screaming fit. I woke up panic-stricken, convinced that this was a long-forgotten event, and with bleary eyes tried to make out where Rosarito had gotten to.

I thought I saw her standing in front of a sketch of a hellish owl that screeched as it carried her through the sky. Astride its winged shoulders was a hobgoblin with nothing in mind for her but evil. It looked to me as if her entire body had turned white. She was covered from head to toe with some kind of flour that caked the corners of her mouth, and she was holding the golden key to the Paradise that I would never enter. Opening wide the eyes of a dead woman who had suddenly come back to life, she starting talking in such a way that I could understand her by reading her lips. "Good morning, Mr. Francisco - kidneys holding up? Did you get rid of that cough? What about the bunions: still bothering you? And your asshole, Mr. Francisco, is it burning today like a monkey's asshole should? Didn't they flush you out, Mr. Francisco?"

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese by Ken Krabbenhoft, 2005