



# ANTERO DE QUENTAL

(Portugal, 1842-1891)

[Monday 2 January 2006]

**Born on the Azorean island of São Miguel, Antero de Quental followed a path often taken by young Portuguese men from well-heeled families: he went to the University of Coimbra to study law. There he became leader of the student movement that struggled to shake Portuguese institutions out of their stagnant complacency and to incite the country's citizens to embrace European modernity. One of his early essays, "Good Sense and Good Taste" (1865), sparked a national debate between the conservative literary establishment and the iconoclasts of the younger generation, and Antero was likewise a thorn in the side of the political body, being one of the founders of Portugal's socialist movement.**

Antero de Quental's most ardent ambition was to be a philosopher, and his essays frequently deal with philosophical themes, but he did not have much talent for organizing his ideas into an original system of thought. Or perhaps it was his mental instability that prevented him. Clinical treatments in Paris did little to stave off the hysteria that periodically afflicted Antero, much less his chronic pessimism, which only worsened over time. At 49 years of age, back in the Azores after many years spent in mainland Portugal and abroad, Antero shot himself on a park bench, thus ending his life.

Antero's psychological and philosophical life is detectable in his poetry, which seems to have thrived on his rather dark vision of the world. His sonnets, the most achieved part of his poetic oeuvre, are often marked by skepticism, and some are militantly antireligious ('Words of a Certain Dead Man', 'Divine Comedy'). But the poet had a change of heart in his last years, which he recounts in an autobiographical letter written in 1887. Initially a defender of Naturalism – the notion that the laws of science can account for all phenomena – he came to recognize that it "affords no real solution, for it leaves the conscience in suspense, and the mind unsatisfied, as regards everything in which it is most deeply interested". Though he could not quell his doubts, he experienced a kind of conversion (as recorded in 'The Convert').

In his student days, Antero had fervently embraced Hegel, but later on he read the German philosopher's forerunners, especially Leibniz and Kant, as well as mystical writers and Buddhist literature. "I found that mysticism, as the last word of psychological development, must naturally correspond with the deepest essence of things, unless the human conscience be an incongruity in the system of the universe." He went so far as to affirm that "the spirit is the type of reality; nature is no more than a distant imitation, a vague mimicry, a dim and imperfect symbol of the spirit". The late diptych of sonnets titled 'Redemption' seems to reflect his ultimate understanding of the relationship between the natural and spiritual worlds, and between himself and other things.

Antero began writing poetry while at university. His *Odes Modernas*, published in 1865, were well received, but it was his sonnets, which he began publishing already in 1861, that attracted the most attention. Translated into German and Italian in his own lifetime, Antero's sonnets were hugely popular at the turn of the century, partly for their technical skill but probably more so for the ideas that inspired them and the gloomy light that illuminated them and made them somehow enchanting. They can enchant us still, with their sad music and dramatic tone, though we may find them wanting in images and earthbound detail.

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## POEMS

**DESPONDENCY**

**DIVINE COMEDY**

**IGNOTO DEO**

**REDEMPTION**

**THE CONVERT**

**THE PALACE OF FORTUNE**

**THE UNCONSCIOUS**

**TO ALBERTO TELES**

**WORDS OF A CERTAIN DEAD MAN**

### DESPONDENCY

Let it go – the bird so cruelly  
Despoiled of her young and nest. . . .  
May the infinite air of loneliness  
Waft where her broken wings took her.

Let it go – the boat tossed about  
On choppy waves amid the blackness  
When night rose out of the vast expanses  
And gales arrived from the South. . .

### Despondency

Deixá-la ir, a ave, a quem roubaram  
Ninho e filhos e tudo, sem piedade. . .  
Que a leve o ar sem fim da soledade  
Onde as asas partidas a levaram. . .

Deixá-la ir a vela, que arrojaram  
Os tufões pelo mar, na escuridade,  
Quando a noite surgiu da imensidade,  
Quando os ventos do Sul se levantaram. . .

Let it go – the soul that laments  
The faith and peace and trust it lost –  
To that ever still and silent death...

Let it go – the lingering note  
Of a final song. . . and the last hope left. . .  
And life. . . and love. . . Let life go!

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Deixá-la ir, a alma lastimosa,  
Que perdeu fé e paz e confiança,  
À morte queda, à morte silenciosa. . .

Deixá-la ir, a nota desprendida  
Dum canto extremo. . . e a última esperança. . .  
E a vida. . . e o amor. . . deixá-la ir, a vida!

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From: *Sonetos*  
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## **DIVINE COMEDY**

Lifting their arms to the heavens on high  
And addressing the invisible gods,  
The men cry out, “Immovable gods,  
Who gains from invincible fate? Why

Did you create us?! Time unfurls  
Relentlessly, and all it breeds  
Is pain, illusion, strife, foul deeds,  
In a cruel and delirious whirl. . .

Wouldn't it have been better for us  
To remain in the peace of pre-matter,  
In the eternal sleep of nothingness?

Why were we made, if pain is our greatest  
End?” But the gods, with a voice yet sadder,  
Say, “Why, O men, did you create us?”

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## **Divina Comédia**

Erguendo os braços para o céu distante  
E apostrofando os deuses invisíveis,  
Os homens clamam: – “Deuses impassíveis,  
A quem serve o destino triunfante,

Por que é que nos criastes?! Incessante  
Corre o tempo e só gera, inextinguíveis,  
Dor, pecado, ilusão, lutas horríveis,  
Num turbilhão cruel e delirante. . .

Pois não era melhor na paz clemente  
Do nada e do que ainda não existe,  
Ter ficado a dormir eternamente?

Por que é que para a dor nos evocastes?”  
Mas os deuses, com voz ainda mais triste,  
Dizem: – “Homens! por que é que nos  
criastes?”

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## IGNOTO DEO

What mortal beauty resembles yours,  
O vision which my soul has dreamed  
And which reflects in me your gleam  
Like sunlight on the ocean's mirror?

So vast the universe! My yearning tells me  
To seek you on Earth, so here I plod,  
A believer searching for a clement God,  
But I find just his altar. . . old and empty. . .

Your immortality inspires my worship.  
But what are you here? A gaze of pity,  
A drop of honey in a cup of lye. . .

Pure essence of the tears I weep  
And dream of my dreams, if you exist,  
At least reveal yourself in the sky!

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## Ignoto Deo

Que beleza mortal se te assemelha,  
Ó sonhada visão desta alma ardente,  
Que reflectes em mim teu brilho ingente,  
Lá como sobre o mar o sol se espelha?

O mundo é grande – e esta ânsia me aconselha  
A buscar-te na terra: e eu, pobre crente,  
Pelo mundo procuro um Deus clemente,  
mas a ara só lhe encontro. . . nua e velha. . .

Não é mortal o que eu em ti adoro.  
Que és tu aqui? olhar de piedade,  
Gota de mel em taça de venenos. . .

Pura essência das lágrimas que choro  
E sonho dos meus sonhos! se és verdade,  
Descobre-te, visão, no céu ao menos!

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From: *Sonetos*

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## REDEMPTION

I

Voices of trees, the wind, the sea!  
When, in certain sorrowful dreams,  
I'm lulled by your powerful melodies,  
I sense that you're distraught, like me.

Twilight words and secret breath  
Of speechless things, mysterious psalm,  
Wispy grieving, are you not  
The world's sighing and lament?

A spirit inhabits the immensity:  
A cruel yearning to be free  
Makes the fleeting forms rave.

I understand your strange tongues,  
Voices of seas, mountains, jungles. . .  
My soul's sisters – souls enslaved!

## Redemption

I

Vozes do mar, das árvores, do vento!  
Quando às vezes, num sonho doloroso,  
Me embala o vosso canto poderoso,  
Eu julgo igual ao meu vosso tormento. . .

Verbo crepuscular e íntimo alento  
Das cousas mudas; salmo misterioso;  
Não serás tu, queixume vaporoso,  
O suspiro do mundo e o seu lamento?

Um espírito habita a imensidade:  
Uma ânsia cruel de liberdade  
Agita e abala as formas fugitivas.

E eu compreendo a vossa língua estranha,  
Vozes do mar, da selva, da montanha. . .  
Almas irmãs da minha, almas cativas!

II

Don't cry, seas and trees and winds,  
Ancient chorus of strident voices  
Chanting ageless, mournful verses  
Like a dirge of mortuary worms. . .

One day you will finally leave  
The shade of twilight visions, emerging  
Radiant from that dream and those yearnings  
Born of all that makes you grieve.

Souls still in the limbo of existence,  
One day you'll awake, in Consciousness,  
Hovering already as pure thought.

You'll see Forms, daughters of Illusion,  
Crumble like a dream's confusions. . .  
And never again will you be distraught.

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**THE CONVERT**

Among the sons of an accursed century  
I took my place at the irreverent table,  
Where still was heard, under all the revel,  
The moan of a helpless thirst for infinity.

Like the rest, I spat onto the altar  
A laugh made of blasphemy and disdain.  
But one day my hardness was fatally shaken;  
An alarm went off in my repentant heart!

Opening the dam to its pent-up tears,  
My lonely soul, sad and weary,  
Turned to God, unable to resist!

I shrouded my thinking in Belief;  
In forgetting and inertia I found relief. . .  
My only doubt is if God exists!

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II

Não choreis, ventos, árvores e mares,  
Coro antigo de vozes rumorosas,  
Das vozes primitivas, dolorosas  
Como um pranto de larvas tumulares. . .

Da sombra das visões crepusculares  
Rompendo, um dia, surgireis radiosas  
Desse sonho e essas ânsias afrontosas,  
Que exprimem vossas queixas singulares. . .

Almas no limbo ainda da existência,  
Acordareis um dia na Consciência,  
E pairando, já puro pensamento,

Vereis as Formas, filhas da Ilusão,  
Cair desfeitas, como um sonho vão. . .  
E acabará por fim vosso tormento.

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From: *Sonetos*  
Publisher: IN-CM, Lisbon

**O Convertido**

Entre os filhos dum século maldito  
Tomei também lugar na ímpia mesa,  
Onde, sob o folgar, geme a tristeza  
Duma ânsia impotente de infinito.

Como os outros, cuspi no altar avito  
Um rir feito de fel e de impureza. . .  
Mas, um dia, abalou-se-me a firmeza,  
Deu-me rebate o coração contrito!

Erma, cheia de tédio e de quebranto,  
Rompendo os diques ao represado pranto,  
Virou-se para Deus minha alma triste!

Amortalhei na fé o pensamento,  
E achei a paz na inércia e esquecimento. . .  
Só me falta saber se Deus existe!

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From: *Sonetos*  
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## THE PALACE OF FORTUNE

I dream I'm a knight who ventures forth  
Through deserts, hot days, and pitch-black  
nights.

A defender of love, with all my might  
I seek the enchanted palace of Fortune!

But I'm already faint with weariness,  
My sword is broken, my armor smashed. . .  
And then I suddenly see it, flashing  
With pomp and lofty magnificence!

I bang on the doors and cry in distress:  
"I'm the Vagabond, the Dispossessed.  
Have pity and open up, golden doors!"

The golden doors open with a din. . .  
But sadly all I find within  
Is silence and darkness – nothing more!

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## THE UNCONSCIOUS

The familiar ghost who accompanies me  
(Without, however, showing his face)  
And whom I sometimes view with distaste,  
Though I usually regard him hopefully,

Is a solemn, sober, ancient ghost,  
Who doesn't seem to like to converse. . .  
Before this figure, ascetic and reserved,  
My words have always stuck in my throat.

I dared to question him just once.  
"Phantom whom I hate and love,  
Who are you?" I asked with shame.

He said, "Your fellow human creatures  
Have called me God for ten thousand years. . .  
But I myself don't know my name. . ."

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## O Palácio da Ventura

Sonho que sou um cavaleiro andante.  
Por desertos, por sóis, por noite escura,  
Paladino do amor, busco anelante  
O palácio encantado da Ventura!

Mas já desmaio, exausto e vacilante,  
Quebrada a espada já, rota a armadura. . .  
E eis que súbito o avisto, fulgurante  
Na sua pompa e aérea formosura!

Com grandes golpes bato à porta e brado:  
Eu sou o Vagabundo, o Deserdado. . .  
Abri-vos, portas d'ouro, ante meus ais!

Abrem-se as portas d'ouro, com fragor. . .  
Mas dentro encontro só, cheio de dor,  
Silêncio e escuridão – e nada mais!

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## O Inconsciente

O espectro familiar que anda comigo,  
Sem que pudesse ainda ver-lhe o rosto,  
Que umas vezes encaro com desgosto  
E outras muitas ansioso espreiro e sigo,

É um espectro mudo, grave, antigo,  
Que parece a conversas mal disposto. . .  
Ante esse vulto, ascético e composto  
mil vezes abro a boca. . . e nada digo.

Só uma vez ousei interrogá-lo:  
«Quem és (lhe perguntei com grande abalo)  
Fantasma a quem odeio e a quem amo?»

– «Teus irmãos (respondeu) os vãos humanos,  
Chamam-me Deus, há mais de dez mil anos. . .  
Mas eu por mim não sei como me chamo. . .»

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## TO ALBERTO TELES

Alone! – On the hill the solitary hermit  
Glimpses God, who grants him solace.  
At sea the sailor whom the high winds toss  
Waits for a friendly breeze from heaven. . .

Alone! – A man who has settled abroad,  
Though far from his people, has fond  
remembrance;  
And who weeps at night on a barren precipice  
At least has the hope that's given by God.

Alone! – Not he who amidst his pains  
Has a tie that binds him to his fate:  
A faith, a desire. . . or a care, a concern. . .

But to cross one's listless arms in disdain,  
To pass through a crowd forever separate  
– That is to be alone: alone and forlorn!

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## WORDS OF A CERTAIN DEAD MAN

I've been dead for over a millennium,  
Exposed, on this cliff, to wind and rain:  
Not even a ghost has a thinner frame,  
And no abortion is more misshapen. . .

Only my spirit lives, absorbed  
By a single, inexorable thought:  
“Dead and buried in life!” That  
Is my torment. . . the rest I ignore.

I know I lived. . . but it was all of a day,  
Just one – and the next day Idolatry  
Built me an altar. . . Ah! they all bowed

As if I were someone! as if Life  
Could be someone! – and then they decided  
I was a God. . . and wrapped me in a shroud!

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## A Alberto Teles

Só! – Ao ermita sozinho na montanha  
Visita-o Deus e dá-lhe confiança:  
No mar, o nauta, que o tufão balança,  
Espera um sopro amigo que o céu tenha. . .

Só! – Mas quem se assentou em riba estranha,  
Longe dos seus, lá tem inda a lembrança;  
E Deus deixa-lhe ao menos a esperança  
Ao que à noite soluça em erma penha. . .

Só! – Não o é quem na dor, quem nos cansaços,  
Tem um laço que o prenda a este fadário,  
Uma crença, um desejo. . . e inda um  
cuidado. . .

Mas cruzar, com desdém, inertes braços,  
Mas passar, entre turbas, solitário,  
Isto é ser só, é ser abandonado!

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## Palavras dum Certo Morto

Há mil anos, e mais, que aqui estou morto,  
Posto sobre um rochedo à chuva e ao vento:  
Não há como eu espectro macilento,  
Nem mais disforme que eu nenhum aborto. . .

Só o espírito vive: vela absorto  
Num fixo, inexorável pensamento:  
«Morto, enterrado em vida!» o meu tormento  
É isto só. . . do resto não me importo. . .

Que vivi sei-o eu bem. . . mas foi um dia,  
Um dia só – no outro, a Idolatria  
Deu-me um altar e um culto. . . ai! adoraram-  
me,

Como se eu fosse alguém! como se a Vida  
Pudesse ser alguém!– logo em seguida  
Disseram que era um Deus. . . e amortalharam-  
me!

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