



# ANTÓNIO FRANCO ALEXANDRE

(Portugal, 1944)

[Thursday 1 January 2004]

**António Franco Alexandre was born in 1944 in the town of Viseu. He studied mathematics and philosophy in France and in the United States of America. He has been teaching philosophy at the University of Lisbon since 1975.**

Although his poetry is characterized by an elliptic and somehow hermetic dimension, rendering its interpretation sometimes difficult, it never abandons an evident proximity with reality. António Franco Alexandre is unanimously considered as one of the most important poets of the last quarter of a century in Portugal.

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## POEMS

**DWELLING PLACES III (9) (TERCEIRAS MORADAS (9))**

**DWELLING PLACES III (11) (TERCEIRAS MORADAS (11))**

**DWELLING PLACES III (18) (TERCEIRAS MORADAS (18))**

**SYRINX, A PASTORAL FICTION (I) (SYRINX, FICÇÃO PASTORAL (I))**

**SYRINX, A PASTORAL FICTION (II) (SYRINX, FICÇÃO PASTORAL (II))**

**SYRINX, A PASTORAL FICTION (XVI) (SYRINX, FICÇÃO PASTORAL (XVI))**

**SYRINX, A PASTORAL FICTION (XVII) (SYRINX, FICÇÃO PASTORAL (XVII))**

### Dwelling Places III (9)

And I could give you  
a cellophane floor where waves would slide  
on cool nights,  
four cage-coloured walls, and flawless  
marble teeth. Love would enter  
the scene on blind wings,

and honey, houseflies and the rest  
would all be ways for us to stave off death.  
Birds would grow in the place of fruits, fooled  
by the relentless exaltation of rhyme,  
and I might even know how to be sad  
without a dog or proverbs,

with my blank eyes looking up, as if sleeping  
on the dull blade of a jack-knife.

### Dwelling places III (11)

when they wake up, they'll ask  
by what presage, what carelessness  
this imprint of a hand was left  
on the stone cliff.  
A hunting ritual? A way to bring rains  
from far lands, where the shroud of complete

solitude dissipates? It could be that  
I've made ignorance into the most exact  
form of memory, or that these delusions are  
enough  
for me as the stiff blowing wind whines louder  
in my bicycle, or that the brain, slapped  
together,  
is the missing part in the clock,

the extra letter in the earth that guides us  
to the lighthouse.

### Terceiras Moradas (9)

E poderia dar-te  
um chão de celofane, onde desliza a onda  
em noite fresca;  
quatro paredes, pintadas de gaiola,  
e o implacável mármore dos dentes. Amor viria  
de asas cegas no recorte,

e o mel, as moscas, tudo nos seria  
maneira de afastar a morte.  
E cresceriam aves no lugar dos frutos,  
enganados  
pela contínua exaltação da rima;  
e saberia, acaso, até como ser triste  
sem provérbio nem cão,

de olhos brancos no ar, como quem dorme  
na romba lâmina de um canivete.

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From: *Poemas*  
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

### Terceiras Moradas (11)

acordados, virão  
perguntar por que presságio, que desleixo  
ficou esta mão gravada  
em precipício de pedra;  
Rito de caça? promessa  
de chuvas além-terra, aonde o manto

da inteira solidão se desvanece?  
Talvez, da ignorância, tenha feito  
a mais precisa forma de memória. Ou me baste  
essa visão de enganos, quando o vento sopra  
mais forte no rumor da bicicleta;  
ou seja o crânio, à pressa encomendado,

a peça no relógio que faltava,  
a letra a mais na terra, que ao farol nos guia.

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From: *Poemas*  
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

### **Dwelling Places III (18)**

to burn it all is a much simpler  
process. I cover my head with ashes  
(not stars) as if in warning.  
Here we are at the end  
of the world! It's a sizeable wall, a monument  
to ancient wisdom,

and it runs inside us! Meanwhile we pour  
ourselves out in all directions, and I know I'm  
forgetting  
the essential thing, that vial of perfume  
at day's end (or was it at night?) when  
hands still made us close,

fire was an easy word,  
and in us light alone lived.

### **Syrinx, a Pastoral Fiction (I)**

I'm going to put a dirty ad in the newspaper  
asking for fresh, not especially athletic meat  
and noble feelings of passion.  
I want a – how shall I put it? – human  
being who'll discover my mouth  
and who, like me, has split hooves,  
a blue bifid tongue and a rude  
manner of singing under water.  
I want someone who'll love me and leave me  
with equally tranquil concision  
and who'll record our encounter in a report  
or a poem for inclusion in the syllabi  
of the schools beyond the bridges.  
And I wait by the phone to find out  
if I'm happy, real, or just a foam  
of ashes passing through sundry hands.

### **Terceiras Moradas (18)**

incendiar, sim, é um processo  
mais simples. Cubro a cabeça de cinza  
(não de estrelas!), como se fora um aviso.  
Eis-nos chegados ao fim  
do mundo! É uma parede considerável, um  
monumento  
ao saber mais antigo,

percorre-nos interiormente! E entretanto  
entornamo-nos em todos os sentidos, e sei que  
no meio esqueço  
o essencial, esse frasco de perfume  
ao descer o dia? ou seria a noite? quando  
as mãos ainda nos aproximavam,

o fogo era uma palavra entre todas a mais fácil,  
e só, em nós, a luz vivia.

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From: *Poemas*  
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

### **Syrinx, Ficção Pastoral (I)**

Vou pôr um anúncio obsceno no diário  
pedindo carne fresca pouco atlética  
e nobres sentimentos de paixão.  
Desejo um ser, como dizer, humano  
Que por acaso me descubra a boca  
e tenha como eu fendidos cascos  
bífida língua azul e insolentes  
maneiras de cantar dentro de água.  
Vou querer que me ame e abandone  
com igual e serena concisão  
e faça do encontro relatório  
ou poema que conste do sumário  
nas escolas ali além das pontes  
E espero ao telefone que me digam  
se sou feliz, real, ou simplesmente  
uma espuma de cinza em muitas mãos.

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From: *Quatro caprichos*  
Publisher: Assírio & Alvim, Lisbon

## **Syrinx, a Pastoral Fiction (II)**

*Stashed under my mattress I've got  
the cleanest heart on earth,  
like a fish washed by the rain  
that floods me deep down.  
I wake up each day with a different body  
from the one I went to bed with,  
and I'm never sure if what I am  
is the project or memory of what I was.  
I hug the powerful but accurate arms  
that brought me last night to where I am,  
and as I sip coffee I read today's weather  
in the leaves of the park's trees.  
Later on I'll cross the bridges  
to buy, sell and trade life on fire,  
but cautiously, lest I scorch  
my artful, princess's hands.*

## **Syrinx, a Pastoral Fiction (XVI)**

*You can pick me up, put me on the scale  
of yes and no, and measure my virtue in inches;  
my heart is still stored in a cool,  
dry place, far away from words.  
And I like being alone, in the smallest cell  
of a sterile prison on the slopes,  
singing all night long against my window  
that looks out on to other, similarly barred  
windows.  
You can even recite (but you don't recite)  
those funny sentences in which you fly  
over distant hills that tremble in awe  
at such a solemn, utterly new dawn,  
and you can bring me cool water; I'll still roll  
myself into a tight ball and not budge  
even when the inexplicable monster  
rips my bedsheet with its claws.*

## **Syrinx, Ficção Pastoral (II)**

*Debaixo do colchão tenho guardado  
o coração mais limpo desta terra  
como um peixe lavado pela água  
da chuva que me alaga interiormente  
Acordo cada dia com um corpo  
que não aquele com que me deitei  
e nunca sei ao certo se sou hoje  
o projecto ou memória do que fui  
Abraço os braços fortes mas exactos  
que à noite me levaram onde estou  
e, bebendo café, leio nas folhas  
das árvores do parque o tempo que fará  
Depois irei ali além das pontes  
vender, comprar, trocar, a vida toda acesa;  
Mas com cuidado, para não ferir  
as minhas mãos astutas de princesa.*

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From: *Quatro caprichos*  
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## **Syrinx, Ficção Pastoral (XVI)**

*Podes pegar em mim, pesar-me na balança  
do sim e não, medir-me às polegadas a  
bondade;  
ainda eu guardo o coração em sítio seco  
e fresco, e longe de palavras.  
E agrada-me estar só, na mais pequena cela  
de uma prisão estéril entre os montes,  
toda a noite a cantar contra a janela  
donde se avistam outras grades iguais.  
Podes até dizer (mas não as dizes)  
as engraçadas frases em que voas  
por distantes colinas, espantadas  
de tão solene e nova madrugada;  
e trazer-me água fresca, que me enrolo  
em mim como um novelo e nem sequer  
me movo quando o monstro inexplicável  
com as suas garras rasga o meu lençol.*

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## Syrinx, a Pastoral Fiction (XVII)

Sorry, I didn't realize that you sing  
in silence, all alone. In this heat  
you should drink ice water; it's also a good idea  
not to worship idols – including, for example,  
your own self-image that torments you  
(or that torments me?).  
Other examples include babylonian gardens,  
eruptions of mt. etna, the aphrodisiac  
effect of diamonds,  
and the arts and sciences of education.  
I'm going to sit right here, breathe possible  
but inevitably unreal things until it hurts,  
and learn knot by knot how you untie yourself.  
We'll fall into a well without  
parachute or compass and be the first  
twin love in the world.

## Syrinx, Ficção Pastoral (XVII)

Perdoa, não sabia que cantavas  
Em sossego, silenciosamente. Neste calor  
é preciso beber água gelada; também convém  
não adorar ídolos, por exemplo a imagem  
que aí trazes de ti e te atormenta  
(ou me atormenta a mim?).  
Outros exemplos incluem jardins de babilónia,  
Erupções do etna, o efeito  
afrodisíaco do diamante,  
as ciências da educação.  
Vou-me sentar aqui, respirar até doer  
as coisas possíveis nunca reais,  
aprender, nó a nó, como te soltas;  
Vamos cair num poço, sem  
bússola e pára-quedas, vamos ser o primeiro  
amor a dois no mundo.

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## ARTICLES

### *Critics on the work of António Franco Alexandre*

January 18, 2006

"I stumbled across an old book by publishers Assírio e Alvim. It is a book by a poet named António Franco Alexandre. I don't know who he is, I have never seen him, I had never read his work and from my point of view, after so many years fighting words (which gives me some insider experience), I have no doubts when I say this writer is a class act.

For many reasons, by the security in his hand, his thoroughness, the strength of his sentences, the parsimony of feelings, the lulling music. Reading something by a talented author gives me the same goose-bumps I get from watching Leotard do a trapeze stunt. There is always a time when the artist (if indeed he is an artist) must let go of one trapeze and grab the other one. The endless seconds that stunt takes fill me with distress because we don't know if he is going to pull it off, if he will fail, if he will hit the net or the ground. Most people just swing back and forth on the same, safe trapeze

they know. They do it without elegance or courage, with a trembling smile on their fearful lips. António Franco Alexandre is one of the few who have the talent and the strength to fly and who know how to fly and do not ever fall. I don't know what people say about him because I don't know or care what is said about anyone, but I know what I say: it is a beautiful book by a wonderful poet and do yourselves the favour of buying it."

António Lobo Antunes

"Crónica". *Público*, 26 January 1997

"This poetry is written from the point of view of a clear thinking phenomenology of the imprecise, that, strangely enough, plays a game with the almost palpable quality of words. The great paradox is that its worlds are built from what is known, but without any certainty ("Despede-te da mesquinha certeza" ["Say goodbye to petty certainty"]). The poem is a field crossed by an all-consuming energy, incorporating everything into such chaos that it is up to the reader to sort things out, all in "small sizes", because only detail is "poetically inhabitable". Far from being "mostly unreadable", as some critic said, this poetry is truly, like the author says, an expression of a relativistic "as if..." searching for "the way to say the true false things", of something in motion "calculating imprecise routes"."

João Barrento

*Nelken und Imortalen - Portugiesische Literatur der Gegenwart*. Berlin: Tranvía, 1999

"[...] one of the best surprises I ever had I owe to António Franco Alexandre, with his *Moradas 1&2* (1987), reaching the highest point of previously registered virtuosity, made him make sense, or a reference, from a negative point of view [...]. Instead of senses or perceptions, this is an experience of pre-senses or pre-perceptions, of clues; also, instead of a clearly audible voice, breath that is merely hinted at, in an as yet inarticulate mouth: "a pequena tosse do outro / lado das palavras" ["a small cough on the other/ side of words"]. And yet, as in Pessoa, but on a different level, there is something under such modest reference: cyclic evidences connected to the earth, to the seasons, to water, seeds of disguised and incoercible continuity, through the watery or windy flow of specific voyages [...], and, above all, an inter-personal meeting or something else that is harder to describe than that. [...]

When I started to read Pessoa, about fifty years ago, I thought it was the limit of non-poetic metaphysics. Pessoa's poetry is, clearly, but subtly, metaphysical: all-denying, saying nothing, at most it insinuates through clear antiphrasis to its own universal negativity. António Franco Alexandre's latest book, probably the best poetry book of the decade, takes me to another, a deeper,

degree of negative radicality, because it is not based on being, but on saying, on the logic of communicating. [...] I believe this is one of the recent books from which, poetry-wise, one can learn most." "Alguns nexos diacrónicos na poesia novecentista portuguesa". In *A Phala – um século de poesia*. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 1988.

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