

Cesário Verde

The Feeling of a Westerner

Cesário Verde (Lisbon, 1855–1886), a poet who went unnoticed in his lifetime, was hailed by Fernando Pessoa and other Portuguese modernists as one of their greatest precursors. His masterpiece, *The Feeling of a Westerner*, was published in 1880.

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A bilingual edition

Cesário Verde

Translated from the Portuguese by
Richard Zenith

Preface by
Anna M. Klobucka

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Introduction: Loitering on the Edge

Anna M. Klobucka

The poet is a loiterer. He loiters in the streets of Lisbon, at dusk and through the night. At once aimless and filled with purpose, he strolls down to the riverbank and back up toward the brightly lit shop windows of the commercial district. He enters and exits alleyways, taverns, and department stores. He scavenges images, sounds, smells, and insights; he spins out sprightly metaphors before his readers' eyes. And in his constant and unpredictable movement he remains precariously balanced on the edge: on the edge of Europe (marooned in its westernmost periphery, far removed from "Madrid, / Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg, the world!"); on the edge of time, surveying his country's past and future from the vantage point of an unstable present; and on the edge of nervous and physical breakdown, as beauty, perfection and immortality beckon to him seductively, only to slip away.

The Feeling of a Westerner (O sentimento dum ocidental) by Cesário Verde (1855-1886) has been extolled by contemporary scholars as "arguably the greatest poem of the Portuguese nineteenth century" (Tamen 2001, 36) and "one of the most extraordinary poems written in Portuguese" (Martelo 42). Yet at the time of its original publication in 1880—in a commemorative collection of tributes to Luís de Camões on the occasion of the third centenary of the Renaissance poet's death—it failed to attract any kind of significant attention except, as reported by Cesário himself, for a censorious comment issued by a Spanish critic who, somewhat ironically, chose to deplore the poem's deficient display of "noble national spirit" (Verde 212). Regardless of its validity, this criticism could not have come as a complete surprise to the author, given that flawed rectitude of poetic

posture, judged by the standards of both national and individual probity, was a charge launched against his vigorously unconventional verses from the earliest days. When the barely nineteen-year-old poet, in “Esplêndida” (“Splendorous”), contrasted his own shabby appearance with the richly appointed carriage of a magnificently haughty (and seemingly British) aristocrat charging up a Lisbon street, and confessed his wish to join the submissive ranks of her lackeys, the eminent historian (and future President of the Portuguese Republic) Teófilo Braga was heard to observe that “a modern poet and lover should be hardworking, strong, and dignified, and should not abase himself like that” (Verde 256). Another prominent intellectual, Ramalho Ortigão, was more publicly and viciously critical: he mocked Cesário and other, unspecified poets for attempting to emulate Baudelaire in spite of their provincially limited horizons—“Baudelaire lived on the Boulevard des Italiens and they live on Rua dos Bacalhoeiros” (215)—and poorly informed taste, which the critic clearly ascribed to their lowly class status, and which in Cesário’s poem was purportedly betrayed by numerous details gotten hopelessly wrong: the carriage’s unheard-of blue satin lining, an improper brand of hand cream, the lady’s multicolored silk dress (“a thing of inadmissible bad taste”), and so forth.

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Cesário Verde’s background distanced him, in effect, from the life experience shared by most male members of his country’s intellectual elite in the late nineteenth century: the study of law at the University of Coimbra, followed by a career in public service or diplomacy, or else—personal wherewithal permitting—by cultivated idleness. Son of a modestly prosperous hardware merchant, he worked from early on in the family business, which he took over after his father’s death and expanded to include exportation of produce grown on the Verdes’ farm near Lisbon. He was only thirty-one when he died of tuberculosis, leaving, in addition to his commercial enterprises, a total number of forty uncollected poems. Some nine months later, twenty-two of these poems (including “The Feeling of a Westerner”) were published in a volume organized by the poet’s friend Silva Pinto and titled *The Book of Cesário Verde* (*O livro de Cesário Verde*). The collection’s many subsequent editions altered the volume’s original design significantly, as poems arbitrarily excluded by Silva Pinto were added to the initial selection, and his arrangement and revision of the texts were questioned and modified by such editors as Joel Serrão and (most recently) Teresa Sobral Cunha. Nevertheless, the most momentous

transformation of Cesário's legacy has surely been his gradual ascent to his now firmly held status of the chief precursor, or indeed the pioneering exemplar, of Portuguese poetic modernity. Well over a century after Ramalho Ortigão's contemptuous designation of the author of "Esplêndida" as a provincial epigone of Baudelaire, Cesário has come to stand, in the contemporary view of Portuguese literary history, as a rightful counterpart to the French poet. Like Baudelaire, he ushered in a wide repertoire of poetic forms, postures and procedures that reflected and shaped the emergent configurations of his country's modern culture and aesthetics (Martelo 40).

The most consequential of the many twentieth-century Portuguese poets to champion Cesário as their precursor was undoubtedly Fernando Pessoa. In an English-language essay charting the recent evolution of Portuguese letters and probably written in 1912, Pessoa pointed to Cesário as "the first to see in Portuguese poetry the clearest vision of things and their real presence which can be found in modern literature" (1966, 350). Most crucially, however, he acknowledged Cesário's central influence in the formation of his own principal heteronymous personae, including the designated Master of the group, Alberto Caeiro, who described in a poem his experience of reading *The Book of Cesário Verde* "until my eyes begin to burn" and who regarded its author as his only real peer in being able to see the world clearly and truthfully (Pessoa 1994, 45). If, at the same time, the bucolically inclined Caeiro pitied Cesário for remaining imprisoned in the artificial environment of the city—a likely echo of the lines in *The Feeling of a Westerner* in which the poet complains of living "enclosed by stone / In a dark and treeless valley of walls"—Pessoa's other leading heteronym, the exuberantly cosmopolitan Álvaro de Campos, referred in several poems (including his magnum opus, "Maritime Ode") to Cesário's ability to explore intimately the poetic potential of modern urban environments in all their gloriously trivial and self-sustaining materiality:

Life's complexity! Though drawn up by people
 Who love, hate, have political passions and sometimes commit crimes,
 The invoices are so neat, so well written, so independent of all that!
 Some people look at an invoice and don't feel this.
 Surely you felt it, Cesário Verde.
 And I feel it so humanly it makes me cry.
 (Pessoa 2006, 193)

Campos's feeling of endearment for invoices would probably have struck a sympathetic cord in Pessoa's "semiheteronym" Bernardo Soares, an assistant bookkeeper who worked and lived in downtown Lisbon and whose own statement of affinity with Cesário—in his monumental *The Book of Disquiet* (*Livro do desassossego*)—praises the stillness of certain summer evenings in his neighborhood when he is able to "enjoy feeling that I'm a contemporary of Cesário Verde, and that in me I have, not verses like his, but the identical substances of the verses that were his" (Pessoa 2003, 13-14). The diverse array of these and other references to Cesário as a significant precursor of Pessoa's bevy of literary personae does not appear to coalesce into a coherent, albeit composite, lesson: he anticipates Caeiro as a master of looking at reality, precedes Campos in their shared ability to express the poetic intensity of the modern city, and is said to foreshadow the particular configuration of subjectivity and experience to which Pessoa gave the name of Bernardo Soares. But the most significant and fertile connection between Cesário's sparse poetic output and Pessoa's sprawling literary universe seems to be a specific quality shared by the two lyric selves—the poet of *The Feeling of a Westerner* and the heteronym Campos as incarnated in his great urban odes—that *pass through* the modern city even as they allow and welcome the city to reciprocate their movement and attention by penetrating expansively their vision, their bodies, and their minds.

The urban poet's desire, expressed in Campos's "Triumphal Ode," to "become *passento*"—a marvelously polysignificant word translators have rendered as "absorbent" (Bosley) and "pervious" (Zenith)—gathers unto itself all the different varieties of *passing* that the city makes available to those who traverse it: registering what one passes, including other passers-by; letting what has been registered *pass through* oneself, as occurs with absorbent paper (*papel passento*) even as it exercises its practical function of absorbing; and *passing for* something, intentionally or unintentionally, in the anonymous amalgam of the urban crowd. Irene Ramalho Santos—to whose analysis of Campos's perviousness in "Triumphal Ode" I am indebted here—describes the heteronym's identity in this and other odes as that of "the person (*essoa*) through whose body—a body without inside or outside, a body turned pure sensation—all things, including the suffering body itself, *pass through*" (182). The boundaries of subjectivity dissolve or, rather, fluctuate in a precarious balance as the self overruns the city and the city permeates the self.

The permeability of the urban flâneur (stroller, loiterer)—the poetic impersonation that Cesário poached from Baudelaire (and Campos from Cesário, some decades later)—is a highly effective organizing principle for the experience of the poet in *The Feeling of a Westerner* (Martelo 49–50). The poem remains true to its title as it sketches out from the first stanzas an intimately sensorial relationship between the city and the self, in which the city appears before the poet and in response the poet *feels*. His “absurd desire to suffer” and sensation of nausea are brought on by the distinctive combination of urban space (“our streets”), time (“evening”), and the myriad events and intensities that this particular space-time convergence harbors: the smell rising from the river, the shadows gradually filling the streets, and, most importantly, the bustle and tumult of the city’s workers returning home—or not—after their day’s labors. It is worth noting that the poet chooses to begin his chronicle of the urban present at the precise moment when bells sound to release carpenters from construction sites, and when workwomen spill out of shipyards. Might he, like them, be a worker who is finally freed at the end of the day, at the same time as most of the city’s labor force, to move on to his second occupation of roaming the city and crafting metaphors set in “skilled, sincere, salubrious verses”? If so (for the suggestion is all we get), then no Baudelairean flâneur he, no man of bohemian leisure, unrestricted in his freedom to scavenge in the streets for images, ideas, and sensations by his subordination to the demands of the labor market. In one of his commentaries on Baudelaire and the exercise of flânerie, Walter Benjamin observes that the flâneur “goes his leisurely way as a personality,” thereby protesting “against the division of labor which makes people into specialists” (84). He quotes from a mid-nineteenth-century utopian narrative (*Paris n’existe pas* by Paul Ernest de Rattier), which foretells the conclusive extinction of the species from the capitalist economy: “The flâneur whom we used to encounter on the sidewalks and in front of shop windows ... this inconsequential type who was always in search of cheap emotions and knew about nothing but cobblestones, fiacres, and gas lamps, ... has now become a farmer, a vintner, a linen manufacturer, a sugar refiner, a steel magnate” (Benjamin 84–85). The loitering narrator of *The Feeling of a Westerner* does not admit to toiling during the day as a hardworking farmer or shopkeeper, the two activities that kept the poem’s author busy, but he does register in attentive detail the multiplicity of ways in which the dwellers of nineteenth-century Lisbon earn their living. As we progress with

him through the night, we observe, among others, carpenters, caulkers, and fishwives (more splendid in their robust swagger than the haughtiest of the many upper-class ladies that also populate Cesário's poetry); exhausted florists and dressmakers about to embark on a second shift as stage extras or chorus girls; knife makers, bakers, and lottery-ticket sellers; and, finally, prostitutes (twice), robbers, and night watchmen.

The powers of observation that the strolling poet musters up for his readers' benefit are as complex and multilayered as the urban reality they target and make visible. The nineteenth century witnessed a fundamental shift of emphasis in the study and understanding of vision, from geometrical to physiological optics, as "knowledge was accumulated about the constitutive role of the body in the apprehension of a visible world" (Crary 16). As the readers of *The Feeling of a Westerner*, we are never allowed to forget that we are seeing what we see through the poet's eyes (and through the pincenez that sharpens his sight), whether it is the nitty-gritty detail of the street life he brushes against or the visual tropes that spring from his imagination, such as the street filled with shop windows that is transformed before our eyes into "a vastly long cathedral" with its rows of extravagantly decorated chapels. This vision sometimes shifts and jumps at an alarming pace, as if the putative aneurism the poet worries about were causing him to hallucinate, substantiating Jonathan Crary's point that the embedding of vision in the contingent materiality of the observer's body preempts any claims to authoritative solidity and permanence of the observed, which now belongs "to time, to flux, to death" (24). Recollections and projections of death (by drowning, by hysteria, by plague, by a thief's knife) are, in fact, injected into the fabric of the poem at regular intervals even as, at the emotional peak of his soliloquy, the poet shares his impossible, exclamatory dream:

Oh, if I'd never die! If forever
I'd seek and attain the perfection of things!

This poignantly counterfactual longing for the timeless "perfection of things" becomes intertwined in the poem with its dynamic, montage-like juxtaposition of past, present, and future as the three dimensions in which the city simultaneously and jarringly exists in the eye of its beholder. Memories of historical events and fantasies of the future are triggered by the poet's encounters with the heterogeneous building blocks of the urban

present. The view of the boats docked at the Tagus wharf brings to his mind the age of Discoveries, while the increasingly dark and ominous atmosphere of “the dead hours” makes him imagine a future Lisbon as a transparent and radiant city of glass. It may be worth digressing here, briefly, on the associations suggested by the latter image. In architectural history, the concept of buildings made of glass is linked to two principal and distinct (if occasionally merged) forms of functional design: the spectacular showcase of industrial achievement, such as the Crystal Palace in London, built for the first world exhibition in 1851, and the greenhouse, or winter garden, which by the mid-nineteenth century had grown out from its initial incarnation as a private tropical paradise for the very wealthy to represent a democratized Eden for Northern city dwellers, covered like the Parisian arcades but, unlike them, also heated and thus even more luxurious (Kohlmaier and von Sartory 14-37). Cesário’s envisioning of “clear-glass mansions” as an objective correlative of his sought-after “perfection of things” echoes this history even as it anticipates a different, Modernist genealogy. As German architectural critic Adolf Behne—a contemporary of Pessoa, not of Cesário—wrote excitedly in 1918, it “is not the crazy caprice of a poet that glass architecture will bring in a new culture. *It is a fact!*” (Scheerbart 8; original emphasis). Glass architecture surfaces as utopia in the 1924 Polish novel *Przedwiośnie* (*The Spring to Come*) by Stefan Żeromski, where it crystallizes the imagined (and unfulfilled) ideal form of the reborn nation-state, and as dystopia in the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin’s 1921 fiction *My* (*We*), the story of an urban society that remains under constant vigilance enabled by the transparent dwellings in which its members reside. Quite strikingly in this context, Cesário’s images of “wives / Who chastely nest in clear-glass mansions” and “the mothers and sisters you love” living “in luminous, fragile homes” appear to combine the more common utopian inflection of the idea of glass architecture (expressed also, for example, by Frank Lloyd Wright; see Scheerbart 27) with its potential oppressive function as a panoptical prison-house.

The male subject of *The Feeling of a Westerner* does not, of course, seem to perceive his vision of glass homes as in any way dystopian. One probably needs to read the poem “as a woman” in order to experience a shudder of apprehension at the idea of subjecting the city’s female inhabitants—even if presumably limited to women privileged enough to reside in “mansions”—to constant voyeuristic surveillance as a means of

guaranteeing their chastity. Most visionaries of glass architecture tended to focus on aesthetic benefits of transparency, especially when associated with color: if glass construction replaced other building materials throughout the world, wrote Paul Scheerbarth in 1914, “it would be as if the earth were adorned with sparkling jewels and enamels ... as splendid as in the gardens of the Arabian nights” (46). But if this is a vision of pure spectacle, and if in Zamyatin’s novel surveillance is all-important (the irrelevance of spectacle is signaled by the permission to lower blinds during preapproved sexual relations), Cesário’s poem interweaves spectacle with surveillance: while his flâneur’s perspective emphasizes the spectacular potential of the city to astound and entertain, his recurrent references to caged animals, prisons, mausoleums, and confining walls are no less significant, culminating in the ambiguous image of a luminously beautiful prison-within-a-prison.

It is no accident that this image, one of the most complex and intriguing in *The Feeling of a Westerner*, focuses on women, for women are constantly and indeed spectacularly visible both in this poem and in Cesário’s writings at large. As with Baudelaire, the variety and complexity of the poet’s “mundus muliebris”—I borrow the expression from Rosemary Lloyd—is hardly containable in a generalizing paragraph or two of critical analysis. Even in *The Feeling of a Westerner* itself, the diversity of female characters and their roles—day and night workers, fashionable shoppers, actual and imagined housewives and prison inmates—is difficult to encompass, in this respect remaining attuned to the overall structural logic of the poem, whose narrative organization, as described by Helder Macedo in his classic study, is based on the programmatically assumed randomness of perception embodied in the movements and sensations of a solitary walker, whose observations, sequentially juxtaposed, build up to “a long and complex asyndeton” (223). Yet (as Macedo also notes) patterns, parallels, and contrasts do emerge in the process of gradual accumulation of the asyndetically disjointed substance of the poem. When it comes to women, it is hard not to notice that their cortège opens and closes with parallel tableaux of female figures poised on balconies above the street, in an ambiguous transitional space between the private and public realms, with the “homemaking angels” of the poem’s first section structurally mirrored by the “loose women, in scanty robes” appearing in its last, and darkest, segment. While this juxtaposition, with its suggestion of interchangeability between the female angels and demons of the poet’s imagination, would suffice in and of

itself to explicate his dream of the “clear-glass mansions” destined to maintain the wives, mothers, and sisters of Portugal in a state of immaculate virtue and at a safe remove from their fallen counterparts, such an orderly and predictable interpretation does not, of course, exhaust the enormous potential of Cesário’s gendered cityscapes for feminist readings. His vision of Lisbon as a workplace and a marketplace of the urban masses emphatically foregrounds women as key players in both spheres, be they the rich ladies choosing among imported fabrics in Chiado boutiques or the fishwives juggling their sales operations, heavy physical labor, and childcare with epic vigor. In fact, the prominence and variegated nuance of their textual presence in *The Feeling of a Westerner* and Cesário’s other poems has no precedents, and few if any equals, in the history of Portuguese poetry.

If the poem’s dynamically diverse “world of women” is one of the clearest markers of its forward-looking modernity, Cesário’s engagement with Portugal’s historical and mythical past is equally fascinating to explore, even though (or rather, precisely because) *The Feeling of a Westerner* fulfills its ostensible purpose, as determined by the context of its publication—to commemorate Camões, the nation’s bard, on the occasion of his tricentennial—in a highly oblique and dubious fashion. It certainly does not resonate with the same exuberant spirit of national exaltation as the series of articles, published in early 1880, in which Teófilo Braga promoted the ensemble of celebrations (strongly tied to the political goals of the republican movement) as a “ceremony of national consecration,” observing that, as with Cervantes in Spain, Voltaire in France, and Dante, Petrarch, and Michelangelo in Italy, Camões represented “the synthesis of the national character” of Portugal (Santos 1930-32, 286). Part and parcel of this ritual of enshrinement was the idea that a return to Camões would stand for a reinstatement—at least virtual if not factual—of Portugal’s “shining and heroic past” (Santos 262), as epitomized by the mythic glory of the Discoveries and immortalized in *The Lusíads*.

By contrast, the dispersed presence of Camões in *The Feeling of a Westerner*—exemplary in this respect of the poem’s entire repertory of historical references—does not add up to a solidly monolithic and reassuring image. On the contrary, it is eminently dialectical, in one of the senses ascribed to this term by Benjamin, namely that of images that are at the same time negated and preserved in history (Buck-Morss 104). He is the monumentalized but unnamed “epic that was,” a cartoonish superhero swimming to an

exotic shore with the manuscript of his future national masterpiece held in his athletically raised arm. Some who have commented on Cesário's disrespectful representation of the bard of Portugal in *The Feeling of a Westerner* took the well-traveled road laid out by Harold Bloom, positing a combat in the arena of literary tradition between the ambitious upstart Cesário and the greatest of his predecessors in the lineage of the country's poetic geniuses (Mourão-Ferreira; Tamen 2002). But it may be more in keeping with the spirit of the feverishly evolving age in which Cesário wrote (and which we his readers still inhabit today) to regard his discontinuous and ambivalent depiction of Camões as a reflection of a genuinely popular and itinerant composite view of this historical figure: a montage consisting of a monument here, a portrait there, images and meanings derived from fragmented and randomly distributed sources of fact and opinion that inform the cultural consumer's haphazard repository of historical knowledge.

Irreverently sampling bits and pieces of his country's past, voraciously processing the multitude of images and sensations the city throws his way, and thriving on movement and transformation as he channels his multifarious material into a verse that is at once brisk and formally precise, the young poet seems to belong as much to the twenty-first century as to his own, the nineteenth. The hierarchical distance that allegedly separated Baudelaire's Boulevard des Italiens from Cesário's Rua dos Bacalhoeiros, or Codsellers' Street, and that the peripherally located Portuguese poet seems to corroborate when he refers to "the world" as something far-off and unattainable, has no valid rationale to sustain it, just its own circular logic. At the same time, the self-proclaimed marginality and epistemological instability of the persona and subjective vision realized in *The Feeling of a Westerner* do reinforce the author's concurrent affinity with and distance from the European core. Modifying a verse from Álvaro de Campos's mock-Orientalist "Opiary," we might say that Cesário's Portugal figures in his poem as "a West to the west of the West" (Pessoa 2006, 147). Similarly, and not coincidentally, the undefinable status of his Lisbon walker among the socially stratified urban population he traverses and catalogues at once enmeshes him in its fabric and offers him a panoramic vantage point from which to appreciate its dynamic and artistically fecund diversity. Cesário's uniquely productive experience of writing from the edge yielded a poem as satisfying in the masterful fulfillment of its large-scale ambition as it is staggering in the finely tuned craftsmanship of its detail.

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PORTO 10 DE JUNHO

PORTUGAL A CAMÕES

PUBLICAÇÃO EXTRAORDINARIA DO JORNAL DE VIAGENS
COMMEMORANDO O TRICENTENARIO DO CANTOR DOS LUSIADAS

IMPREZA
Ildefonso Corvela.
Ferreira de Brito.

1880-1880

DIRECCÃO
Emigdio d'Oliveira.
D. Benigno Joaquim Martinez.



«Para servir-vos, braço ás armas feito,
Para cantar-vos, mente ás Musas dada.»
LUS. CANT. X, CLV.

O sentimento dum ocidental was first published in *Portugal a Camões*, a special supplement to *Jornal de Viagens* of Porto, on June 10, 1880.

Translator's Note

Given the cinematic vertigo induced by his unrelenting, jolting sequence of visual impressions, Cesário Verde may justifiably be considered the first Modernist poet in Portugal. This would not be apparent by running one's eyes over the pages he wrote. The abundance of striking images in a poem such as *The Feeling of a Westerner* are harnessed into carefully metered and rhymed stanzas, giving an unusual muscle to what at first glance might seem like fairly traditional verses. Since these are crammed with highly specific, concrete references, there is scant leeway for a translator to create end rhymes while faithfully rendering each line's rich semantic content. I have resorted, instead, to internal rhymes as well as assonance and alliteration. And rather than replicate the unusual stanzaic structure of the original—quatrains consisting of a decasyllable followed by three alexandrines—I have adopted tetrameter throughout, making the poem a little leaner, so as to keep it driving futuristically forward.

Richard Zenith

Cesário Verde

The Feeling of a Westerner

O sentimento dum ocidental

I

Avé-Marias

Nas nossas ruas, ao anoitecer,
Há tal soturnidade, há tal melancolia,
Que as sombras, o bulício, o Tejo, a maresia
Despertam-me um desejo absurdo de sofrer.

O céu parece baixo e de neblina,
O gás extravasado enjoa-me, perturba;
E os edifícios, com as chaminés, e a turba
Toldam-se duma cor monótona e londrina.

Batem os carros de aluguer, ao fundo,
Levando à via-férrea os que se vão. Felizes!
Ocorrem-me em revista, exposições, países:
Madrid, Paris, Berlim, S. Petersburgo, o mundo!

Semelham-se a gaiolas, com viveiros,
As edificações somente emmadeiradas:
Como morcegos, ao cair das badaladas,
Saltam de viga em viga os mestres carpinteiros.

Voltam os calafates, aos magotes,
De jaquetão ao ombro, enferruscados, secos;
Embrenho-me, a cismar, por boqueirões, por becos,
Ou erro pelos cais a que se atacam botes.

E evoco, então, as crónicas navais:
Mouros, baixéis, heróis, tudo ressuscitado!
Luta Camões no Sul, salvando um livro a nado!
Singram soberbas naus que eu não verei jamais!

The Feeling of a Westerner

I

Vespers

When evening falls across our streets
 And sullen melancholy fills the air,
 The Tagus, the tang, the shadows and bustle
 Bring me an absurd desire to suffer.

The sky hangs low and seems all hazy;
 The gas from the streetlamps makes me queasy;
 The tumult of buildings, chimneys and people
 Is cloaked in a dullish, Londinish hue.

Oh lucky travelers in hired coaches
 Now hieing to the railway station! Countries
 And exhibitions file past me: Madrid,
 Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg, the world!

The timber frames of future buildings
 Resemble cages for keeping animals;
 Like swooping bats the carpenters leap
 From beam to beam at the sound of the bell.

Clusters of callous, tar-smeared caulkers
 Return from the slipways, coats on their shoulders;
 I wander through alleys that lead to the river
 Or walk by the wharves where boats are docked.

I evoke the ocean chronicles: the Moors,
 Old vessels and heroes—all resurrected!
 Shipwrecked Camões swims his book to shore!¹
 Great carracks that I'll never see ride the waves!

¹ When shipwrecked at the mouth of the Mekong River, Luís de Camões managed to save himself and his epic-in-progress, *The Lusads*.

E o fim da tarde inspira-me; e incomoda!
De um couraçado inglês vogam os escaleres;
E em terra num tinir de louças e talheres
Flamejam, ao jantar, alguns hotéis da moda.

Num trem de praça arengam dois dentistas;
Um trôpego arlequim braceja numas andas;
Os querubins do lar flutuam nas varandas;
Às portas, em cabelo, enfadam-se os lojistas!

Vazam-se os arsenais e as oficinas;
Reluz, viscoso, o rio, apressam-se as obreiras;
E num cardume negro, hercúleas, galhofeiras,
Correndo com firmeza, assomam as varinas.

Vêm sacudindo as ancas opulentas!
Seus troncos varonis recordam-me pilastras;
E algumas, à cabeça, embalam nas canastras
Os filhos que depois naufragam nas tormentas.

Descalças! Nas descargas de carvão,
Desde manhã à noite, a bordo das fragatas;
E apinham-se num bairro aonde miam gatas,
E o peixe podre gera os focos de infecção!

The twilight inspires, and also disturbs me!
 An English battleship launches its cutters
 While swank hotels on land bedazzle
 With china and flatware clinking at dinner.

Two dentists argue inside a streetcar;
 A clumsy clown is struggling on stilts;
 Homemaking angels flit around balconies;
 Hatless, bored shopkeepers wait at their doors!

The shipyards and workshops are emptying out;
 The river glints thickly, the workwomen hurry;
 And a black school of Herculean fishwives
 Bursts out of nowhere, joking, laughing.

Wagging sumptuous hips they come!
 Their manly torsos remind me of pillars;
 And some, in the baskets on their heads,
 Rock sons who'll one day drown in storms.

On frigates—barefoot!—they unload coal²
 From dawn to dusk, then crowd together
 In a neighborhood where cats meow
 And the rotting fish breed infection!

² Apart from their main activity, Lisbon's fishwives did other sorts of labor, unloading coal being a particularly common one.

II

Noite fechada

Toca-se às grades, nas cadeias. Som
Que mortifica e deixa umas loucuras mansas!
O Aljube, em que hoje estão velhinhas e crianças,
Bem raramente encerra uma mulher de “dom”!

E eu desconfio, até, de um aneurisma
Tão mórbido me sinto, ao acender das luzes;
À vista das prisões, da velha Sé, das Cruzes,
Chora-me o coração que se enche e que se abisma.

A espaços, iluminam-se os andares,
E as tascas, os cafés, as tendas, os estancos
Alastram em lençol os seus reflexos brancos;
E a Lua lembra o circo e os jogos malabares.

Duas igrejas, num saudoso largo,
Lançam a nódoa negra e fúnebre do clero:
Nelas esfumo um ermo inquisidor severo,
Assim que pela História eu me aventuro e alargo.

Na parte que abateu no terremoto,
Muram-me as construções rectas, iguais, crescidas;
Afrontam-me, no resto, as íngremes subidas,
E os sinos dum tanger monástico e devoto.

Mas, num recinto público e vulgar,
Com bancos de namoro e exíguas pimenteiras,
Brônzeo, monumental, de proporções guerreiras,
Um épico doutrora ascende, num pilar!

II

After Dark

Prisoners bang on the bars of their cells—
 A sound that rattles my nerves with shame!
 The Aljube jail, for old women and children,
 Rarely encloses a titled lady!

I feel so ill as the lights come on
 I worry I might have an aneurysm;
 The sight of the jails, crosses, cathedral,
 Fills and sinks my heart with tears.

One floor after another lights up,
 And cafés, restaurants, tobacco and other shops
 Spread like a sheet their white reflections.
 The moon brings jugglers, the circus, to mind.

The funeral-black stain of clergy spills out
 Of two churches fronting an ancient square,
 Where I sketch a lonely, dour inquisitor,
 Daring to extend myself into History.

In the part of town that the earthquake flattened
 Equal, straight buildings wall me in;³
 Everywhere else I face steep streets
 And the tolling of pious, monastic bells.

But over a common, public square
 With lovers' benches and lithe pepper trees
 A war-sized monument cast in bronze
 Stands, on a pillar, for an epic that was!⁴

³ Lisbon's downtown district known as the Baixa, completely leveled by the 1755 earthquake, was rebuilt with right-angle streets lined by buildings of the same height.

⁴ Refers to the statue of Luís de Camões, in the middle of the square that bears his name in Lisbon.

E eu sonho o Cólera, imagino a Febre,
Nesta acumulação de corpos enfezados;
Sombrios e espectrais recolhem os soldados;
Inflama-se um palácio em face de um casebre.

Partem patrulhas de cavalaria
Dos arcos dos quartéis que foram já conventos;
Idade Média! A pé, outras, a passos lentos,
Derramam-se por toda a capital, que esfria.

Triste cidade! Eu temo que me avives
Uma paixão defunta! Aos lampiões distantes,
Enlutam-me, alvejando, as tuas elegantes,
Curvadas a sorrir às montras dos ourives.

E mais: as costureiras, as floristas
Descem dos *magasins*, causam-me sobressaltos;
Custa-lhes a elevar os seus pescoços altos
E muitas delas são comparsas ou coristas.

E eu, de luneta de uma lente só,
Eu acho sempre assunto a quadros revoltados:
Entro na *brasserie*; às mesas de emigrados,
Ao riso e à crua luz joga-se o dominó.

And in this assemblage of stunted bodies
 I think of the Fever, imagine the Cholera;
 Returning soldiers look somber as ghosts;
 A gleaming palace stands opposite a hovel.

Mounted patrolmen set out from the archways
 Of army barracks that once were convents;
 The Middle Ages! Others, on foot,
 Range through the capital, now turning cold.

Sad town! I dread you'll arouse a dead passion
 In me! I mourn upon seeing your elegant
 Ladies so white in the lamp-lit distance,
 Leaning and smiling at jewelers' windows.

Coming down from the department stores,
 The florists and dressmakers wrench my gut;
 They're hardly able to hold up their heads,
 And many are walk-ons and chorus girls.

Even in sordid human tableaux
 I, with my pince-nez, find subject matter:
 I enter the beerhouse; at the immigrants' tables,
 Harshly lit, they laugh and play dominoes.

III

Ao gás

E saio. A noite pesa, esmaga. Nos
Passeios de lajedo arrastam-se as impuras.
Ó moles hospitais! Sai das embocaduras
Um sopro que arripia os ombros quase nus.

Cercam-me as lojas, tépidas. Eu penso
Ver círios laterais, ver filas de capelas,
Com santos e fiéis, andores, ramos, velas,
Em uma catedral de um comprimento imenso.

As burguesinhas do Catolicismo
Resvalam pelo chão minado pelos canos;
E lembram-me, ao chorar doente dos pianos,
As freiras que os jejuns matavam de histerismo.

Num cutileiro, de avental, ao torno,
Um forjador maneja um malho, rubramente;
E de uma padaria exala-se, inda quente,
Um cheiro salutar e honesto a pão no forno.

E eu que medito um livro que exacerbe,
Quisera que o real e a análise mo dessem;
Casas de confecções e modas resplandecem;
Pelas *vitruines* olha um ratoneiro imberbe.

Longas descidas! Não poder pintar
Com versos magistras, salubres e sinceros,
A esguia difusão dos vossos reverberos,
E a vossa palidez romântica e lunar!

Que grande cobra, a lúbrica pessoa,
Que espartilhada escolhe uns xales com debuxo!
Sua excelência atrai, magnética, entre luxo,
Que ao longo dos balcões de mogno se amontoa.

III

By Gaslight

And I go back out. The night's weight crushes.
 Impure women roam the sidewalks.
 O languid hospitals! Ill-clad shoulders
 Shiver from drafts where streets open up.

Warm shops surround me. I think I'm seeing
 Flanking candles, rows of chapels
 With saints and the faithful, flowers, more candles,
 More saints, in a vastly long cathedral.

The bourgeois women of Catholicism
 Slip on the ground that's tunneled by drainpipes.
 To me they recall, with their whining pianos,
 The nuns who, fasting, died of hysteria.

An aproned knife maker, working the lathe,
 Redhotly wields his blacksmith's hammer;
 And bread, still warm, from the baker's oven
 Sends forth its honest, wholesome smell.

And I, whose goal is a book that galls,
 Want it to come from inspecting what's real.
 Boutiques shine with the latest fashions;
 A street urchin gapes at their window displays.

O long descents! Could I but paint
 With skilled, sincere, salubrious verses
 The delicate shimmering of your streetlamps
 And all your romantic moonlit pallor!

That sensual, corseted creature selecting
 Printed shawls—she moves like a snake!
 Her excellence is a magnet amidst
 The finery piled on mahogany counters.

E aquela velha, de bandós! Por vezes,
A sua *trâine* imita um leque antigo, aberto,
Nas barras verticais, a duas tintas. Perto,
Escarvam, à vitória, os seus mecklemburgueses.

Desdobram-se tecidos estrangeiros;
Plantas ornamentais secam nos mostradores;
Flocos de pós-de-arroz pairam sufocadores,
E em nuvens de cetins requebram-se os caixeiros.

Mas tudo cansa! Apagam-se nas frentes
Os candelabros, como estrelas, pouco a pouco;
Da solidão regouga um cauteleiro rouco;
Tornam-se mausoléus as armações fulgentes.

“Dó da miséria!... Compaixão de mim!...”
E, nas esquinas, calvo, eterno, sem repouso,
Pede-me sempre esmola um homenzinho idoso,
Meu velho professor nas aulas de Latim!

And that old dame with coiled plaits!
Her train with its vertical, two-tone stripes
Mocks a spread fan! Her Mecklenburg horses
Wait with the carriage, pawing the pavement.

Decorative plants wilt on the tables
Where clerks unroll their foreign fabrics;
In clouds of satins they bow and smile;
Rice powder hovers and chokes the air.

But all grows weary! Slowly, like stars,
The storefronts' hanging lights go dim;
The glittering buildings become mausoleums;
A lone, hoarse voice hawks lottery tickets.

And there on a corner: "Please, sir! Take pity!"
Whenever I pass him, that little old man,
Bald and eternal, begs for alms:
The teacher at school who taught me Latin!

IV

Horas mortas

O tecto fundo de oxigénio, de ar,
Estende-se ao comprido, ao meio das trapeiras;
Vêm lágrimas de luz dos astros com olheiras,
Enleva-me a quimera azul de transmigrar.

Por baixo, que portões! Que arruamentos!
Um parafuso cai nas lajes, às escuras:
Colocam-se taipais, rangem as fechaduras,
E os olhos dum caleche espantam-me, sangrentos.

E eu sigo, como as linhas de uma pauta
A dupla correnteza augusta das fachadas;
Pois sobem, no silêncio, infaustas e trinadas,
As notas pastoris de uma longínqua flauta.

Se eu não morresse, nunca! E eternamente
Buscasse e conseguisse a perfeição das cousas!
Esqueço-me a prever castíssimas esposas,
Que aninhem em mansões de vidro transparente!

Ó nossos filhos! Que de sonhos ágeis,
Pousando, vos trarão a nitidez às vidas!
Eu quero as vossas mães e irmãs estremecidas,
Numas habitações translúcidas e frágeis.

Ah! Como a raça ruiva do porvir,
E as frotas dos avós, e os nómadas ardentes,
Nós vamos explorar todos os continentes
E pelas vastidões aquáticas seguir!

Mas se vivemos, os emparedados,
Sem árvores, no vale escuro das muralhas!...
Julgo avistar, na treva, as folhas das navalhas
E os gritos de socorro ouvir, estrangulados.

IV

The Dead Hours

The lofty ceiling of air, of oxygen,
 Runs between the facing rooftops;
 The stars' tired eyes shed tears of light;
 Blue dreams of transmigration exalt me.

Below all that, what portals! What streets!
 I hear, in the dark, a screw hit the ground,
 The clacking of shutters, the jangle of locks;
 And the bloodshot eyes of a buggy scare me.

I follow, like lines on a music stave,
 The stately double row of façades
 While pastoral notes from a distant flute
 Trill, in the silence, a gloomy warning.

Oh, if I'd never die! If forever
 I'd seek and attain the perfection of things!
 I lose myself envisioning wives
 Who chastely nest in clear-glass mansions!

Dear sons! What swift dreams, alighting,
 Will bring sharp clarity to your lives!
 I want the mothers and sisters you love
 To live in luminous, fragile homes.

Ah! Like our grandfathers' fleets, like fervent
 Nomads, like the ruddy race to come,
 We'll go and explore every continent
 And sail across the watery expanses!

But how, if we live enclosed by stone
 In a dark and treeless valley of walls?
 I think I see knives flash in the shadows
 And hear a strangled cry for help.

E nestes nebulosos corredores
Nauseiam-me, surgindo, os ventres das tabernas;
Na volta, com saudade, e aos bordos sobre as pernas,
Cantam, de braço dado, uns tristes bebedores.

Eu não receio, todavia, os roubos;
Afastam-se, a distância, os dúbios caminhantes;
E sujos, sem ladrar, ósseos, febris, errantes,
Amareladamente, os cães parecem lobos.

E os guardas que revistam as escadas,
Caminham de lanterna e servem de chaveiros;
Por cima, as imorais, nos seus roupões ligeiros,
Tossem, fumando sobre a pedra das sacadas.

E, enorme, nesta massa irregular
De prédios sepulcrais, com dimensões de montes,
A Dor humana busca os amplos horizontes,
E tem marés, de fel, como um sinistro mar!

And along these murky corridors
The taverns, if I peer in, appall me.
Some sorry drunks are staggering home
And sing, arms joined, for old time's sake.

But I'm not afraid of being robbed;
The dubious characters fall behind me.
The scrawny and mangy dogs don't bark;
They look a little like yellowish wolves.

And those keepers of keys, the night watchmen,
Scan with their lanterns each entryway;
Above them loose women, in scanty robes,
Smoke and cough at the balcony windows.

And looming out of that jagged mass
Of tomblike buildings tall as hills,
Human Pain, like a baleful sea,
Seeks vast horizons for its bitter tides!

