

## Nemésio: Words Cast Forth

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### I.

It is difficult to write a truly comprehensive summary of Vitorino Nemésio's *poetic person* and fit it within the dimensions of an essay. I prefer the expression "poetic person" to "poetic voice" because I believe that it gives a more exact, a simultaneously more *personal* and *sonorous* account of literary writing in its human dimension (which is evidently not the same as writing's biographical or anecdotal dimensions). However, for the purposes of my analysis of Nemésio in this essay, I prefer not to assume the risks of the synthesis implied by the idea of his "poetic person." Instead, I will discuss certain aspects of Nemésio's poetry, without a preconceived program.

It might be said, and indeed it *has* been said, that Nemésio as a poet effectively had a certain affinity for *presencismo*, that he was to a certain degree the product of symbolism, that he had a sense for the popular in its most genuine form, and that he reflected a certain mystical or philosophizing mode of expression in Portuguese poetry. But somehow Nemésio always escapes such classifications so that, if he *is* all of this, he is also much more. Above all, Nemésio was possessed of an awareness of the word in its relation to the world. He dramatized this awareness and subjected it to scrutiny, without recourse to "-isms" or schools, paying attention above all to the word's interior, expansive impulse, as it revealed itself to him and *through him*. It may be worthwhile to apply much of what Nemésio wrote about other authors, as a

critic, to Nemésio's own poetic expression. While risky, this operation can in many respects be illuminating, revealing, for example, the intimate, complementary relationship between Nemésio-the-poet and Nemésio-the-critic—a relationship that at times extends to his use of certain images. Nemésio was well aware of the risks of poetic criticism, writing: “Nem sempre o modo crítico é o melhor para falar de poesia: o modo poético também lhe convém com uma forma de hermenêutica—arte de interpretação do que é simbólico” [“The critical mode is not always the best way to speak of poetry; the poetic mode is also appropriate as a hermeneutic approach—an art of interpreting the symbolic”]. And, referring to the title of his book *Conhecimento de Poesia*, it is more appropriate to speak of Nemésio as a *conhecedor* of poetry rather than as a critic. As he said: “A poesia é, mais que uma arte, uma actividade espiritual e específica, no exercício da qual não buscamos entendidos que nela contem, senão espíritos afins a quem gratuitamente a comunicamos” [“Poetry is, more than an art form, a spiritual and specific activity, in the exercise of which we do not look for specialists who can talk to us about it but kindred spirits to whom we can gratuitously communicate it”].

With this as our starting point, and drawing on two distinct texts by Nemésio, it is interesting to observe that what Nemésio says of Verlaine can be applied to his own poetry. He writes of the French poet:

a consciência da culpa irrompe na sua lamentável carcaça—e um confessor, uma igreja em silêncio, a mesa deserta e azeda de um *café*, o catre de uma prisão ou a infecta cama de uma casa de hóspedes, tudo lhe serve para tomar o peso de uma responsabilidade que se não efectiva, em última análise, senão pela entrega total de um destino miserável em mãos de misericórdia.

[the consciousness of guilt springs forth from its ugly shell—and a confessor, a silent congregation, the bare and stained table of a *café*, the bunk bed of a prison or the unwashed linen of a guest house, all these are appropriate for him to consider the weight of a responsibility not yet realized, in the last analysis, except by total surrender of a miserable fate into the hands of mercy.]

Compare this with the following passage from Nemésio's *De Profundis*:

Sejam vossos ouvidos atentos (ah, Senhor  
Assim se diz, assim seja!)

À voz da minha culpa e do meu nada—

Maior, neste clamor

E na miséria que esse olhar deseja,

Que toda a coisa principiada.

[... ..]

Levanto o meu queixume,

Pura evaporação,

Secada pelo teu lume,

[... ..]

Senhor que me sujei na força da agonia

E em minhas lágrimas me lavo,

Como um velhinho fazia

No catre do hospital, fedendo a murta e alho bravo—

Uma algália nas partes, algodão num ouvido:

Só por cima da colcha uma mosca o afogava

Enquanto ele chorava,

Todo borrado e comovido.

[May your ears, Lord, be attentive

(If those be the words I should speak)

To the voice of my guilt and my nothingness—

One greater, in the clamor

And in the misery that your look desires,

Than all things begun.

[... ..]

I raise my complaint,

Pure evaporation,

Dried up by your fire,

[... ..]

I sullied myself, Lord, in the force of agony

And wash myself in my tears

Like an old man

In a hospital folding-bed, smelling of myrtle and garlic—

A catheter in his parts, a cotton patch on his ear

A fly on his bed strangling him

While he goes on crying

All soiled and shaken.] (*O Bicho Harmonioso*)

As can be seen here, Nemésio is a poet of life's concrete dimension, and of anguish, experienced before death and before God. He is a poet of the *meaning* and happiness produced by the senses, a questioning and incessantly curious poet, a poet of the humble and the handmade (he writes of Supervielle: "Acerca-se das coisas, toma-as na sua humildade e, convidando-nos a uma operação interior de simplificação e desadorno é em nós que talha o vestido radiante dessas coisas" ["He approaches things, accepts them in their humbleness and, inviting us to perform an inner operation of simplification and unadornment, it is within us that he fashions the radiant garments of those things"]). Drawing on all of this and more, and aided by his sense of tradition and of innovation, Nemésio achieved a hyper-intense density of expression, rendering his work an incomparable creative mo(nu)ment for our twentieth century.

He is a poet that I would compare to Goethe, in the near universality of his vast, interdisciplinary, and interrelated body of knowledge, in his extremely sharp sensibility, in his great expressive versatility—all of which allow him to uncover a certain intimate truth with regard to the world and its contents, often with an apparent, complete simplicity. Nemésio consciously cultivated an apparent "ingenuity" as a means to sneak up on, in the most varied registers, certain rough, anguished areas of the human condition.

On the other hand, we should not forget Nemésio's declaration that he encountered "os momentos mais felizes e originais da poesia portuguesa... nas escolas, movimentos e personalidades que assimilavam à lei do génio nacional o inevitável influxo estranho e hiperculto" ["the most felicitous and original moments of Portuguese poetry ... in the schools, movements, and personalities that allowed the assimilation into the national genius of the inevitable and highly erudite influx of the foreign"]. Moreover, and "apesar da permeabilidade a círculos culturais mais latos, nenhuma das nossas experiências poéticas com o de fora resultou em pura perda" ["despite the permeability to wider cultural circles, none of our poetic experiences with the outside resulted in pure loss"]. This idea was dear to Nemésio, as can be confirmed simply by reading his texts on the origins of Portuguese poetry, or on António Nobre, Roberto de Mesquita, or Eugénio de Andrade. From this perspective, crossing the Portuguese—*our own vital fluids*—with the influx of the foreign, it becomes possible to mark the important, let us say genetic (in fact, they are not exclusively genetic) connections between Nemésio's poetry and symbolism, as has perhaps been implicitly or explicitly anticipated by the majority of Nemésio's critics, who have analyzed his poetry so capably. As

Nemésio declared: “poesia e símbolo aliaram-se estreitamente na literatura europeia—na sua consciência estética—quando a vaga de confissão do romantismo ficou espaiada, sem força para inventar mais” [“poetry and symbol became close allies in European literature—in their aesthetic consciousness—when Romanticism’s confessionalist wave spread itself too thin, bereft of strength for further invention”]. Without ignoring what is Portuguese in Nemésio’s work, we can affirm that he derived his relationship with the various forms of symbolism through his connection to this common European trunk. Nemésio, much like the symbolists, sought by way of words to reach that intimate core of things that, once made visible (though never entirely so, since this core also represents an essential, intimate mystery), irradiates, with surprising ease, the pure evidence of our relationship with the world, mediated in terms of “sensory intelligence,” though neither discursive nor logically intelligible. For instance, Nemésio says of Guillén: “mais que experiência lírica, dir-se-ia uma teoria do conhecimento inefável, a exploração dos termos em que é possível falar dos sinais misteriosos das coisas” [“more than lyrical experience, one might call it a theory of ineffable knowledge, the exploitation of those terms by means of which it is possible to speak of the mysterious signs of things”]; and of João Maia: “*selva essente*: quer dizer, o campo em que o homem inquieto procura fazer o ser. Esse homem é o poeta e o filósofo situados na fronteira que os indetermina. Assim poesia e ontologia se tocam naturalmente” [“*selva essente*: that is, the field wherein restless man seeks to realize his being. That man is the poet and the philosopher, both situated on a frontier that renders them indeterminate. Thus poetry and ontology touch each other naturally”]. I will return to this point.

The *hantise* of lost youth is one of the most frequently exploited topics relating to this pure evidence. William Blake blazed this path early on and was joined by many others, including the deliberately essentialist Rainer Maria Rilke. I believe there is value in the detailed, though as yet unstudied, relationship between Blake and Nemésio. This relationship is quite apparent, for example, in the following lines from Nemésio: “Uma rosa cortada / E roída do bicho / Boia na água estagnada, / Minha força e capricho” [“A cut rose / Gnawed by a bug / Floats on stagnant waters / My strength and fancy”]. The theme of lost youth as expressed in poetry concerns a kind of *interior diaspora* that, in adult life, leads in a poetic-existential sense to the recovery of the initial phase of one’s life, during which one was not opposed to the world but rather found oneself in undifferentiated communion with



it. This awareness of one's *exile from childhood* is accompanied by a rejection of reason's real or fictitious reign in practical life. Nemésio observes: "Este orbe das coisas, pessoas e relações profundamente animadas é regido por uma espécie de inocência ou, se ousar dizer, divina estupidez, que deve ser a garantia que Supervielle lhes dá para se deixarem captar com confiança" ["This orb of things, persons, and deeply animated relationships is governed by a kind of innocence or, if I may, a divine stupidity, which must be the guarantee that Supervielle recognizes in them of letting themselves be captured with confidence"]. See also the following: "A razão, o conhecimento pertencem ao plano de existência, a realidade está no Ser de Deus e na divina ignorância do poeta" ["Reason and knowledge belong to the plane of existence, reality dwelling in the Being of God and in the poet's divine ignorance"]. In symbolist poetics, reason does not dominate history, and certainly not the individual, with Pessanha speaking of the dark paths down which reason loses itself (we will soon see in what terms we can speak of reason in Nemésio). We could well ask ourselves if the frequently lived or consciously experienced phenomenon of exile, whether interior or exterior, in time, in space, or perhaps in both, might not constitute one of poetic creation's perpetually driving forces. Here we are confronted by a lost moment in time that is the object of our obsessive search, and which promises us access to its *gratifying* mysteries. This purifying moment of *innocent* existence, of the pure identity we possess during our short-lived orphaned period on earth, is endowed with a long-gone irrationality, referring back to the verbal frontiers of a vision of things and beings in an integrated, boundless whole. We might counterpose this moment to the line of theorization beginning with Anaximander's *Apeiron* and passing through Rilke's *das Offene* (symptomatically, the figure of the *angel* also appears in Nemésio).

Looking back on Vitorino Nemésio's writing, and with these thoughts in mind, I believe it possible to term him, next to Camilo Pessanha, as the *possible symbolist* of twentieth-century Portuguese poetry, though I accept the inexactness of the term. Nemésio is a possible, rather than an outright, symbolist because of his lack of adherence to a particular school, along with his receptivity to a special way of being or of inserting himself within lived experience generally, and in literary activity specifically. Adhering to the maxim that "todo o campo poético é de interioridade" ["the whole of the poetic field is an inner field"], Nemésio was influenced by a variety of currents (*Orpheu*, *presença*, surrealism, etc.) and, moreover, participated in many of these.

Nemésio was open to Pessoa's (and Valéry's) dialectical, and symbolism-inflected, treatment of individual reason, to the *presencistas'* audacious confessional stance and interior explorations, and to the surrealists' idea of "sotie" and their practice of automatic writing. He was receptive to the mystical-baroque tradition, to insular regionalism, and to the many other currents that marked the literature of his time. More a poet of confluences than of influences, Nemésio integrated all of this by way of a highly personal and good-humored poetic synthesis. This synthesis, on display in his compositions' conceptual mixture of literary materials, speaks to Nemésio's vivacity, authenticity, and capacity to surprise his readers, as a unique, exemplary writer in our literary tradition. In sum, Nemésio is a poet who possessed a *style* (a personal, unique style incapable of duplication), but who did not, in the final analysis, belong to a particular school.

## II.

One of the earliest and best examples of Nemésio's blending of literary influences and elements can be found in his "Versos a uma cabrinha que eu tive" ["Lines to a little goat I had"], a text included in his volume *Eu, Comovido a Oeste*, and which merits our consideration here. The poem has six regular stanzas, five of which have four lines each, and one of which has five lines. The lines are alternately of six and seven syllables, with the exception of the last two, both of which have four syllables. Beginning with its title, the poem makes implicit reference to childhood. The use of the verb *ter* in the preterit (*eu tive*) suggests a past qualified by the term *cabrinha*, with the phrase *ter tido uma cabrinha*, and the poet's elaborations on this phrase, evoking an immediately recognizable childhood experience. This childhood context is reinforced by the apparently simple tone of the stanzas, which recalls children's literature, and by the use of diminutive forms (*badalinho*, *casquinho*) often employed when speaking to children. The small animal the narrator at one time *had* is *made present* in the poem through the use of various verbs in the present indicative. It is not merely the workings of memory that grant the animal existence in the here and now. In the main, we encounter the animal described in the poem as a vision reconstructed or produced by words, as the *re-making*, understood both reflexively and transitively, of a moment in time made symbolically actual and active, possessed of a "mysterious" complementarity between life and death, and between the path *through* and *between*:

Com seu focinho húmido  
 Esta cabrinha colhe  
 Qualquer sinal de noite  
 De que a erva se molhe.

[With her wet snout  
 This little goat gathers  
 Any sign of night  
 That moistens grass.]

In the third line of the stanza, the young goat must protect itself from death, identified here with “night”; in another text from *Eu, Comovido a Oeste*, night is described as “*matéria da morte*.” Night *produces* or *provides* for life’s necessary elements, namely the water and dew that forms on the grass. The *cabrinha* is a small animal pulsing with life (see its *focinho húmido*—here Nemésio establishes the relationship between the warmth and wetness of the snout and the night’s role in producing the grass the animal eats), who searches the landscape for the *sinais da noite* that fuel life. The young goat is also a *ser de passagem*, placed between the plant and animal kingdoms and undifferentiated with respect to the world—a status reinforced throughout the text, for example, in the lack of distinction between the visual (*flor pendente*) and the sonorous (*o badalinho*):

Daquela flor pendente  
 Pra que seu passo apela  
 Parece que a semente  
 É o badalinho dela.

[Of that hanging flower  
 That draws her step  
 It seems that the seed  
 Is her own little bell.]

With the young goat drawn to the flower (notice how a suggestive alliteration skillfully marks the short period of time described by the lines, *pendente* / *Pra que seu passo apela* / *Parece*), the third and fourth lines of the stanza suggest the sign of life (*semente/badalinho*). While the night (in reality not just



the night, as we will see) feeds this life, the young goat, a living thing and carrier of life, must nevertheless brace herself against it:

Sua pelerina escura  
Vela-a da noite sentida [...].

[Her dark coat is protection  
Against the night she senses (...).]

This allows the animal to continue along the careful path she demarcates; through her travels along paths like these, she draws the world together. Travel marks the young goat, as does the night, whose presence the young animal senses. The dewdrops, the *sinais de noite* the animal searches for in the grass, and on which she feeds, deposits these *signs of night*, which are also *signs of life*, on the grass *en masse*. These dewdrops, as *signs of life*, reflect and complement their function as *signs of night*, in a relationship reinforced by the opposition *noite sentida/vida*:

Tem cada pêlo uma gota,  
Com passos, poeira, vida.

[Each hair bears a droplet  
Of steps, dust, and life.]

This wandering, digressive tone marks the central section of the poem, and is inserted in each of the second through fifth stanzas. Significantly, these lines are of seven syllables each. The alliteration mentioned above is utilized here to the same end (*Tem cada pêlo uma gota / Com passos, poeira*). But the reader does not accompany this journey at the visual level only. If up to this point the young goat was viewed from the outside, in the fourth and fifth stanzas, it is presented to us as the synthesis of a biological process and of interior and external life, observed (momentarily from an adult perspective) in the transmutation of that which moves forward and, in doing so, incorporates the outside world into itself:

De silêncios, silvas, fome,  
Compõe nos úberes cheios

Toda a razão do seu nome  
E fruto dos seus passeios.

[With silences, brambles, and hunger  
She composes in swollen udders  
The reason for her name  
And the fruit of her wanders.]

Silence follows the ringing of the bell, as the woods follow the hanging flower, and hunger follows the wet grass. Life is made from all of this (*compõe nos úberes cheios*). With germination, seed becomes fruit, and the obstacles and difficult aspects of life are transformed into the elements by which existence will renew itself. In this way, the harsh conditions of the first line (*silêncio, silvas, fome*) are opposed to the swollen udders and the fruit of the second and fourth. But it is not merely the boundary between the vegetable and the animal, or between the interior and the exterior, that is overcome. This movement also occurs between the plant world and the mind. Slowly, with an image (*já marcha grave / como os navios entrando*) that neutralizes the quiet steps suggested by the above-mentioned alliteration, the poem introduces a new kind of movement, which anticipates the animal's ultimate immobility. The young goat advances, with a certain "suave consciência," and by way of admirably written implicit oppositions (*marcha grave, pesada dos pensamentos*—which do not in fact weigh the animal down because they are... *da sua vida suave*):

Assim já marcha grave  
Como os navios entrando  
Pesada dos pensamentos  
Da sua vida suave.

[A gravity in her pace  
Like a ship coming in  
Weighed down by the thoughts  
Of her serene life.]

This movement continues until a suspended, immobile state of equilibrium is achieved, in a skillfully visual, highly emblematic image, which con-

denses the hidden balance between the vital tensions that together comprise the “mystery” of existence, a mystery suggested by the fact that an egg, a perfect form representing the origin of life, can produce a bird, a being capable of flight. In closing, the line contracts to four syllables, heightening the power of the poem’s final effect. The same alliteration mentioned earlier (*pendente, pura, passo, apela, parece, pelerina, pêlo, passos, poeira, passeios, pesada, pensamentos, puro, penedo*), whose sonority continually evokes the image of the goat (and which we could complement with the words *cabrinha, colhe, gota, úberes, grave, casquinhas, tocada, grande, equilibrado*) is a bit of authentic technical achievement, successively reinforcing the ideas of physical travel, thought, and stillness (*no puro penedo*). The overlapping of new forms of alliteration, which serves to resolve the musical tensions in the final verse, is likewise impressive (*casquinhostocando... comoovoeaavelgrandesegredollequibrado*), as is the counterposing of various sets of oppositions: *húmido/molhe, erva/flor, pendente/badalinho, pelerina/pêlos, sinal de noite/gota, semente/fruto, gravelpesada*, etc.:

E assim, no puro penedo  
De seus casquinhas tocado,  
Está como o ovo e a ave:  
Grande segredo  
Equilibrado.

[Standing on pure rock  
Touched by little hoofs,  
She is like egg and bird:  
A great secret  
In equilibrium.]

### III.

Given this example, which is sufficiently characteristic of Nemésio’s creative output and of some of the technical-literary strategies used by the author through practically his entire career, I consider it unnecessary to analyze the author’s entire body of work. Rather, I will focus on a particular developmental path that takes us from the initial moments of his career and closes with the volume *Sapateia Açoriana*.

Nemésio's stated thoughts on poetry are oft-cited:

com os temas coerentes e reiterados do sentido da existência pela representação do passado: o mundo da infância no microcosmo da Ilha: o isolamento no seio de uma comunidade patriarcal: a revelação de Deus e do próximo na vizinhança e na família, do destino no amar e na promessa da morte.

[his themes are made coherent by a reiterated sense of existence brought out by the representation of the past: the world of childhood in the Island microcosm; isolation in the midst of a patriarchal society; the revelation of God and of his fellow humans in neighbors and family, and of destiny in loving and in the promise of death.]

We will more or less follow the progression of this summary statement.

Beginning with the idea of insularity (*insularidade*), we must place this in two contexts. First, in ordinary terms, the condition of being an islander entails a certain capacity for confronting existence and rejecting isolation (Nemésio: "Tomo aqui a palavra *isolamento* no seu sentido etimológico: solidão de ilha. Um homem numa rocha e em volta o mar" ["I understand the word *isolation* here in its etymological sense: island solitude. A man standing on a rock with the sea all around"]), even if the world, under these conditions, can only be recovered in words, through a poetic language that rediscovers the Island and allows it to function in memory, as well as grants it meaning in the present:

dobrado sobre si mesmo, o ilhéu tem de ser inventivo, suprir o seu racionamento (filho de solidão geográfica) por uma vasta virtualidade de que dota as coisas—especializando, por assim dizer, o que é particular num exercício geral, o que é privativo de uma função em várias funções circunvizinhas.

[folded upon himself, the islander needs to be inventive, to add to his stock of ideas (born of geographical isolation) a vast virtuality with which he endows things—investing, so to speak, the particular with a kind of generality, and making what is applicable to a specific circumstance, applicable as well to other similar circumstances.]

This, which Némésio writes of Roberto de Mesquinha, describes the critic as well as his subject. Nemésio experienced his insularity intensely and in his corresponding refusal to accept isolation, he sought to recover, by way

of poetic memory and totalizing symbols, lost connections; with life and nature's great regulating cycles; with the family, that foundational unit of social life in its spatial-temporal projection outward; with the primordial *Erlebnis*, one's lived experience in the real world, both concrete and symbolic, which only the word can reconstitute (by instituting it) and transfigure (in terms of the sea, the island, the home, the family, animals, and the professions).

As concerns the second context within which we must place the question of insularity or isolation, let us observe that modern industrial society can be defined by the chaotic, unmediated growth of the State and by the increasingly cybernetic dehumanization of its members. The pace of modern life is accelerated by a technological progress that threatens various forms of life with extinction, and limits men and women to a life of individualistic egoism by questioning and confusing received values, and distancing them from a sense for communal life. In these circumstances, the individual increasingly disconnects from the community and becomes an *island* unto him- or herself. In addition to the insularity implied by his Azorean roots, Nemésio lived this other, generalized insularity, which circumscribes the human condition and limits the fulfillment of the human vocation. He reacts to this insularity, this other form of "exile," by opening the necessary doors, allowing air to circulate freely. Nemésio not only imposes an ethical and social vision on the islands, which is counterposed to a day-to-day life on the islands that is traditionally regulated by a mythical order, but, moreover, he examines things in their simplicity as the primary means to achieve God's grace. Later, in texts like *Limite de Idade*, he attempts to integrate life, science, and poetic knowledge into a broader cosmic vision. This is a possible key to understanding Nemésio's well-known indifference to politics, or more precisely, his unwillingness to commit himself to specific political and ideological positions. In reality, Nemésio was much more concerned with a dimension of experience capable of restoring the individual's ontological wholeness, or, as he described it, "uma ordem superior de que o homem fosse degradado e de que conservasse virtualmente os lineamentos da figura que tem de reconstituir" ["a superior order from which man was downgraded and from which he kept, as it were, but the outline of the image he must reconstruct"]. As we will see, it is in this process of reconstruction that science and poetry, positive and poetic knowledge, and electronic and metaphysical messages face off.

If an anguished memory and temporal experience inspire Nemésio to recreate the world of his insular childhood, reclaiming it as a central part of his inti-

mate experience, the force of will and the desire witnessed in this operation allow the author to experience the bright flashes that accompany the experience of God, Eros, and Death. The drama is resolved, either successively or simultaneously, in these three entities, as each one of these can give *a* meaning (or *the* meaning) to the world. Significantly, the most important part of Nemésio's love poetry is known only fragmentarily, which makes it probable that we will have to *rethink* Nemésio's work once this heretofore unedited portion of his work is published.

#### IV.

Let us now turn to how God is revealed in Nemésio's work: in the copy of *O Pão e a Culpa* I used in my research, I encountered this moving dedication by the author to his friends, dating from 25 January 1977, less than a month before his death: "estas 'asceses' passadas, mas que muito marcaram o seu velho e grato Vitorino Nemésio" ["these old 'asceticisms,' which left marks on your old and grateful Vitorino Nemésio"].

This testimony, given by a man on death's doorstep, and referring to a book published twenty-two years earlier, indicates, with rigorous and total economy, one of the most important aspects of Nemésio's composition: it speaks of an *asceticism* in which Nemésio was deeply involved, and which correspondingly marked his work in several respects. This asceticism is by extension a transcendental elevation of the individual in his or her humanity. We do not, as in Rilke, behold a *reine Uebersteigung* achieved in the metamorphoses brought about by the singing of a song. Rather, we are confronted with a human *impurity* that the author assumes and seeks to overcome. We have here less of the fiery, ecstatic, mystical fugue that Nemésio presents us with in another portion of his work, and more of the individual's humble involvement in and development of (I use Eduardo do Prado Coelho's expression, *envolvimento e desenvolvimento*, for my analysis of *O Pão e a Culpa*, though he applied it to *O Verbo e a Morte*) daily life in search of divine Grace. Nemésio's search for the divine is situated in his investigation of the most humble features of daily life. Recall that this search for God's immediate presence in the most humble aspects of daily life (later, Nemésio will instead seek to discover the *ways of God* in terms of angelic relations) marks Nemésio's entire poetic career, from "Anjos de matéria nenhuma e de toda a arrogância" ["Angels of no matter at all and of all arrogance"], from *O Bicho Harmonioso*, to the mediators, "ávidos de transe e rapidez" ["eager for trance and swiftness"], who can also be granted a Rilkean *Schrecklichkeit*.



Anjos são os terríveis  
 Modos de Deus connosco  
 Nós, as suas possíveis  
 Transparências a fosco.

[Angels are the terrible  
 Ways of God to us  
 We, his possible  
 Opaque transparencies.] (*O Pão e a Culpa*)

These lines describe an attempt to understand the interceding function that exists between the human and the divine, and to illuminate its opaque reflections. This attempt presupposes an intimate involvement with the real, and here Nemésio, an anti-Caeiro, is a poet of the intimately real, which becomes a kind of *communicative*, revealed sustenance that—

Desde que me conheço sei o pão  
 E o corto em companhia.

[Since knowing myself I've known the bread  
 And cut it in company.] (*O Pão e a Culpa*)

—and, from the moment it is made manifest as a substance simultaneously reconstituted and transfigured by the poetic word, demonstrates that the individual's relationship with God presupposes a prior relationship between the individual and the world. Here lies one of the essential qualities of Nemésio's *realism*, as well as one of the reasons why religious poetry is frequently capable of touching readers who do not believe: there is an overriding *truth* to the real here, irrespective of one's belief or lack thereof. This truth, revealed in the enunciations of the concrete that are rediscovered in poetic language, extends itself to other registers, all the while affirming itself and reorganizing our perception, as in this poem:

*Roseira*

A área da rosa é o seu perfil de orvalho.  
 Abro à manhã quantas cultivo:

Se espinhos têm dos pregos do meu soalho  
 É que ainda moro vivo.  
 Mas mesmo rosas de madeira,  
 Com a cor da lama do meu passo,  
 Sem graça, aroma, nem maneira,  
 Dou-as a Deus. É do que faço  
 Nesta estrumeira.

[*Rosebush*

The rose's area is its profile of dew.  
 I open to the morning all those I grow:  
 If they bear thorns from my floor  
 It's because I still live where I'm alive.

But even wooden roses,  
 Mud-colored from my steps,  
 With no grace, aroma or shape,  
 I offer to God. They're all I grow  
 In this dunghill of mine.] (*O Pão e a Culpa*)

We can also see this poetic naming at work in the sonnet *A Virgem da Cova*, a high point in Nemésio's writing, as well as innumerable other examples in which the *weight* of the recovered real is accompanied by the verbal elegance of the poem:

Ó concisão das árvores esguias,  
 Que se acusem num nada exactamente!  
 Os ciprestes são tristes só pelas guias;  
 Um lindo enterro só com pouca gente.

[O conciseness of slender trees,  
 Self-accusing in a nothing exactly  
 Cypresses saddened for being guides;  
 A beautiful funeral with few people.] (*O Pão e a Culpa*)

Um torrão de barro!

Eu vi um torrão de barro  
 Fresco, na enxada, e uma minhoca!  
 Aquele torrão cheiroso  
 Era a toca!

[A clod of earth!  
 I saw a clod of earth  
 Fresh, on the hoe blade, with a worm!  
 That pungent clod  
 Was his burrow!] (*Nem toda a noite a vida*)

In some cases, a single metaphor is sufficient to underpin the whole of the poem's thematic development, because its exactness makes possible the discovery of a relationship *of difference* expressed by the transition from the description of a rabbit to the operations of memory:

*Mnemosinon*

Tal o coelho minucioso  
 Com a serralha que desfia,  
 Vem a memória ao silencioso  
 Cortar lembranças todo o dia.

Guarda as mais grossas para o que olha;  
 No amor a cólera humedece;  
 Finas e últimas desfolha  
 As que mal lembra e logo esquece.

[*Mnemosinon*

Like a fastidious rabbit  
 With the thistle it shreds,  
 Memory comes to the silent  
 Tearing his remembrances all day long.

Keeping the thickest of what he sees;  
 In love anger dampens;  
 The finest and last he strips off  
 Hardly remembered and then forgotten.] (*O Pão e a Culpa*)

## V.

At the risk of excessive generalization, we may observe the confluence of three great thematic lines in Nemésio. First, we have an awareness of the world's architecture and the structure of its composite materials, symbolically apprehended and related to *the whole* and, later, scientifically deepened, as in *Limite de Idade*, though nonetheless retaining its symbolic character. I would venture that this represents an esoteric, perhaps Masonic, line of development, marked by great emblematic intention (on this topic, a title like *Eu, Comovido a Oeste* might imply a contemplation of the ... *Orient*, and, from *Limite de Idade*, we may quote a line like: "Nos pedreiros da pedra encontro os irmãos que procurava" ["In the carvers of the stone I find the brothers I sought"]). Second, we find a humble, mystical or baroque religious experience, to which I already referred. This is profoundly rooted in the seventeenth-century Iberian experience of God and of sin, which in turn refers to the Judeo-Christian tradition of original sin, which is assumed in self-flagellating manner by sinners, in their abjection and confession of sins before God, and their petition for divine pardon, which is fulfilled through ongoing penitence and total surrender. Finally, we see a long-established line of ontological speculation in Nemésio. This tradition has remote, pre-Socratic roots, recovered by the German Romantics, as well as the existential reading of these Romantics, namely in the Heideggerian interpretation of Hölderlin's poetics, which is literally present in Nemésio's work in certain moments and carries with it a philosophy of symbolic language in its relations with Being. These three thematic lines often overlap, at times becoming indissoluble, as is frequently the case in *O Verbo e a Morte*.

Just as Pessoa's originality lies in the ways in which he introduced reason (and its absurdities) to symbolism, thereby pulverizing it, Nemésio's unique contribution is to fuse the three aforementioned strains, and to dialectically oppose forms of reason to the potential for irrationality contained in these forms, as well as in the language by which reason expresses itself. Reason, in Pessoa, operates radically, and on the reverse side of a limited number of abstracted, disembodied concepts. It moves in the pure abstraction of the mechanisms installed in the desert of the soul, as if seeking a formal structure for operations taking place outside discourse, or at any rate, for operations not contained by discourse. Everything occurs as if, parodying Nemésio, Pessoa had written *Língua, Casa da Razão que lá não mora*, utilizing the poem as a vehicle for reason, in the self-consuming spiral of reason's voracity, with reason functioning as the cold consumer of meaning, both transcendent and

immanent: this is reason dead to itself, and confined to an absurdity without exit and without escape. In Vitorino Nemésio, reason is precisely the opposite. What in Pessoa is a spiral endlessly moving toward nothingness is in Nemésio a spiral continuously *developing* in its plenitude; the world is not a *waste land* and the nature of the soul, far from a *question of limits* (“A posição, o oco cheio / Por cada um no seu limite” [“The position, the filled vacuum / For each within his limit”]), is better understood as the limits of the question. In short, beings and things are interconnected: they communicate, refer, and find themselves (amongst themselves). As Nemésio writes: “Como a pegada, que é o resto / Do caminheiro na terra firme” [“Just like the footprint, the vestige / Of the walker on firm land”]. If these are communicative, if they can be *gathered together*, reason need not be immobile, but is instead *flexible*. In these circumstances, reason is not *imposed* on beings and things from the outside but instead derives from them by way of their discourse. It does not operate on the reverse side of existence but on its near side, or within it, or rather, stitched into it. If it is in these circumstances that one still lives in the concrete, all features of the concrete aid in this expression that is the product of the concrete, and that generates images, metaphors, symbols, allusive mechanisms, paronyms, and etymological, syntactic, and derivative processes, among other elements of discourse. The generative function is preserved even as one arrives at the unspeakable regions of the most rarified ontological speculation. As we will see, abstraction generally continues to *embody itself*. In this way, if Pessoa’s reason is a desert of the soul, reason in Nemésio is a *peopling* of consciousness. If Pessoa succeeded in introducing reason to symbolism, Nemésio introduced reason to the symbol itself, identifying reason with a vital sense of congruence, rather than linking it to absurdity.

On this point, see the sonnet *Águia de fogo*:

Brado o nome das coisas que comovo,  
 Mas o sono me cala e as arrefece:  
 Não me vem ave à mão dizendo “ovo”  
 Nem se chamo Jesus ele me aparece.  
 Mas se me calo, então o Mundo é novo,  
 Clara a noite, Deus lembra, a terra esquece,  
 Amplia-se o futuro no que louvo,  
 O sentido da morte se esclarece.  
 Oro no prolongado vácuo ouvido,

Interiormente mar, ou mesmo menos  
Que marulho remoto ou enxame haurido,

Onde o eterno levanta, com pequenos  
Sinais de tempo astral que a carne capta,  
Uma águia de fogo que me rapta.

[Of things I move I cry out the names  
But sleep silences me and chills them:  
No bird flies to my hand saying "egg"  
Jesus comes not if I call his name.

But if I still my voice, the World is then new,  
The night brighter, God remembers, the earth is warm,  
The future opens wider for what I praise,  
The meaning of death becomes clear.

In the extended audible vacuum I pray,  
Inward sea, or even less  
Than distant surge or absorbed swarm,

Where the eternal rises, with small  
Signs of astral time by flesh captured,  
An eagle of fire transports me.]

This piece exhibits a dense weave of oppositions, juxtaposed and taken to the extremes of both combination and opposition: between proclaiming the names of things, which results in muteness or lifeless silence, and the word's suspension or (other) silence (*mas se me calo*), which memory (*Deus lembra*) and death, here equivalent to authentic life, reveal as renewed *meaning*, and in the illuminating presence of God; between the impotence of human clamoring (*nem se chamo Jesus ele me aparece*)—and, by extension, the uselessness of defining origins in light of life's function as a struggle to capture vital energies (*Não me vem ave à mao dizendo "ovo"*)—and the possibility of an *animated* silence (*o Mundo é novo, Deus lembra, amplia-se o futuro, o sentido da morte se esclarece*); between an Earth suggestively differentiated from the *World* (*o Mundo é novo, Deus lembra, a Terra esquece*) and a future that gains



new qualities; between the initial act of interpellation and the mystical vigil, passing through *sleep*: the voice passing from the physically audible to the inaudible, from the spoken to pure interior tension, through various states, from sound to sleep to labor, until it is transformed first in the listening “*do vácuo*” (see, for example, the experience of the anechoic camera, and then into flesh itself, which accumulates “*sinais*”: *brado* [or rather, *chamo*], *o sono me cala, mas se me calo, Deus lembra, louvo, oro, o vácuo é ouvido, a carne capta sinais*; between the ever-shrinking subject and an eternity that continually gains corporeal mass [the speaker becomes a mere receiver and, moreover, *is received*]); and finally, between the bird that denies itself in the third line and the eagle that triumphantly asserts itself in the final line. Ultimately, the affirmation of God resolves these tensions. We can compare this appearance to the mystical *enthousiasmos* of the Greek myth of Ganymede, which superimposes itself on the relationship between the Christian God and Jesus. This correlation is born out by various shared mythical features (for instance, the theme of the great beauty of the man who contemplates God, a beauty so great that it causes God to descend and to impose himself on the man so as to participate in the *agape*). But another, “heretical” reading is also possible: Christ, who like his human followers is possessed of a human nature, fails to respond to the most human of communication methods, the call of the voice. A silent God appeals to the vigil; the response of the eternal occurs only in a *prolonged vacuum*, *communicating* with man in “depersonalized” form, in the form of a fiery eagle, the *águia de fogo* (according to Christian texts, this fire was given to the apostles so that they could speak ... and recall that at the beginning of the text, words are ineffective). The symbols contained by the words *nome, sono, ave, ovo, Mundo, noite, vácuo, mar*, and *águia de fogo*, whose very sequence is meaningful, are subject to an esoteric interpretation, as are the actions described in the sonnet.

Óscar Lopes observes that what Nemésio “*exprime de mais impressionante é a imanência de outrem (e superlativamente de ti) a mim, o mais mim de mim mesmo e de isto à relação entre ti e mim*” [“expresses that is most impressive is the immanence of *the other* (and superlatively of *the thou*) in *me*, the *most me of myself* and from *this* to the relationship between the thou and me”]. This insightful observation on one of the characteristics of Nemésio’s writing allows us to analyze the author of *O Verbo e a Morte* in light of Heidegger’s reading of the poet Hölderlin. In his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” Heidegger discusses the *unity* of the dialogue that composes us, and that “con-

sists in the fact that in the essential word there is always manifest that one and the same on which we agree, on the basis of which we are united and so are authentically ourselves. Conversation and its unity support our existence.” Elsewhere, Heidegger succinctly identifies this existence with the concept of *Dasein*. Further, “it is precisely in the naming of the gods and in the world becoming word that authentic conversation, which we ourselves are, consists.” In Heidegger, the essential word is eminently symbolic and the dialogue that we are defines the word as sacred. The sacred is forbidding: its flame does not permit anyone to get near it without being burned; its infinite brightness attracts the sentient to it, which circles it obsessively, entranced and held prisoner, as a moth to a flame. A fringe of mystery is emitted from the sacred, surrounding it, and functioning as a cryptic, prophetic oracle: individuals encounter the keys to interpreting the sacred within an ambiguous sensory field. As Heidegger writes: “Language first creates the manifest place of [the] threat to being, and the confusion and thus the possibility even of the loss of being, that is—danger.” We know that the sacred watches over the secret points by which Being and totality can be accessed and that it maintains the power to integrate all things into the whole, unifying the primordial with the final, and rendering the relative absolute (*noli me tangere*). The sacred expresses itself in ultimate, indecipherable terms, as the definitive key to the world and the endless night, and can be only vaguely intuited through the rough, profane medium of language. Language, conscious of the profanity it commits and of the risk it runs (these two features of language are quite important in Nemésio), senses the tension that accompanies its aspiration to the bright totality of the sacred. The sacred grants epiphanies, since it provides both total knowledge and total liberty. It *reveals itself* in its omnipresence. “The poet is exposed to the god’s lightning flashes”—so goes Heidegger’s elegant affirmation, which is confirmed by the inexpressible force of those terms that refer to totality, by myth’s capacity to convey presence (which is only possible when myth works on us in the present), and through a few recoverable linguistic fossils, referring to language’s participation in the act of naming, as in the story of Adam (see Genesis 2:19-20). This act links us together *cosmo-agonically*. Heidegger writes: “naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet’s naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known *as* beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word.” And in Nemésio’s words:

Com medo de o perder nomeio o mundo,  
 Seus quantos e qualidades, seus objectos,  
 [... ..]

Nomeei as coisas e fiquei contente:  
 Prendi a frase ao texto do universo.

[Fearing I may lose it I name the world,  
 Its numbers and qualities, its objects,  
 [... ..]]

I named things and was happy:  
 I attached words to the universe's text.]

There is a universal text, and it has a Meaning; it is through the Word that text and Meaning constitute the absolute limits of the human voice's precarious attempts at expression. And because *Ser, Verbo e Sentido* (or, *Being, Word, and Meaning*) exist at the absolute limit of totality, they are linked together, coinciding as equivalents, without a before, without an after, with neither cause nor effect. If we perceive these, it is because of their continued *being*. We can only *reassemble* the fragments we perceive through symbols. And it is only through the voice that we arrive at symbols. In this way language is the *house of being*. In this arrangement, language may mark being, and is the medium through which being is communicated, although being retains in its most intimate recesses the capacity for self-generation. The world *is* because we name it. The world exists, and history is instituted, in this act. But as Nemésio observes, language is the home of a being “que lá não mora” [“that does not abide there”]. This pronouncement marks Nemésio's difference from Heidegger: the word persists in us “como sombra de sol e eco de amor” [“like sun's shadow and love's echo”]. In confronting the “Verbo unívoco e sagrado” [“Univocal and sacred Word”] of Being, the individual—an “Homem, menos que nada e mais que tudo” [a “Man, less than nothing and more than everything”]—carries with him as his only weapon the *faltus vocis* of the “verbo equívoco falado” [“univocal spoken word”], leaving him open to dangers and error. Would Heidegger write:

Minha vara que fará  
 Senão bater no Sentido,

Correr o risco das vozes?

[What can my wand do  
But beat out the Meaning,  
Run the voices' risk?]

The German philosopher argues that: "The word as word never offers any immediate guarantee as to whether it is an essential word or a deception." Words are ambiguous, and in their many possible meanings they risk losing what is most essential in them (Rilke says of the poet, "Sein Sinn ist Zwiespalt"). Since a word is irreducible to any one of its possible meanings to the exclusion of the others, Meaning absorbs all possibilities, incorporating them and consuming them all in its constantly burning fire. Even time ceases to be a mere category of subjective experience; it too becomes absolute (though time here should not be confused with the *here and now*, as "Tudo é cá tempo em espaço pervertido" ["All is herein time in space perverted"]). We encounter the being and the face of God in this state of summary equivalence, which can also be described as a utopia in the Nemesian sense (Nemésio writes of utopia in these terms: "*Utopia*, isto é, ausência de lugar determinado do acontecer" ["*Utopia*, that is, absence of determined place of happening"]). This is the *time of being*, in which the sea functions as the great metaphor for dilution, as Nemésio further suggests in *Águia de Fogo*:

Entro com Deus no forno  
Do seu ser. Oíço o mar.

[With God I enter the oven  
Of his being. I hear the sea.]

The act of poetic creation lives a dual existence, or a latent conflict, between the word as a mode of access ("a poesia é a instauração do ser com a palavra" ["poetry is the instauration of being with the word"]) and as a form of forgetting, and, indeed, as a *verbal prison*. As a mode of access, the word can allow for the sudden revelation of Being and Meaning. Here "given" describes the meaning both of the word that is *conceded*, and of games of chance (again, Heidegger states: "the pursuit of poetry often looks like little more than *play*," and the poetry may deceptively appear as "just a harmless

game"); the casting forth of words is a search that is simultaneously the fruit of changeable fortune and of vigilant involvement:

No lance do verbo jogo,  
Mas, se vigio o meu dado,  
A boca sabe-me a fogo  
Do sentido inesperado.

[Casting the word I play,  
But, as I watch my cube,  
My mouth tastes the fire  
Of its unexpected meaning.]

But as far as it is *ambiguous*, spoken by individuals in their agonized search for the absolute, the word deprives one of liberty, alienating one from it. The word circles around itself, as if it were trapped down a dark alley without an exit. Nemésio conveys this state in these words:

Com a chave da voz abri a vida:  
Mas sair? Onde o passo? e como, a porta?  
[... ..]  
Assim rolo em redondo e mesmo, alheio  
À liberdade, aço da chave, aberta  
À noite da prisão verbal deserta.

[With the key of voice I opened life:  
But leave? With what step? Through which door?  
[... ..]  
Moving in circles, ignoring freedom  
I become steel of the key, and open myself  
To the night of a deserted verbal prison.]

We can compare these lines with the passage from Hölderlin cited by Heidegger, in which the German poet states that the, "free will / and higher power to command and to accomplish have been given to him, who is like the gods, and that is why the most dangerous of goods, language, has been

given to man, so that creating, destroying and perishing, and returning to the everliving, to the mistress and mother, he may bear witness to what he is / to have inherited, learned from her, her most divine gift, all-sustaining love." In order to free himself through absolute knowledge and the return to this knowledge, the poet can rely only on the feverish, overflowing madness he puts into words, on his voice's impulse, and on innocence:

... apenas poetas por castigo  
Com um pouco de insânia e de inocência

[... only poets as punishment  
Endowed with a little insanity and innocence.]

or:

... ofereço  
minha razão de ser no que deliro,

[... I offer  
my reason for being in my raving.]

These allow the poet to escape the limitations of his reason ("Somos tão pouco no mundo, / Apesar de Kant e o mais..." ["We are so little in the world, / Despite Kant and such..."] ), and to reach that other *logos*, which is, for Hölderlin as for Nemésio, "o íntimo dos deuses e das fontes, / Divino louco, amado de astros" ("the intimate of gods and of fountains, / Divine madman, loved by the stars"),

Pois só no rigor a fogo  
Das palavras exactas e sofridas  
Abre o estame de amor, pólen do Logo,  
Que é maneira de Deus com nossas vidas.

[For only in the fiery rigor  
of words exact and suffered  
Does the stamen of love open, pollen of the Logos,  
The way of God in our lives.]



By now we are moving away from Hölderlin's views, in that Nemésio reduces the pantheon of gods to God, and thereby weakens the mythic charge of Hölderlin's argument, as well as the dialogue he describes between the mythical and the actively historical. Hölderlin's Greek-inspired paganism is substituted in Nemésio by a Judeo-Christian eschatology. This transition implies a diminished subjectivity in this portion of Nemésio's work. God's centrality to the experience of death and the corresponding emphasis placed on individual guilt and repentance distances the individual from the actual and the active. We are also quite removed from the violently baroque incandescence Nemésio identifies with the individual's experience of God in *O Bicho Harmonioso*:

Ah! Tu, Toiro de Fogo, e eu lesma fria!  
 Tu, Roda de Navalhas retirada  
 Das Sete Dores de tua Mãe!  
 Tu, Tubarão de Amor, e eu a enguia  
 Que até as águas estagnadas  
 Têm!  
 Tu, sol cortado a diamante,  
 [... ..]

[Ah! You, Bull of Fire, and I cold snail!  
 You, Wheel of Knives removed  
 From the Seven Pains of your Mother!  
 You, Shark of Love, and I the eel  
 That even stagnant waters  
 Have!  
 You, sun cut by diamonds,]  
 [... ..]

In both cases we are confronted by a *fiery* intensity. In the first case, Nemésio's conception of God has roots in Iberia and its mystical-baroque tradition, and, as I discussed earlier, is elaborated through metaphorically described concrete forms. In the second case, Nemésio's views are characterized by a Romantic-existential, ontological meditation, which renders abstract speculation concrete and subsumes it in a Christian, theocentric vision. David Mourão-Ferreira made a quite similar observation, elevating *O Verbo e a Morte*

to *quintessential* status and noting that here Nemésio wipes away the circumstantial, biographical, or ethnographic content of his previous work, privileging “este decisivo encontro da Graça divina, esta transferência da sede da memória, esta subida de tom do registo da gravidade” [“this decisive encounter of divine Grace, this transference of the thirst of memory, this rise of tone in the register of gravity”]. Further, Fernando Guimarães observed of *O Verbo e a Morte* that:

A realidade, agora, deixa de assumir aquela forma concreta e imediata que vimos ser uma característica dos primeiros livros de Nemésio; o mundo transforma-se numa região da carência, um lugar de perda que, todavia, poderá ser compensada pela possibilidade criadora de que a linguagem parece estar investida.

[Now reality no longer assumes that concrete and immediate form that we recall being a characteristic of Nemésio's first books; the world becomes a region of want, a place of loss that, nevertheless, may be compensated for by the creative possibility with which language seems to be invested.]

In both cases, however, a mystical tradition of very remote origin is recalled, and God is experienced through the mediation of pain and death.

... mostra-te digno  
Da Nova que por ti será cantada.

Por ti,— não ossos teus, mas plectro e corda  
Que desfiras e sejas juntamente  
Na dor que às vezes tua carne acorda  
Com o pouco de ser que te faz ente.  
[... ..]  
E humilde torna a ti, só tubos de osso  
No silêncio mortal do órgão de medo  
Que ínvios dedos de Deus vibrando exigem.

[... show yourself worthy  
of the News that for your sake will be sung.

For your sake,—not your bones, but plectrum and rope  
That you throw and together suffer

The pain that some times awakens your flesh  
 With that little of being that renders you human.  
 [... ..]  
 And humbly returns to you, only bony tubing  
 In the mortal silence of the organ of fear  
 That the inscrutable fingers of God trembling demand.]

In this way, the word is death in conversation, as well as an adhesion to the moment of one's moral reunion with Being, in which, as Furio Jesi wrote, "o processo de destruição ou de autodestruição purifica a contingência individual" ["the process of destruction or self-destruction purifies individual contingency"]. This accounts for its broad, communal value: all great art derives from the violent emergence of existence in our sphere. Our existence only precariously suspends or interrupts the application of this general rule, or, if you like, only temporarily allows for the location of describable knowledge in contexts other than the moment during which existence erupts. There are those, like Michel Guiomar, who speak of the permanence and congenital, instinctive essence of Death; if language is the means to access Being, and death is congenital to this Being, the word must therefore reflect and imply death; if "flato de voz é morte irreparável, / só Verbo é vida" ["a voice flatus is irreparable death, / only the Word is life"], we must be able to locate the true meaning of the Word, which is invoked "ao ser que ainda não é mas nela (a palavra) se futura" ["the being that still is not but through it (the word) will come to be"]. Nemésio writes:

Pensemos a promessa da palavra  
 Na esperança de ser mais que som no ouvido  
 [... ..]  
 Contra as portas da morte o seu poder  
 É esse o acto de fogo em língua pura.

[Let's contemplate the promise of the word  
 In hope of it being more than sound in the ear  
 [... ..]  
 Against the doors of death its power  
 Is that act of fire in pure tongue.]

As such, what is ambiguous is undone by the return of a plurality of meanings (this occurs at the level of practical language as well): life without the Word is death, the Word is “ao abismo idêntico” [“identical to the abyss”], and death, in becoming a path toward Being, is life “no além lá dela” [“in the beyond of it”]. We observe this in *Manhã na Morte*, and we saw a similar process at work in *Águia de Fogo*.

Clara via, a tal passo, que pusesse  
Corpo e alma em repouso, pura estando,  
Morte seria vida que amanhece  
Na breve área de lábio que diz:—“Quando...

Quando eu morrer”—

[Clear path, at this pace, that could  
Induce into repose body and soul, being pure,  
Death would become a dawning life  
In the brief area of the lip that says:—“When...

When I die”—]

## VI.

Having arrived at this point, we must observe that Nemésio’s mystical and religious fervor, even when it seems to reflect Church positions, is in reality far from orthodox with regard to religious doctrine. Eduardo do Prado Coelho has implicitly demonstrated this, in an excellent essay on *O Verbo e a Morte*. Here I would add that we can consider Nemésio’s symbolic investment as heterodoxy itself. Nemésio’s involvement with symbols is a means to achieve, and vindicate, a heretical (and Gnostic) liberty, with its breadth and depth of implications, in the face of an orthodox position that admits the “letter” of a symbol, but not the profane “interpretations” or “derivations” of that symbol.

Later, in *Limite de Idade*, Nemésio renews this involvement, in a new and disconcerting form, by way of an integrating process in which poetry and science *realize* themselves as a fundamental unity, which questions the destinies of lived experience, of individuals, and of Being, and which takes a diverse collection of values and notions deriving from modern consciousness and attempts to arrange them according to an eschatological perspective.

Moreover, this unity seeks to order molecular structure and universal architecture, the precarious and the eternal, individual limits and cosmic infinity, the limited and the unlimited, the aging and ageless—undertaking all of this not in the manner of Lucretius, who would make instrumental use of expression, applying it to the exposition of a system, but rather through the neutralization of differences between poetics and science, in this way reformulating the role of each in the quest for totality. In historical terms, science has effectively nullified poetry's symbolic charge, understood as the revelatory force of signifying; in attempting to understand the world, science seeks to establish unquestionable laws. These can be verified through regular recourse to quantifiable measures, which amounts to a testing of the limits of quantification's potential. Science is unwilling to coexist with a form of knowledge that is irreducible to abstract formalization or to rigorous, normalizing definition: it tends to deny that such forms represent knowledge at all; its domain is not that of symbolic imagination, and its findings do not result in epiphanies as to unspeakable existential realities (nor would it grant that the realm of the unspeakable could be approximated through extra-scientific means); science is the domain of objectivity *par excellence*, while poetry is the space of inter-subjectivity, as forecast by the poem as a *communicative project*, as an incessantly self-regenerating structure, the sense of which *cannot be transferred* to other systems, as similar as they may be to the poem, and whose *truths* are qualitatively distinct from the certainties advanced by science.

It is this duality of science and poetry that renders the guiding idea, both symbolic and ironic, of *Limite de Idade*, so unique. Its proposal is symbolic, in that the text presents the reader with a mass of data from modern science, from biology to quantum physics, represented by the written word, and thereby imbued with ontological implications and interrogative tensions, both of which point toward the transcendent. From here springs the question, “Quando voltará o sentido à casa do Homem?” [“When will meaning return to the house of Man?”]. Likewise, the poem *A.D.N.* [*D.N.A.*], in the two stanzas quoted below, appeals to the ultimately unspeakable implications of what are, in the end, questions of spirit and matter:

I

Afinal sou assim, infeliz e volúvel,

Porque minha alma guarda uma ordem diversa

De pulsões celulares ao longo do seu eixo:  
 Decifre-me quem saiba,—que, dispersa,  
 Com nome de *A.D.N.* aqui na cruz a deixo.

II

Nervo a pavor, fonte renal de rijo  
 Cor dos meus olhos, estatura, gosto,  
 Quanto me importo, ó Deus, quanto me aflijo,  
 Tudo *A.D.N.* inscreve no meu rosto.

[After all I am this way, unhappy and voluble,  
 Because my soul keeps a diverse order  
 Of cellular pulsations along its axle:  
 Let him who knows decipher me,—for, disperse,  
 With the name *D.N.A.* here on the cross I leave it.

Nerve in panic, renal font of strength,  
 Color of eyes, height, taste,  
 How much I care, God, how I shudder,  
*D.N.A.* inscribes everything on my face.]

This is a symbolic proposal, in its vision of *uchronic time* [*sic*], which generates real time in the world of *Idade do Mundo*, as well as in genetic progression, in the inconsolability of a God “fora de seu criado e já quente e amor nele” [“outside his creation and already hot and love in him”], and in the transformation of the universe:

A clínica de Viena ainda não tem divã  
 Mas já o homem se deita num colchão de ventre e epitélio,

O hidrogénio nasceu prometido ao carbono:  
 Vem aí, vem aí uma alvorada de hélio!  
 [The Vienna clinic still lacks a couch  
 But man is already lying on a mattress of womb and epithelium

Hydrogen was born betrothed to carbon:  
 Approaching, approaching is the dawn of helium!]



This is also an ironic proposal, aware of the inverse relationship between scientific and moral progress:

Hoje o homem é o bicho sem sentido,  
A formal secreção da morte.

[Today man is the senseless creature,  
A formal secretion of death.]

This brings a number of issues to the reader's attention—man and the inevitability of death, the coherence of the self, the dizzy heights of technology, and the crisis of civilization—by way of a Mozartian strategy of playfulness and verbal games deriving from the inexhaustible fantasy of these “delírios microfísicos e biopoéticos” [“microphysical and biopoetic deliriums”], as the poet terms them. Nemésio moves from tenderness to the burlesque in his seemingly unlimited and omnipresent capacity to relate all parts to the whole, by way of what Eduardo Lourenço, one of the poet's greatest critics, termed a “lirismo paródico da nova Idade” [“a lyricism parodying the new Age”], after sustaining that, “alusões ou fórmulas de carácter científico não foram nunca para ele senão metáforas líricas e cenário lúdico para o teatro da sua dramática interioridade e salva pela graça humana e divina do humor” [“allusions or formulas of a scientific nature were to him nothing more than lyrical metaphors and a ludic scenario for a dramatic interiority saved by human grace and divine humor”]. These comments reflect an interpretation that is somewhat removed from my own and, effectively, I disagree in part with Lourenço and would argue that it is not Nemésio's presumed dilettantism that is of greatest interest. The idea that Nemésio's relatively rigorous use of scientific concepts serves as a pretext for his “metáforas líricas” reflects an author-centered or autobiographical interpretation of his work. What interests me, rather, is what Nemésio does with this information, how he problematizes it (and problematizes *us*) in touching on the human condition of those who survive in a world where *meaning* is rare. Certainly, Nemésio's application of this information would be less disconcerting if it were historical, philosophical, or literary, rather than scientific. We are already accustomed to seeing these bodies of knowledge symbolically poured into poetic creation, resulting in poems from *Os Lusíadas* to *Mensagem*, and passing through Antero de Quental. Nemésio seems to intuit as much, writing:

Em gráfico de sismo a sina veio  
 Nessa foto cardíaca— “Receio  
 Que morra, Daisy!”—Não: morra, Dolly!”  
 Pois eu não sou o Fernando Pessoa  
 Ou Antero, nem em inglês seu nome soa,  
 Que minha Musa é Escherichia Coli.

[In seismic graphics fate came  
 in that cardiac photo—“I fear  
 he may die, Daisy!”—“Don’t you die, Dolly!”

Look, I’m not Fernando Pessoa  
 Or Antero, nor does English suit her  
 For my Muse’s name is Escherichia Coli.]

See also his pronouncement on, “Nossa angústia habituada—portuguesamente vil-tristeza,— / Nosso cansaço clássico, vitaminado a C” [“Our habitual anguish—Portuguesely vile-sadness,— / Our classical tedium, with vitamin C”]—which concludes:

Que não é sensato esperar do nada alguma coisa  
 Mas só de morte fiar puro perdão de Deus,  
 Entre pinhas reais e Afonso LV, Dinis II,  
 Com um búzio e uma vieira—or piango or canto—muito fina,  
 Por conta de Camões e um pouco de Petrarca,  
 Devendo aliás chorar muito mais do que canto  
 E calar a buzina!

[For it’s not wise to expect something out of nothing  
 But only in death trust in God’s forgiveness,  
 Among royal pines and Afonso LV, Dinis II,  
 With a dog-whelk and a scallop—or *piango* or *canto*—very fine  
 On account of Camões and a little of Petrarch,  
 When I should really cry more than I sing  
 And silence my horn!]

We do not feel the full measure of this strangeness, conditioned as we are by tradition and inertia, and distanced from science. Rather, we are accustomed to seeing science in a static relationship of difference with regard to poetry. And even if we involve ourselves with both science and poetry, we tend to view the two as entirely distinct. For this reason, and because it assumes the great risk of pushing us toward a twenty-first-century conception of poetry, Nemésio's *Limite de Idade* is perhaps the greatest Portuguese poetic work of the twentieth century. On this point, it is instructive to revisit Gregory Bateson's essay *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. Bateson, linked to Wiener, von Neumann, and McCulloch in the development of cybernetics and other recently inaugurated areas of science, published his essay eight years after *Limite de Idade*. In his essay, Bateson proposes rigor and imagination as "the two great contraries of [the] mental process" and goes on to define cultural evolution as the result of the interaction of these two forces ("Rigor alone is paralytic death, but imagination alone is insanity"). He sustains that science has nothing to do with truth, constituting nothing more than, as John Pfeiffer wrote in his review of Bateson's essay, "a disciplined fiction, in the sense that each hypothesis is a deliberate oversimplification." Further, Bateson sustains that "ultimate unity is aesthetic," this being a form of overcoming, a kind of possible *act of faith* that goes, as Pfeiffer has it, "over and beyond the facts assembled by *quantitative science*." I believe that all of these ideas can be found, not in theory, but *in actu*, in *Limite de Idade*.

## VII.

In this essay, I have discussed some of the characteristic features we find in the best moments of Nemésio's poetic career, from *O Bicho Harmonioso* through *Sapateia Açoriana*. In this final volume, as in his other poetic works, we find the echoes of an at-times Rilkean symbolism, joined by a certain dramatization of the "I" rooted in *presencismo*, as well as a self-consciously serene wisdom that nonetheless manages to be restless and curious in his love for life, people, lands, and things. Moreover, in Nemésio's poetry we encounter an unapologetic sense of fun (Nemésio: "A poesia é filha do mistério, mas também nasce do humor. Talvez até porque o humor é misterioso e genésico. O humor gera o riso, a decepção, a tristeza" ["Poetry is the child of mystery, but it's also born of humor. Perhaps because humor is mysterious and genesiacal. Humor generates laughter, deception, and sadness"]), and even pastiche, in the poet's skillful manipulation of forms and genres, dynamically

utilizing and transforming these in accordance with expressive necessity.

Nemésio's poetic composition is served by his command of an extraordinarily vast lexicon, which, impressively, he applies with a naturalness that marries ease and precision. His use of diminutives, colloquialisms, and references to the most mundane features of daily life (in this, Nemésio at times recalls Antônio Nobre), is continually counterposed to the highest flights of culture, of erudition, and of abstract, speculative thought (Nemésio: "Eu acho graça quando vejo certos bons servidores da Filosofia fecharem-se ao segredo da Poesia, que a prepare ou que, pelo menos, concita: os que não querem ou não sabem ver, nos ritmos e metáforas do poema, ao menos os primeiros lineamentos da face do mistério, como vêem ou dizem ver o rosto da Esfinge no alinhamento dos conceitos" ["I find it humorous when I see certain good servants of Philosophy close themselves to the secrets of Poetry, which opens the way for it, or at least incites it: those who do not want or do not know how to see, in the rhythms and metaphors of the poem, at least the outlines of the face of mystery, as they see or claim to see in the line-up of concepts the face of the Sphinx"]).

Moreover, Nemésio's poetry is fortified by a sense of insularity, reflected in his multiple (political) affirmations of autonomy, even when these are mentioned in passing:

As furnas são nossas,  
 As pipas de vinho velho são nossas,  
 O leite das tetas que ordenhamos,  
 As pontas com poucos faróis e muita craca,  
 Os caminhos seculares mal calçados.  
 Os chafarizes com um tapete de bosta quente cheiram bem  
 Vamos salvar as Ilhas: Eu tenho lá ossos de Pai e Mãe.

[The caverns are ours,  
 The casks of old wine are ours,  
 The milk of the teats we squeeze,  
 The points with few lighthouses and rich in barnacles,  
 The secular roads badly paved.  
 The public troughs with fresh piles of sweet-smelling dung  
 Let us go save our islands: I have there the bones of Father and Mother.]

Nemésio's vast, wide-ranging cultural understanding complements, or rather, *extends* to, his knowledge of professions other than his own, and an appreciation for traditional, popular modes of production and culture. This appreciation extends to traditional literary language and forms (Nemésio: "o esquecimento do pouco folclore orgânico que tínhamos, a arcaização dos romances e das xácaras, a decadência da vida popular colectiva deram à quadrinha ou cantiga um poder de improviso que faz dela uma espécie de lâmpada de bolso, qualquer coisa de pronto e rápido que nos faz companhia" ["the forgetting of the little organic folklore that we had, the archaization of the ballads and ditties, the decadence of collective popular life lent the popular copla or song a power of improvisation that makes of it a kind of pocket lamp, something ready and quick that keeps us company"]), which are much less naive than they appear. See, for example, the following verses:

Uma cadeira de pau, flor dos dedos do Avô  
 —Polimento, esquadria, engrade, olhá-la ao longe—  
 Dava assento a Florália, o meu primeiro amor.

[A rough-hewn wooden chair, flower of Grandpa's fingers,  
 —Polish, square shape, rails, looking at it from a distance—  
 Was the seat for Florália, my first love.]

and

Que a vergonha no Alentejo  
 De fome pede alegria:  
 Recantada só a vejo  
 Nas pinturas da Pavia.

[Shame in Alentejo  
 Of hunger fashions joy:  
 But I only see it resung  
 In the paintings of Pavia.]

Nemésio's impressions from his travels constitutes one of his habitual modes of writing (his travel writing culminates in the series *Andamento Holandês*), and find their way into *Sapateia Açoriana* after its first edition. But

how can we speak of a “habitual mode” for a poet like Nemésio, who always finds new ways to surprise us? What can a brief, incomplete reflection such as this say of the *poiesis*, of the *pleasure of creation*, of the youth and maturity, of the tenderness and the eroticism, of the guardedness and abandon, of the captivity and the freedom, of a poet who, at seventy-five years of age, presented his readers with *Pedra de Canto*, one of his best writings, published in *Colóquio/Letras* 35?

Also worthy of mention is Nemésio’s preoccupation in *Sapateia* (as in the earlier *Limite de Idade*) with applying scientific knowledge to life’s problems, to the experience of old age, and to the anticipation of death. We learn the following of this “Morte pensada” (the title of the volume’s penultimate poem, of incredibly rich expression and implication—not only poetic):

Experimentei a morte na cabeça  
(No coração, só se ele parasse).  
Mas, por mais que a conheça,  
Não se pensa a Morte: dá-se.

[I experienced death in my head  
(In the heart, only if it stopped).  
But, as much as I may know it,  
Death isn’t thought: it’s given.]

The burning intensity of religious feeling, which in Vitorino Nemésio represents the experience of an ardent humility, likewise marks his anticipation of death, prolonging one of the central themes of his poetry. On this point, see Nemésio’s pronouncement:

Com que torrentes de fogo me visitas,  
Senhor!

[With what torrents of fire do you visit me  
Lord!]



\*

Having made my argument, and discounting its potentially bombastic or questionable features, I would like to conclude by saying that I consider Vitorino Nemésio to be a poet at least as great as Fernando Pessoa. In seeking to ground this opinion, I would add that I do not much like Pessoa, though I recognize his great worth as a poet. And in heading off the anticipated protests, I would explain that my lack of general attraction to Pessoa does not preclude me from very much enjoying certain moments in his work.

It is certainly true that Pessoa has acquired the status of a master of poetic sensibility (I doubt the same could be said of his thought), and that Nemésio is far from reaching this level of public recognition. Of course, Pessoa's stature may be a reflection of the sensibility and intellectual capacity of the generations that have venerated Pessoa, as groups possessed of discursive prolixity, though otherwise relatively limited perspective, and above all (and at least according to them), engaged by the logical games and the language of Pessoa-himself (though this does not account for their attraction to Caeiro, a much different poet), and attracted to Reis's self-consciously Horacian decadence and to Álvaro de Campos's futuristically dated, though nonetheless critically sanctified, violence.

I will end here with my thoughts on the drama of Pessoa's heteronyms and of his readers, though I should add that Pessoa has been (and continues to be) much more widely published and popularized than Nemésio. Further, Pessoa, much more than Nemésio, lived a revolutionary moment in literature. If this constitutes a fair evaluation of Pessoa and Nemésio's respective historical importance, we cannot evaluate their relative greatness as poets in this way, in qualitative terms. I can guarantee that when Nemésio elicits readings and interpretive work of equal intensity to those dedicated to Pessoa, that the many ideas this generates will reverse the common wisdom that currently subordinates Nemésio to Pessoa. I only hope that God spares Nemésio the devotional fervor that Pessoa has been unable to escape.

## Note

This essay was originally published in Vasco Graça Moura, *Várias Vozes* (Lisbon: Presença, 1987) 53-79.

Vasco Graça Moura (Oporto, 1942) is a Portuguese writer, translator, politician, and, in his own words, "man of action." Among his books are the collections of poetry *Modo Mudando* (1963), *Instrumentos para a Melancolia* (1980), and *Antologia dos Sessenta Anos* (2002); essays *Luís de Camões: Alguns Desafios* (1980) and *Sobre Camões, Gândavo e Outras Personagens* (2000); and works of narrative fiction *Quatro Últimas Canções* (1987), *Meu Amor Era de Noite* (2001), and the novel *À Sombra da Magnólia* (2004), which won the 2005 Fiction Prize of the Portuguese Association of Writers. As a celebrated translator, Graça Moura is noted mainly for his translations of Dante, Shakespeare and Racine into Portuguese. Following a long public career as a lawyer, vice-minister in two governments, administrator of RTP (Portuguese state television channel), and director of the publishing house Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, Graça Moura currently serves in Brussels as a member of the European Parliament for the Social Democratic Party-People's Party.

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