

Ruy Cinatti's Timor

Urgent Purpose

What aches is seeing the poor
squalid Timorese drinking
water from swamps,
where waste flows,
eating dust
and greeting me, as
I roll down the road,
indolent god.

So, so many others,
squalid Timorese,
see me as if bound
to bury seeds
for a supper ...
of rice, corn and meat,
to fill empty glasses
with drunkenness and dream,
that numbs pain,
thrashes indolence,
revives time.

To flee is better than to promise
hope of better days.

To flee is to delay
the last soliloquy

Propósito Inadiável

O que magoa é ver o pobre
timorense esqualido beber
agua do pântano,
onde se escoam lixos,
comer poeira
e saudar-me, quando
rodo na estrada,
deus ocioso.

Tantos e tantos mais,
timorenses esqualidos,
olham-me como se dever fosse
abrir covas,
plantar repasto ...
de milho, arroz e carne,
encher copos vazios
de bebedeira e sonho,
que não magoe,
mortifique o ócio,
reanime o tempo.

Fugir é melhor que prometer
A esperança em melhores dias.

Fugir é atrasar
o discurso limite

stalled by the wheels
of manic indecision.

I promise nothing.
I invoke the hills
bruised by the light,
the sea that surrounds me
in Dili, tedious land of vile people.

I tune myself to the
clean timbre of the souls
of the squalid Timorese
who cipher me to life.

And I carry on,
clean in soul and in face,
subject to the condition that re-
deems me.
The Timorese will only be right
when they kill me.

travado pelas rodas
De dúvida maníaca.

Eu não prometo nada.
Invoco os montes
feridos pela luz,
o mar que me circunde
em Dili, terra tédio e de má gente.

Afino-me pelo timbre
limpo das almas
dos esqueléticos timorenses
que me soletram vivo.

E sigo,
limpo na alma e no rosto
sujeito à condição que me redime
Os Timorenses só terão razão
quando me matarem.

—First published in
Uma Sequência Timorense 41-42.

In the land of Nári-Lautem

Part of us,
the morning bustle.
Part of us
the crisp harmony of roosters
with wings spreading
above the tombs.
The crisp sunlight
that would rub clean the eyes
of children stumbling into the day.

Part of us
also, and wise,
the ways of the old.

And now, only
the cemetery remains
by decayed houses.

Only the dead never died,
In Nári, a land like ours.

Em Terras de Nári-Lautem

De gente,
o bulfício matutino.
De gente
belo o acorde dos galos
abrindo as asas
por sobre os túmulos.
Belo
o sol que limpava
os olhos das crianças
que tropeçavam no dia.

De gente
também, e sábio,
o pensar dos velhos.

E só ficou
o cemitério jacente
às casas que apodreceram.

Só os mortos não morreram
em Nári, terra de gente.

—First published in
Uma Sequência Timorense 46.

Ruy Cinatti (1915-1986) remains arguably the most compelling foreign commentator on Portuguese Timor, in any genre. Son of a diplomat born in London and brought up in Lisbon, by the time he first departed for Timor in 1946, Cinatti was already a pillar of his generation's poetry scene in Portugal. His arrival in the colony was characterized by his shock at the total devastation caused by World War II. Even during his first trip to Timor as a Dili-based administrator, Cinatti developed a sense that the Timorese were "more than simple, exotic figures in an already exotic landscape" (qtd. in Stilwell 186). In his subsequent stays in the 1950s and again in the 1960s, Cinatti developed an unshakable sense of kinship with the Timorese, made manifest by the two blood oaths he took with Timorese *liurai* in Loré and Lacló. Training in Anthropology at Oxford in the early 1960s lent a new, academic perspective to his profound relationship to the Timorese people. Cinatti was in his lifetime very silent about his affective relationships, but given what little information we do have, it seems undeniable that part of Cinatti's enchantment with Timor was that in that non-Western milieu he was freer to feel, on his own terms.

His poetic works on Timor draw on not only his vivid experiences there as an administrator, agronomist, and anthropologist but on a profound concern for emotional and spiritual matters. A Catholic humanism served as a muted basis for his constant questioning of his personal role, and country's role, in Portuguese Timor. Preceding what Carolyn Forché would later name a "poetry of witness," he illustrates the painful ambiguities of colonialism, but more generally, of the north-south encounter. His discomfort towards a foreign presence, and its "mission," in the midst of third-world structural violence, remains highly relevant in the post-colonial era.

The poem "Urgent Purpose" stands out in this respect. The poem is quite frontal, suggestive of the profound poverty that moved Cinatti and that he moved through. When striving to fully understand Cinatti's intent with this poem, the ambiguity of the third line of the second stanza "see me as if bound" is pivotal. Who is bound? Cinatti seems to challenge the reader here, but we believe he implies that what follows are the Timorese expectations of him, as he passes through their lives, as an "idle god." Seen from this point of view, in this stanza the tenth line "Thrashes indolence" suggests then that the colonized are in fact waiting to be violently spurred into action. And so while the poem ends with the colonizer's most violent, masochistic sentiment, Cinatti has included the analogous sentiment, a masochistic wish of the colonized to be abused into action.

To accompany “Urgent Purpose,” we chose the lesser-known “In the Land of Nári-Lautem” because it is more representative of the body of Cinatti’s Timor poetry on the whole. It is a compassionate portrait of Timorese humanity and their world-view, where the landscape is never excluded from view. We began to regard this poem as Cinatti’s “Ozymandias.” Using a subtle shift in tense mid-poem, the reader realizes Cinatti is portraying an abandoned site as alive, paying tribute to the Timorese cosmological notions of the unity of the dead and the living. Unlike Shelley, Cinatti is not attempting to remove the Timorese from an orientalist tableau; to the contrary, he is urging the reader to feel a kinship with the people of Nári. Here the poet is able to convey to the reader the silent, resilient beauty of Timorese culture without objectifying or freezing it in a romantic past.

In this concise poem, Cinatti displays his gift for word-play, which unfortunately is simply too difficult to translate into English. Between lines 3 and 4, we notice Cinatti uses a strange formation—“De gente / Belo o acorde dos galos”—why the definite article after the rather bland adjective “belo”? From very early in the Portuguese presence on the island of Timor, *Belo* or *Belos* was the term the Portuguese used to describe the inhabitants of the east. (The word comes from the Tetum word *belun*, meaning friend.) And so the lines take on a double meaning, with “De gente Belo” lurking as a reward to the attentive.

Cinatti had a distinct style and choice of subject matter in relation to his peers, and he stands out in twentieth-century Portuguese poetry. Yet the sad fact is, while Cinatti is not out of print in Portugal, his poetry is quite hard to come by. Two collections of written documents and images from Timor have been made available in recent years. Cinatti’s documents and journals, organized by Stilwell, remain at the João Paulo II Library of the Catholic University of Lisbon, and the National Museum of Ethnology possesses film and photography produced by Cinatti in the 1950s.

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