

**Antero de Quental. *A Poesia na Actualidade*.
Intro. Joaquim-Francisco Coelho. Vila do Conde:
Centro de Estudos Anterianos, 1999**

George Monteiro

This book—a handsome production—reproduces in transcription and facsimile the holograph copy of Antero de Quental's 1881 essay "A Poesia na Actualidade" from the papers of Joaquim de Araújo now in the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice. It includes as well Joaquim-Francisco Coelho's graceful and informative introduction.

Asked to review Joaquim de Araújo's *Líra Intima*, Antero responded with an essay on the state and fortunes of modern Western poetry. Locating its beginnings among the shepherds of ancient Israel, he traces its development to its apogee in the Renaissance, and laments its becoming a diminished thing ever since. It is the rise of analytical science in the nineteenth century that has brought poetry down, reducing it to an ever more unsatisfactory expression in the small voices of individuals, of the ever-secluded self. This has been the story of poetry from the pre-Romantics and Romantics, including that proto-Decadent, Edgar Allan Poe (whose story, "The Assignation," Antero translated in 1864) and his first European translator, Charles Baudelaire, to the Decadents of Antero's own day. Diminished to throbbing subjectivity, poetry faces extinction.

E àquela voz sarcasticamente desesperada [Heine's] respondiam outras: Baudelaire, em França, prostituindo a poesia, a antiga inspiradora da virtude e do heroísmo, e obrigando-a respirar as pestíferas *flores do mal* e a cantar o vício incurável, a maldade impenitente—e, além dos mares, na América democrática e cientificamente brutal, Poe assentava o Desespero no sólio sagrado, a repetir num sonambulismo de tédio incurável, de tédio infinite, o sue estribilho de morte: "Never, oh, nevermore!"

As Antero probably knew, Poe had also complained, in the face of what he took to be historical fact, that the smothering triumph of rational, analytical, scientific thought had dis-empowered those poets who had

hitherto enjoyed a substantial purchase on the expression of religious-mythic truths. In "Sonnet to Science," published in 1829, he cried out:

Science! True daughter of Old Time thou art!
 Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
 Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,
 Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?
 How should he love thee? Or how deem thee wise,
 Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
 To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
 Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?
 Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
 And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
 To seek a shelter in some happier star?
 Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,
 The Elfin from the green grass, and from me
 The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Himself anticipated by the Poe who complains that the poet's privileged mythicizing faculty has been severely superseded by the successful rise of rational and analytical science—though not by the Poe who reveled in the ratiocinative tale as well as the analytical criticism of the poetic process—Antero singles out those who, like Poe, responded to the powerful changes resulting from the rise of scientific thought, without allying himself to them. In his recognition that the "irrational, decadent" voices that have responded to the triumph of scientific thinking are morally reprehensible, however, Antero anticipates the attacks of those like Max Nordau, whose attack in *Degeneration* (1893) is based on esthetic and moral dictates rather than the principles of reason and science. Championing the production of traditionally rational art—especially in poetry, drama, and fiction, but even in music—Nordau wages war on all those irrational, decadent, and "insane" artists, suggesting that their very existence poses a deathly threat to the continuation of Western art.

Strangely, neither Nordau nor Antero was much taken with Walt Whitman. Nordau attacks him directly, calling him a "mad," "morally insane, and incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, virtue and crime." Always insisting that art be moral, Nordau affirms that "it does not occur to

any reasonable man of the present day to demand of poetry the teaching of scientific truths, and for generations no serious poet has thought of treating astronomy or physics in a didactic poem." He has no use, apparently, for Whitman's grand poetry celebrating the large universal virtues and truths of democracy and the common man.

Antero, on the other hand, whether disdainfully or simply out of ignorance, makes no mention of Whitman. Still, the American poet aside, Antero seems to have been largely right about the future of that Western poetry that has continued to matter. Confronting what are essentially the same determinant conditions that faced Antero, twentieth-century poets have found it increasingly difficult to consider poetry to be a creditable medium for voicing humankind's large truths.

To say that poetry's "great" voice has over the last century or so grown completely silent, as Antero predicted, may be an exaggeration. Still, it may not be misleading to say that poetry has probably not, during that period, managed to regain its once privileged position in human affairs with its concomitant power to address humankind's large general truths. Twentieth-century attempts to regain that power, especially in the efforts of poets whose first work established them as Modernists, have been especially instructive. To what extent they have succeeded in restoring to poetry the privileged voice seems to depend largely on any given reader's ideology or predilections. T. S. Eliot, for example, having produced in 1915 the decadent complaints of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," put together the fragmented prophecies of *The Wasteland* in 1922 as preparation, it now seems, for "Ash Wednesday" and *Four Quartets*, personal poems of affirmative religious-mythic thought and feeling; Hart Crane, reacting against the nay-saying voice of Eliot's *Wasteland*, produced *The Bridge*, an arrangement of otherwise free-standing pieces intended to be the epitomizing expression of a nation's ethos.

When we turn to Antero's Portuguese successors, we find the story to be much the same. Similarly, there have been notably ambitious efforts to recuperate the lost "great" voice of poetry. As the all but self-identified "supra-Camões," Fernando Pessoa produced *Mensagem*, a collection of lyrics and elegies that look back generically and historically to Portugal's role in the Renaissance. Miguel Torga's *Poemas Ibéricos* attempts to recover the great historical past and its virtues, the waning and virtual disappearance of which is already registered in Camões.

The publication under review presents itself as the most local and modest of tributes to Antero. Nevertheless, it also serves to remind us that Antero's thinking was always passionate, never more so, in fact, than when he was dissecting the literary and spiritual currents of his and, as it has turned out, our age as well.