

Between Time and Heaven: The Mysterious Laws of João Miguel Fernandes Jorge's Poetry

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Abstract. The poetry of João Miguel Fernandes Jorge is a continuous attempt to grasp the spirit of the place: a poem is what is retained by the poet after his travels around the world. Avoiding the trap of simply describing his journeys, the poet creates images that reshape historical and geographic realities, that is to say, in his own poems he goes beyond his mere physical presence in a place to find the mysterious laws of poetry. In his poems, he builds homes for the gods so that they will strengthen his words and images. Since the gods know the mysteries that poets want to translate into poetry, the poet follows them, enters the deep sea, searches among ruins, overhears enigmatic dialogues, and travels around the world like an ancient oarsman.

Sometimes we read a poem and are astonished by its clarity, its familiar tone, by the straightforward logic that pervades it. There is a four-line poem by the Portuguese poet João Miguel Fernandes Jorge (born in 1943) that seems to follow this *raison d'être*:

"Where would you like to die?"

"In Venice, like Pound."

And now how can I write a poem
after this story?

The dialogue appears so trivial that we are not immediately aware that it hides a much more profound question: how can we choose the place of our death? Is death something we choose, like we choose a poet from the bookcase to read at night? Is death a catalogue that we can use to choose a place to die, so that we may answer "in Lisbon," like Pessoa, "in New York," like Whitman, or at "Field Place, Sussex," like Shelley? The singularity of this poem is that a place is the place of poetry and that the death of Pound enhances Venice as a place. Who is supposed to be the chronicler of such a trivial wish? An anonymous passerby who aspires to be eternally connected to Venice and poetry? The answer most certainly is: the poet himself. The poet is the ghostlike being whose function it is to overhear the dialogues hovering about him. Sometimes we have the impression, as we have in this case, that the inquiry coincides with the poem—what is the point of knowing how to start a poem when the poem is already written? The poem is half-written as soon as the poet eavesdrops on a conversation, or when he has a conversation with someone he does not bother to identify. These beginnings or starting points are the crucial elements of Fernandes Jorge's *ars poetica*, and so the poem revolves around names, places, and more or less cryptic stories.

The cryptic tone of this poem is conveyed by its title: "Antonello." Another name. Antonello, a famous Italian painter (1430-1479), was not from Venice. Neither was Pound. Antonello, however, did not die in Venice. What mysterious law is the word "Antonello" supposed to reveal? One thing is certain: the mystery of the title matches the subject matter of the poem. For now we have to divine the spirit that connects these bodies or parts. Antonello was from Massina, in Sicily. Pound was from Hailey, Idaho. Fernandes Jorge is from Bombarral, Portugal. There are two important places that link these three figures: Venice, on the one hand, and the poem whose title is "Antonello." The Italian painter spent some years in Venice and influenced the development of Venetian painting. Pound died in that Italian city, adding his poetic *persona* to that already mythical place. As for the Portuguese poet, he tries to overcome his belatedness by uniting his name and poetry both with those two monumental figures and with the history of Venice. Antonello impressed the Venetians with his artistic virtuosity, by creating forms with color rather than with the usual lines. Fernandes Jorge tries to grasp or evoke the place enriched by the painter and the American poet. His virtue lies in his poem and the fact that he seemed to be in the right place at the right time. In this sense, "Where would you like to die? / In Venice, like

Pound" is for him what "In the room women come and go / talking about Michelangelo" was for Eliot. Like Eliot, he was there to capture the dialogue or invent more or less frivolous characters, that is to say, to impress by means of his poetic virtuosity. If Eliot imitated Laforgue, Fernandes Jorge imitates the spirit of the place.

As a poem as short as "Antonello" shows, Fernandes Jorge's oeuvre is a sort of poetic palimpsest, to the extent that he assembles his work over the already trodden path of other minds. More properly, a poem is made of names and places that acquire a particular meaning because they are evoked by the poet, because it is the poet who sees everything. It is his point of view that exerts a pull on the images and reshapes historical and geographic realities. A poem is, therefore, an overlapping of figures and places; it is what is retained by the poet after his travels around the world, after avoiding the trap of simply describing his journeys. The work of the poet consists in going beyond his mere physical presence in a place. This is, furthermore, his fate, as he confesses in another poem ("Chronicle, chapter III"):

[...] And we are nevertheless condemned
to live forever beyond our existence
and the mobile reasons of the kingdom.
We are condemned

as it would be useless to put up doors to contain the sea.

.....

We have a body and we are not body
a soul a freedom and we are not soul
or freedom. All of this is body soul freedom
and what we invent discover defend.

Although Pound died in Venice, even there he too was condemned to live beyond his existence, that is to say, in poetry. Both Pound and Antonello were condemned to live in Fernandes Jorge's poetry—the latter's freedom, or fate, is to invent a situation that becomes a poem, the discovery of a place where he is able to defend the existence of a dead painter and a dead poet beyond the fact of their existence.

The poet travels and by doing that he establishes his own place. Between what is hidden to him and what he exposes, there is the place of poetry. As

Almada Negreiros affirmed, man “was condemned to Poetry. He was condemned to create his own place. His ‘where.’” In effect, Fernandes Jorge’s magic place, from “where” he discovers and invents, may sometimes be an anonymous hotel room, but his place par excellence is at an ordinary table in a coffee shop from where he sees uncountable solitary men who become the privileged interlocutors of his vagueness of thought. From coffee shop to coffee shop, the poet intertwines the reality of his inner nature, always in motion, always creating news and unexpected paths, with the reality he sees in front of him. Seated on a chair, he broods over his youth while he flips through a newspaper or plays with a piece of lemon peel in his fingers as he observes other customers. This Epicurean-like attitude, as it were, is one of the central elements of his poetic travels, for, as he acknowledges, “I am the one who leaves and is always / happy / only because I can put my hands on the table in a coffee shop” (“Olcott Hotel, 8”).

His dreams, his inventions are, consequently, the point of view of his spirit, although it is important to point out that the oneiric part of his poetry is nothing but the amalgamation of chunks of reality. So, when the poet travels, he searches for the meaning of his displacement—everything he sees, experiences, or reads is hidden in a dream-like penumbra, as we can see in the opening dialogue in “Antonello.” His task is to reconcile the banality of reality with the (imaginary or real) heroes that haunt the place he visits. It goes without saying that both this reconfiguration and the revisitation of the cultural past only occur when the poet asks himself how he can write a poem with this material. There is a daydream-like atmosphere that makes him jump from one place to another, stranger place, but the dream, the mental wandering, is deeply rooted in reality. In Fernandes Jorge’s poetry, there is too much reality. I venture to say that, for him, dreams are an intrinsic part of reality, all the more so because he is able to look at his dreams from the outside or, as he says in “Twelve Nocturnes of Ceuta, 3”: “I always liked to see the way dreams function.” All things considered, the poem may be permeated by relatively obscure references, but there is always a hint—a word, a sentence, a name—that permits us to elaborate on it. The poem may take us to winding roads and African nights, to impossible dreams, but it always brings us back to our daily reality. It brings together geographically, culturally, and historically shadowy regions; yet, those experiences are used to test the reality of the place that the poet uses as a point of departure. This poetry superimposes matter-of-fact and mysterious elements, and that is the reason

why the poet lives beyond his existence, for his poetry articulates mutations and events that go beyond his kingdom, worlds that are dispersed within his mind. We, too, are invited to discover those places, and our guides are the suggestions and the reverberations we find in the poem, that is, the “secret voice” that travels with “the boat that came from Persia / loaded with odors / and touched the ruin of the earth” (“The Place of the Well, XVII”).

The boats from Persia are the sentences the poet writes, with more or less legitimacy, in the middle of the night in a hotel room. In the morning, some of those sentences may form a poem. This experience is described in poem XXV of “The Place of the Well”:

When one night you told me
 I was a lost soul
 because I only dreamt of Autumn
 leaves and the tumult of voices
 from times forgotten and an echo carried me
 to abandoned senses, to gloomy rooms and
 to a sea of ruins
 then I understood the heart of an errant
 who cannot hate and goes on
 after walking for days without
 catching even the glimpse of the shadow of a tree, goes on
 castaway
 singing hurt rhymes of love.

This is Fernandes Jorge’s *ars poetica* par excellence. It is an enigmatic dialogue between the poet and someone else, an interlocutor who frequently appears in his poems. This doppelganger does not have a name, remaining anonymously in the shadows, as if he were an invention of the poet himself, another imaginary element arising from the poem, that is to say, from the poet’s wanderings. The night covers both the dreams and the echoes that take the poet to dark rooms, unusual ideas or, to use an image Fernandes Jorge often employs, to a “sea of ruins”—this sea of ruins is where the remote past meets all the voices that provide the poet with a myriad of meanings. That time was abandoned but can be revisited, was forgotten but still sends echoes that permit the poet to wander over the sea of ruins. Water and the sea are themes that pervade Fernandes Jorge’s poetry, for they are a privileged

“where” from which the poet contemplates and scrutinizes the remains of lost meanings. That someone tells him that he goes from gloomy rooms to a sea of ruins only makes him put on another mask: he is now a harmless wanderer who travels ceaselessly during the day, singing love songs, like a castaway on a distant, forgotten island. After all, he is the dreamer who is attracted by the melancholy sight of autumn leaves and ends up identifying himself with someone whose only and final destiny is to sing love songs. He was saved from a shipwreck only to become a component of the landscape of the poem, that is, he is another ruin in the sea, living there beyond his existence.

What we can see in the above poem is that, as in “Antonello,” an apparently inconsequential dialogue is written and conceived as poetry. The poet chronicles what he sees and hears and by doing this he is, at the same time, telling the reader the way he wanted the poem to be. And we have good reasons to believe that the way he wants the poem to be is the way the poem is actually written. Its lines are conceived in remote and anonymous hotel rooms; they bring to light experiences and voices with which we are not familiar, but the clear will of the poet helps them to reach us, or, more properly, lets us know that he was in a specific place at a precise moment. Put differently, the poet wants us to see him as a witness of a particular state of mind and also to note that the mental and physical landscapes he has taken hold of can be described with a certain splendor. His ambition is to reach all places and all times and we, his readers, are included in these categories—we are the place and the time of the poem. In “By David Hockney,” after a pair of lines whose meaning the poet himself considers to be lost, he interrogates: “[...] I don’t know what the meaning is / of beginning a poem with these lines.” Apparently, we are supposed to agree with him, all the more so because we feel we are his interlocutors. Be that as it may, this outlandish world of poetry seems to be built upon doubts. Trivial doubts, for they are the doubts that emerge from daily experience, which is the most fantastic of the ruins. That the poet hears stories and writes them in the form of legends or enigmas only adds to his stature as chronicler or, as he asserts in another poem, “the poems are flags // signaling on a map the places I have been to” (“The Knight from Amares”).

Like the mythic oarsmen that used to cross the oceans from shore to shore, the poet travels in a boat to bridge past and future: “Qualified to interpret the past / the flight of the birds gives them the future. / The oarsmen had the gift of prophesy” (“Study for Oarsmen and Words”). If there is something these oarsmen/poets believe in, it is History. Each poem is a return from

History, a time made of memory and dreams. And each moment of the future is a repetition of the past. Their secret mission is to be the keepers of the treasure that is hidden in History, something that makes them go beyond History. The hymns they sing, be they about real or imaginary characters, help them to reconfigure their own history, because there is no memory without both an unreal turmoil and the awareness that the starting point for this temporal adventure is the solitary space of a hotel room. Hence, the poet is the voice of the past, but his voice is subtly covered with a shadowy aura, precisely because it materializes from his memory—it is his memory that gives shape to the memories of his characters. As a result, the figures of the past, when seized by the memory of the poet, become a combination of nostalgia and dislocated historic vigor; consequently, memory is also the silence and the shadow of the place where the past is evoked as a sea of forgetting, as we can see in this short poem included in *By the Sea in June*:

This year the summer crossed
Lisbon. The summer was invisible.
It crossed the city and the others
it took from my body
memories of your name.

What the poetry of João Miguel Fernandes Jorge tells us about the past is that it is a time we remember but also forget. In many of his poems, we do not precisely feel the effort to recuperate the time forgotten; instead, we experience the attempt to seize the act of forgetting. This is the poet's belief in History, which makes him spend time with people for whom he is nothing more than an obscure visitor. In a poem, Fernandes Jorge makes King Pedro I of Portugal say "I am alone and I am not sure I am the king" ("Chronicle, XIII"). What we see here is the poet assuming the role of the mental chronicler of the past, in which History is inhabited by ghosts that dwell in abandoned castles. For this reason, the past is not a whole entity but only allusions lying amidst the slender, flimsy sand of History. Poetry suspends time between the vagueness of the past and the future seen as prophesy—the poet has, therefore, to be the apprentice, the "disciple of the time that will never / come back" ("There was a Time in which they went through the Streets of the City"), while he is fully aware that he will end up joining the vagueness of time in a tomb. But the atemporal confusion of historical memories paradoxically

coincides with the passing of time: the faces the poet sees and describes cannot but make him anticipate the centuries that will come and that will turn them into shadows in the past that had been their future. This anticipation, or prophecy, provides the act of remembering with a tone of purity when he describes castles, churches, streets and plazas in old villages, that is, images of a past dead to the present time, a time overthrown by the annoying sound of the pinball machines that will become the ruins of the future. The past is brought to the present by the act of writing the poem, but only birds, small lizards, and beetles subsist in the rocks that were once its glory.

This brings to mind an idea the Italian essayist Roberto Calasso has recently stated, according to which this sort of debt to the ancient world is like a spell that frustrates our ambition to seize the whole of the past. What really oppresses us, something that also especially oppressed Hölderlin, is the notion that the past will never belong to us in its entirety. That is the spell of the past that keeps haunting our relation with kings, angels, and gods. Because of this spell, gods disappeared from literature, but this disappearance, however, contributes to the history of literature: "the gods are fugitive guests of literature. They cross it with the trail of their names and are soon gone. Every time the writer sets down a word, he must fight to win them back." For a certain time, it was not easy to see the gods—but they are around us, although in different forms, as if they chose to let us think they had abandoned us. How can we be certain that the gods are still among us? How can we recognize them? I am convinced that modern mythology can better be grasped in poetry, not as a mere ornamentation, but as the stuff of literature itself. The way Fernandes Jorge invites the gods to his poetic universe has to do with his motivation to apprehend the hidden meanings of History, as well as with his relation with the past: "a god will one day / amplify what we are / with harmony and eternal peace and reward" ("Mozart / Alicia de Larrocha"). This god (or ensemble of gods) is coming, as is noticed by Calasso and by those who read modern poetry. In truth, the gods never left us, but now they "are no longer made up of just one family, however complicated, residing in their vast homes on the slopes of a single mountain. No, now they are multitudes, a teeming crowd in an endless metropolis. [...] The power of their stories is still at work." Poems are the gods' new homes, and they are there to help poets to defeat their enemies, just as the gods used to protect kings before blood-spattered battles. Now they amplify the poet's words as they used to bless the king's sword. And, since gods know the mys-

teries poets want to translate into poetry, the poet follows them, enters the deep sea, searches among ruins, travels around the world like an ancient oarsman, overhears enigmatic dialogues, and is willing to merge several layers of temporal dimensions into one, to go beyond himself, to be somehow more human, like the mythical mariners who have the privilege to know “what happens / in heaven and on earth” (“Ida Lupino by Carla Bley, 11”).

The poet, therefore, puts the gods into the world—they may be traveling incognito in the world, like the poet, but they are scattered across poetry, for poems are the place of their epiphanies, i.e., they are the point of view of heaven. Up to a certain point, the plasticity of the poem coincides with the nature of god to the extent that in both there is a mystery, a dramatic ignorance of the circumstances of human and divine existence. In a certain poem, Fernandes Jorge talks about she-goats and a tempest, about Muslims offended by beauty and the vastness of the universe contained in a synagogue, and then he distances himself from the poem, assuming the point of view of the gods to say that “god is not pleased with this story” (“In Tomar”). As a consequence, the poem may be “an indignation of the gods,” because what really matters is “the magnificent ship between obscure faith and invention.” Calasso alludes to a “mnemonic wave” along which the gods manifest themselves. In Fernandes Jorge’s case, this wave is the journey to a past inhabited by gods:

By god by the god of Cister that God that explodes
by the window is not hiding from you anymore
he navigated with you at night through paths and
dreams. (“Ruy Belo”)

This god is capable of being wild and exploding, but he is also the silent guide of the poet (or the poetic doppelganger, his interlocutor) through remote landscapes and eerie places. God provides the poet with a destiny and the willingness to live the stories of the dreams. Put differently, the poet becomes the “angel of melancholy” who writes about men, the sun, fire, the stars, rivers, water and the sea, in order to preserve in his poems those elements that constitute the adventure of the gods.

The poet lives between the laws of the earth and the order of the gods. A poem may be the earthly sign that confirms that the nature of the poet will never be similar to the gods, but it is also, without any doubt, a robe in which the gods can wrap themselves. A poem cannot aspire to become a god, but it

is thanks to the poem that the gods acknowledge their own perennial nature, something that is inevitably linked with their sense of immortality. Here is a poem called "Wooden Sculpture from the Sixteenth Century":

The father, the son, missing only the holy spirit,
 maybe for this reason this Trinity in the museum of Angra
 emits most passionately an aura of the divine Nazarene.
 The father cradles the son and we can almost hear their conversation
 in a church near the sea—immense is the light in the Jewish
 Port, the blue of its narrow bay, those who travel far
 from their homeland disappear. In the houses, fires are lit. The
 ancient place, its rocks so beloved that the eye
 always comes to rest on them—those who travel afar
 return no more. Death deserves the son, transmitted by
 the father: this is the life that leads to the other life. The ash
 deserves the opposite, the reward for a
 much tattered body: the spirit is absent,
 it was stolen. What remains is the belief in blood and in martyrdom,
 it remains the soul; and holding his son's hand beyond his death
 is the hand of the father, ripping through the gold and green of his robe.
 I see no difference between that and other hand that holds, not
 the punished hand of the son, but a mighty glove. Humiliated and
 distraught; martyrdom and blood are not worth the brief hour of his
 time; light, not blood among wounds and pain and
 the lost eyes of human suffering; see the plurality
 of the world; light, not fire is the keeper of the heart of nature.

The holy ghost is absent and this fact cripples the Trinity—the ghost may be missing from the sculpture seen in the Museum in Angra do Heroísmo, in the Azores, but the spirit is undoubtedly present throughout not only the poem but also in the passionate expression of the Nazarene. Again, the poet himself is another kind of spirit that almost hears this most private of conversations, the one the father holds with the son in a Catholic church near the sea (the poet's strongest ally, as we know), close to the Jewish port—it is from this place that those who have to leave depart, those who will not return. As the father transmits death to the son, which puts him beyond death, those who head off are going to die only to live a different life. That is

the immortality of the gods and the near immortality of the poet. That is the reward for his dispersed, lacerated body. Although the spirit is not present, its function is performed by the soul, which is a ritualized belief in blood and martyrdom. Hence, the hand that links this life with the other world beyond life breaks through an intense and prodigious blend of gold and green. Yet, that hand also merges with the myriads of hands that are both humiliated and distressed. In the end, time is light, pain and human agony, but it is the experience of absence that permits the plurality of the world, the creation of poetry whose nature is the light the poet/god gathers around the world.

The death of the spirit, or the death of God, is the beginning of a new future, because the gods always return, albeit in different forms and wearing new masks. Their light is always accidental:

[...] First
 they announced the death of god—and
 god let himself die. Then
 they killed the king—and the king let himself
 be killed.
 Tomorrow
 what will happen to the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea?
 There will be always someone who sings
 someone who dies in a different manner. ("October, Fall 1993")

It is as if God died to sacrifice himself for poetry, so that the blue of the sea may be always sung. When someone disappears, the blue of the sky becomes brighter, the angels radiate with light, and at night the golden flames of the candles accentuate the bleak color of dead things. After the death of God and the king, the poet acquires an absolute freedom to bring them back in different forms. The multitude of gods revolves around poems, they manifestly contradict each other—by evoking them with his poetic universe, the poet makes them simulate the creation of the world. In this regard, the death of God is, as Calasso believes, like the death of Orpheus, "the primordial scene of all literature."

There is always a world beyond this world as well as signs the poet tries to come to terms with, by setting the poem among obscure ruins. His ideal is to give meaning to the exact place where his trip begins. He realizes he is what he is, but he is also what he is not; he gives life to the amorphous reality he finds in the most inconspicuous places, but he also has to fight with the

instinct of death, the feeling of disappearance that constantly haunts the meaning of the poems. Every now and then, the poem does not restrain him from appropriating someone else's mind, as when he thinks he is a boy who works in the fish market and imagines he is an insect, describing in a clear way the curve of his flight: "he flies the flight of the insect, the sudden noise, the safe / meaning of the trip [...] / Time becomes the spiral flight in the space" ("Ribeira Grande Market"). This is, indeed, a very significant feature in Fernandes Jorge's poetry—the assimilation of the poet to a different body, with a new form, always trying to find a privileged interlocutor. Maybe this is not really different from Friedrich Schlegel's idea that the gods now have different forms. In his seminal essay "Dialogue on Poetry," the German thinker stated that "man, in reaching out time and again beyond himself to seek and find the complement of his innermost being in the depths of another, is certain to return ever to himself." In Fernandes Jorge's poem, this projection of the self is achieved within a certain vagueness, for the poet cannot identify the person he talks with, or, if he can, he simply refuses to do that. Thus, complete integration is never accomplished because, as Schlegel points out, "absolute perfection exists only in death." Fernandes Jorge's poetic persona is in the neighborhood of this perfection, for instance, when he admits his belatedness and sees "Achilles crying your death" ("In Miss Bradbury Tavern").

When the poet seeks absolute communion with the ideal "you"—"But your name during this entire day is my name. And / I don't want any other" ("Pedro")—he may be, to use Schlegel's terminology, giving a new form to the sublime. He seems to aspire to the creative metamorphosis that Schlegel coined as the "symmetry of contradictions." In a certain poem the person he sees as his doppelganger may have been a handsome man with an expressive appearance, while in another the figure that calls his attention is nothing more than a mere silhouette half-hidden in a corner of a bar. But times have changed and so the forms of the gods have also been modified. One thing is certain: now, more than ever, the gods are closer to men, at least to poets, than they have ever been. It is as if the spirits that used to exist in statues and sculptures are now free to run wild in the world. And the poet tries to figure out the laws that govern their movement, something that is crucial for him to maintain a certain "poetic sobriety," as is the case with "Over the Highest Shadow":

I saw him, seated two tables away from mine
in a coffee shop on Avenida de Roma. Dark, very

dark complexion, very straight hair,
finely cut, with
a dark gray suit and a purplishblue sweater
he read with the unmindful attention of someone
who burns the halfhour before a
date, for which he fixed

a blue and brown tie to
his pale gray shirt.
Dressed in this way by Battista Moroni
he left. He was short, broadshouldered.

I did not hesitate. For him I drank my hurried,
much too burnt coffee; and I smoked what remained of my
cigar. I was also in a hurry
because I had quickly burnt the days of my fire.

That man, whoever he was, I saw him
at the forbidden limits of this land
upon the ruins of authority and throne. Without
greeting anyone as he walked

he was the dark shadow that looks much like the solitary
bull that runs away through the mountains of the city.

Again, the site of the apparition is a coffee shop, an anonymous place along a famous avenue in Lisbon. This time, the figure that is the origin and the end of the poem is portrayed with all the details available to the poet (face, hair, suit, shirt, tie). This encounter seems to occur in an idle, timeless setting that even allows the poet to identify the designer of the man's suit. If anything, the poet wants us to be quite familiar with the physical traits of the man. There is, however, something that separates the poet from the individual he describes: while the man reads aimlessly, the poet admits that he is in a hurry, that throughout his entire life he has been running. His life is running out. The appearance of the man instigates a series of thoughts in the poet's mind. Ironically, the one who is in a hurry is the one who stays there brooding over his life. But who is this mysterious being disguised as a

common soul who dwells in an old city? Why was he at the forbidden limits of the earth, assuming a human form, upon the ruins of an unspecified throne? As a black shadow, absolutely indifferent to human beings, he was the mythical bull whose spirit dwells in the highest and darkest paths of the polis. For a brief moment, though, the poem was able to describe him, to outline his bodily form, probably because he was allowed (or allowed himself) to go beyond his outward appearance and place himself above the highest shadow.

In the poem above, the poet tried to be worthy of the greatness of the moment that soon would vanish from his eyes. "All thinking is a divining," wrote Schlegel, and added that "he who could understand his age [...] would understand the earth and the sun." This is, indeed, the kind of mythology that underscores Fernandes Jorge's poetry, a poetry that is transparent to the eye although enveloped in an aura of mystery. The "you" in his poems, be he a king or a man of the working class who is trying to catch a bus to Cais do Sodré, in Lisbon, gives him license to set his impressions in motion, talking about this character as if we all knew one another, as if we had to remember a history that we had already forgotten or, more precisely, as if we were familiar both with the earth and the sun. Be that as it may, the poem is written so that the image of these semi-physical, semi-ethereal beings can be preserved. Yet, the poem also aims to preserve the physical image of the poet and his body that lies in a hotel room and begins a sort of movement or expedition towards his memory and his past. He does not hesitate to imagine himself looking at his former self. He sees himself in the reflection of a window in a train, although he is fully aware of the passing of time, and that the flame of his life is quickly vanishing. In "The Fake," the poet concedes that he knows what shadow and light are, but that he is not really capable of realizing what the soul and the body are:

[...] At that
 moment I looked at myself in a mirror, with a thick
 frame, a solitary mirror in which any face
 can be contemplated forever—my
 face seemed repugnant to me; pale, even
 vile, covered by a dust of anger, short
 and very spiky hair: the eyes could barely
 be seen—there was something evil

that bit my own heart, with a whisper. And
that gave me pleasure [...].

In this poem, a true self-portrait with a mirror, or a double self-portrait, soul and body are a single entity. The poet is incapable of portraying himself without resorting to a negative kind of pleasure, noting that his image cannot be contemplated forever in the mirror. It is as if, for only a short moment, the soul allowed the body to be seen, which his heart experienced as a calm, subtle reward.

What this and other incomplete self-portraits make clear is the absolute inexistence of a perfect image. There is always a kind of noise that impedes the image from being shown in its full splendor. Like the gods, the poet cannot be totally seen, his existence goes beyond the image reflected in the mirror. What the poet observes when he sees himself for an ephemeral moment in the mirror are intimations of his own death, visions of death. For him, death is a slow business; it is the condition of History, of heroes—the death of the latter is the death of the poet, although the death of heroes, brought by oarsmen from distant regions, fuels the poems the poet is willing to devote to the mythical past. Above all, death is for him being alone, among tourists, in a plaza, seated at a silent table, sipping coffee, looking at a blind musician without actually seeing him, mentally wandering from flower to flower in the nearby garden. This is the way his body is reminiscent of ancient monuments covered with sand. Now his body is his boat, his weather vane, his guide: “I continue the navigation descending the absolute / the miracle to have a body and gods” (“Two Pages From London, IX”); his body takes over everything: “Towers, labyrinths, boats / everything was the undulating body. As for me, I / no longer existed” (“Twelve Nocturnes of Ceuta, Four”). This empowerment of the body allows it to be loaded with a cargo of thousands of images and dreams that will transform it into a succession of new and distant bodies, that is to say, of new and different poems.

The symbiosis of the body of the poet (or the body of poetry) with the images he grasps is sometimes so intense and vivid that the poet looks at himself and what he sees is a boat, a beach, a sea. These are indeed aspects extremely crucial for the movement of the poet between different temporal and geographic categories. The sea is like an incommensurable plastic object sustained by ruins, and the blue of the water is the ideal mirror for the poet. What he sees when he looks at this mirror is his body scattered amidst a heap

of ruins—roots of trees, empty bottles, the arm of a doll, or even a David Hume book with the knave of hearts as a bookmark; this type of maritime ruins is the complement of the ruins the poet sees in old castles, convents, fortresses, cathedrals, and palaces. With one foot on the ground and the other in the sea, the poet can configure the poem as a mirage of forts, boats, and kingdoms. His temporal dimension coincides with the existence of the mythical boat, the boat he relies on to show him the way:

I cannot think but about the boat
that is going to take me away.
It is necessary that it leaves quickly
white, crossing the Tagus.

.....

I
Seated here,
a bottle and a glass on
the marble, iron table,
I drink
to a quay, a sun, a river
to the white ship
that is going to take me away.
("Seaweeds and Blue Sea")

In Fernandes Jorge's poetry, sooner or later the reader discovers a boat that is ready to leave.

The mythical sea, with birds, sun, boats, and beaches, is an archetype of a real or invented childhood spent in the southern seas. This archetype evolved and is now the solitary place of the poet. The sea is now a sea of images, an attempt to redeem the present time but also to comfort the navigator who once built his kingdom in the middle of undulating dunes. Again, we remember what Fernandes Jorge makes King Pedro I say: "I am alone and I am not sure I am the king" ("Chronicle, XIII"). The whiteness of memory is counterbalanced by the blue of the present time, and June seems to be the bluest month for the poet, when his sight can reach the vastness of the blue horizon. As Fernandes Jorge writes apropos some photos of Jorge Molder, "blue is burdened with the paths of time, even with those that stay forever in the world of shadows." The abundance of blue contains the circular totality

of heaven and sea. Let it be said in passing that in the sea all the boats are beautiful, each seascape with boats is a powerful element of the transfiguration of the poet's self, seduced by the juxtaposition of water and color. The sea provides the poet with the intimate light that breeds his silence and solitude so that he can imagine the noise and bewilderment of some legendary quay, with white smoke and the smell of fish. Blueness is what makes him pay special attention, in his imagination, to the hands and arms of the oarsmen, who, with their instruments, plough the seas, following the invisible path that leads them to the time of the poet, bringing to him the sea of Herodotus. Most of all, blue is the color of his dreams—in this indeterminate space, the poet is able to go on with his obscure kind of existence, adding more mystery to his mysterious journeys.

By and large, the aim of the trips is to give the poet the opportunity to confirm his dreams, it is a kind of repetition of his experience inside the labyrinth of images. The paradox, however, is that the repetition distorts the original image, because the idea of not knowing one's destiny is more likely to lead us to beauty. The poem "Things of the Countryside and Some Pictures" may shed some light about this idea:

He walked aimlessly.
 He crossed the woods.
 The foggy weather allowed him
 to wander. He did not need
 to go to any place.
 He walked aimlessly
 he lost himself in the fields
 in the water of the night.

What mysterious appeal lies in the water of the night, what kind of fog is this that impels the poet to travel to its heart? About a century ago, Marcel Proust tried to answer a similar question in his essay "Poetry, or the Mysterious Laws." Like Schlegel, who affirmed that both nature and poetry were ruled by sacred mysteries, Proust was convinced that the starting point of the sacred act of poetry, as he defined it, was the private, isolated space of a room. How "sacred and dizzying" the task of the poet is, to use Proust's words, is shown by the wanderer of the poem above when he tells us of his experience in the foggy night. Without knowing exactly what he is looking

for, or what the object of his attention is going to be, the poet gazes both into the night and into himself, waiting for the specific instant when the "tide uncovers the ancient quay" ("The Place of the Well, VI"). This is one of the "exalted moments" Proust talks about. To feel them is to live through the mysterious laws of poetry, or the sacred nature of beauty. When the poet shows us his own place of creation, when he admits that poetry is the interpretation of the past and the future, when he intertwines several strata of time, when he goes beyond himself to reunite his being with the prophets of History, when he describes the new forms of the gods, when he looks at the sea and realizes that what he sees in the blue immensity is his own dreamt-of image, when he does all of this, the poet lets us have a glimpse of the magnified image of his mysterious laws.

Fernandes Jorge's poetry is filled with evocations of mysterious walks through imaginary landscapes, through the extraordinary scenes and the historic worlds imagined by the poet. Each poem is a palimpsest of epochs, figures, states of mind, and other displaced elements. For that reason, it is not surprising that sometimes both the poem and the landscape evoked by it need to be disentangled: "One face came in the evening and asked for your help / to solve the landscape, / confused conglomeration of rough elements" ("Scott Burton"). It goes without saying that this person who inquired about the meaning of the visual scenery is not identified, adding, thus, one more ingredient to the puzzle and the mystery of the poem. But, as was eloquently stated by Antero de Quental, probably the most eloquent of the Portuguese philosophers, "the ultimate mystery of man needs only be *felt*, for it is the self-same mystery of God." This perception may explain the tendency of Fernandes Jorge's poetry to be more familiar with allusions than with categorical assertions, with inexplicable instincts rather than with symbolic missions, with light rather than psychology. The future of the poet is unpredictable, and that is his best legacy to poetry. More than a century ago, Antero summed up this effect of journeying through the mysterious imaginary: "This is the crepuscular empire of feeling, the world of mystery. Holy and blessed mystery. We need only a small light in the distance to see *where* we are going. *How* we will go is the unpredictable aspect of the journey, the drama, the life—it is the soul's sublime surprise." There are always other worlds on the other side of time, dream, and History: there are boats, suns, and seas, there are ineffable lights that guide the poet in his journey, for the other guides that for centuries were sent to the earth from the heavens have also been lost in time. The gods are

now part of the vagueness of the poet's destiny, they are part of the poet's sublime surprise, i.e., they flee over and in the poem.

The gods' new forms make them perform new tasks, but also make them assume new masks. They may even revolve around us in the guise of artists. The luminosity Fernandes Jorge sees in Mark Rothko, for example, puts the painter on the same level as other divine entities. "Rothko's Brown and Grey Series" is a group of eight poems freely inspired by the work of the American painter, with Morton Feldman's musical piece *Rothko Chapel* as a complement. The poet looks at the abstract paintings through a representational perspective, associating them with an ordinary and daily context—"in the middle of the music it is difficult / to stand the light of the coffee" (2)—paying close attention to the visual details of his familiar world as a form of appreciation of the musical work. This is unquestionably one of the most eclectic meditations on abstract painting ever written, because it matches abstraction with trivial aspects and objects, such as pink pants, red fish, gray birds, horses and riders, knives, stars, trees, theatres and wars. Rothko's fields of color are here rendered as chunks of dialogues, small thoughts and impressions, and the large-scale paintings become short, almost pointillist poems, with the sense of the tragic and the sublime conveyed by rhymes of love or dreams, or a dialogue with a fisherman near the Nile, as if the poet wanted to pay homage to the painter by grounding his work in unambiguously lived experiences. To put it differently, Fernandes Jorge looks at Rothko's art and establishes direct associations with his immediate visual experience—"the sad heroes / [...] / cut their fingers with a kitchen knife" (5); as he forms his poetic imagination, he acknowledges that his poetic universe is as infinite as abstract painting, and can be stimulated by the nourishment of other worlds and artistic minds. Feldman's *Rothko Chapel* was itself a brilliant attempt to translate the painter's stasis into music, and its presence in the poem indicates that the poet also takes notice of other heroes through a process of mediation. In this regard, Feldman is the angel, the messenger of the gods. It was Feldman who said that in order to experience Rothko, one has to find a way out of his abstraction. "The total rhythm of the paintings as Rothko arranged them created an unbroken continuity," Feldman said. But, to create the piece, he "felt that the music called for a series of highly contrasted merging sections. I envisioned an immobile procession not unlike the friezes on Greek temples." More drastic than Feldman, Fernandes Jorge goes beyond Rothko's immobility: on a mountain, he says, the ice "changes direction / verses and

prose / horse and horseman" (4), because, while someone has a brown and gray heart, "the body is under the domain of the body" (6).

In the short afterword to *The Stealer of Water*, published in 1981, Fernandes Jorge clearly acknowledges the intense mystery of his poems: "each line is the enumeration of my own evidence. I do not feel responsible for them, but I also know that I cannot ignore them. [...] I am surrounded by a developing kind of truth that has to do with error. [...] I live in the error of those truths; I live in its limits—I shed light on it, I ignore it, I develop it inside my time, I turn it into my subjectivity. [...] my poems know something that I am ignorant of." What this means is that his poetic universe is made of doubts, that is, some indeterminate aspects that do not allow us to immediately identify a given sequence of words. Let us look closely at the first lines of a poem called "The Last":

A painter should never speak because words
are not his field.

What trivial doubts can you do? Doubts.

Let's take, for example, an untidy room

the need to shave and coffee waiting

books everywhere

newspapers from the weekend

the wrinkled pajamas

the rain hitting the windows.

The enigmatic sentence "What trivial doubts can you do?," originally written in English, is the center of this intimate landscape. The poet hesitates, he cannot decide what he should do, he is torn between action and inaction, between his inner motion and the weather outside. His mind is filled with doubts: he lives among them, sees them in his own face, in the coffee cup, scattered among the books and newspapers. As for the painter, the poet is absolutely certain he must remain silent. Words are for poets, and we know that Antonello and Rothko, and also Clyfford Still and Vieira da Silva, among the many others that turn up in Fernandes Jorge's poetry, do not speak in this poetry, because the poet speaks for them—he is the one who is qualified to expand on their doubts. Painters and musicians, as well as princes and seamen, cannot be confounded with the voice of the poet, the one who puts them into his subjectivity. They are like messy newspapers the poet uses

to enliven his art. What is utterly astonishing is that some of the lines of this same poem, "The Last," were included, with slight changes, in a text of art criticism on the photographer Jorge Molder (in *Landscape with Many Figures*). According to this account, the trivial doubts associated with the objects of our daily life only lead to other doubts, to many more doubts. Mystery leads to more mystery. This is nothing but "the shadow of a dream. But I know that what I am saying is not an explanation for the photographs of Jorge Molder." The critic does not explain. What about the poet? Does he explain? Probably not, because a poem only amplifies the act of seeing, not the actual object. Knowing that the perfect image is an ideal, the poet interrogates the image he sees, and this becomes his own evidence, his own reality, his own doubts. To come to the point, his own myth.

Permeated by doubts, poetry is for Fernandes Jorge what mythology was for the ancients. This new mythology comes forward from the ruins that sustain the poet's atemporal sea, from the stories and legends that he overhears in his journey to the daily dreams that help him to divine the point of view of the gods. Moreover, this mythology makes his spirit explode in all directions, from land to sea, from earthly to heavenly time. The remote past is alive again and is mixed up with the chaotic remains of present time, with books and pajamas in an obscure room. Besides, the past is a kind of oracle that shows the poet multiple paths to happiness. That is the reason he writes poems based on legends, avoiding putting them into an emotional nutshell, because the sublime quality of this mythology cannot be contained in emotional glass-cases. The "arabesque of imagination," as Schlegel puts it, is the point of origin of poetry that transports us to "the original chaos of human nature, for which I know as yet no more beautiful symbol than the motley throng of the ancient gods." This horde of ancient gods has now new forms, and they manifest themselves in ways that the poet, a messenger between them and his pagan world, wants to apprehend, all the more so because of his wish to create images of them. If his poems do not have gods and heroes, if there is nothing to mediate between his mysterious imagination and what simply is in the world, then the poet is nothing more than the guardian of a mere discrepancy, of the same void that used to lock the gods within decrepit libraries and onto disintegrating pedestals. When the poet succeeds, however, the reward for him is to be in the company of the real gods: "He wanted to be a god just like the other gods, without mercy. / He deserved the coffee he drank; a simple pleasure between / heaven and sea" ("A Crime Between Várzea and Candelária").

The poetry Fernandes Jorge writes has a voice that speaks, but it also has gods who watch over what is said. Occasionally, these three entities are so entangled that the triangulation of the I, the Self, and the Divine cannot be understood except as a manifestation of the immortality of the poet. His body, as well as his spirit, incessantly shifts from poem to places and mental attitudes. The ambiguity of poetry is also the ambiguity of the role of the poet as the gods' courier, wandering from different temporal dimensions to divine dimensions, as we can see in the poem "Fajã Grande":

I read in Francisco Pimentel Gomes about the
 forty-one fortified areas on Flores
 and Corvo islands. Many were no more than guard
 houses; small forts, batteries, watch-posts, most of them are now
 piles of stones. Next follows the list of
 commanders-in-chief, captains and sergeants, and a bit
 of the tale that connected them to the islands.
 In Fajanzinha, before we arrive at the church,
 just after the small plaza, there is an
 ochre-painted house, with a window hovering about the floor,
 the exterior stairs made of stone.
 At Fajã Grande. The streams tumble down the
 cliffs. They form with the land of Fajã and the sea
 a circular body. Families follow the natural
 movement, creating and destroying themselves: variation,
 instant, mobility: along the hazy
 path and the green darkness, in another century
 and in this one, a fleet boy is the messenger.
 He ran along the difficult foot-path, bringing from the port
 the news of someone who managed to return
 from the not-so-distant America. He receives a silver piece
 for the good news, the messenger who seems constant
 and eternal in his agile run between time
 and heaven. His callused hand accepts the steaming
 mug of coffee, poorly made from toasted fava beans.

The poem begins with the ruins, so old that some of the fortresses now only exist in history books. What is left, a pile of stones, is the remains of

what was once there. There are also the military men who served there, and the poet almost yields to a narration of their stories, their tales. He flees over the old village, Fajanzinha, and sees a church, a plaza, and a house. Surrounding the old village, mountains, the sea, and brooks form a circular body. So far, the voice of the poet is indistinguishable from the voice of the divine being who knows and sees everything. The mythological voice suddenly breaks through, enlightening us about the biological movement of families that are like poems—some are built over the ruins of others, and that constitutes the history of their existence, their ephemeral life. But out of the darkness comes the herald who, like the poet when he tells us the story of this poem, brings the news from one century to the other. Between the Azores and the mythic American lands there is the sea, the privileged element of the poet. And the courier is paid twice for being what he is: a silver coin for his mythical journey and a cup of coffee made from fava beans for his earthly task. Both the rewards and the poem invigorate him, encouraging him to continue on as the eternal, light-heeled messenger between time and heaven. After all, he is a being surrounded by a type of wall that will not perish, and his story is not going to be told by any Francisco Pimentel Gomes simply because his story is the poem, which includes both the past and the historian.

In his ceaseless journeys between time and heaven, the poet also communicates with dead heroes, thus bringing them to the life that is poetry. He has his own dead people to remember, and he sees them in the streets and in the churches, as well as in his memory. His relation with the literary dead is somehow painful on account of the bliss he once shared with them. “The Place of the Well, VII” is a good illustration of this relationship:

IKAPOS. The bookstore; the pine cones and pomegranates painted
on the desk lamp, the milky white glass globe of the ceiling
the portraits of Seferis, Kavafy, Elytis, the
surrealist poet Engonopoulos
the most beloved editions Eliot, Rilke, Lorca

and the dark image of Lello, in Oporto, Guimarães,
Hyperion
when I had a publishing house I left among the books
some photographed faces Sophia, Sena, Agustina, Cesariny
Belo, Cinatti

I lost some of those shadows, others I brought
 along; a painful estate; the books
 I wanted them, in the verses more beauty
 and not the filthy and little left-wing politics or the snotty realistic
 prose; that loss

cost me the feeling of treason
 the scheming of someone who used my name and yours;
 the sentences, in Greek, the variations on a Mexican theme by
 Cernuda, I see them
 inhabiting the pleated robe of wisdom.

These are the literary myths of the poet, which will acquire a new form, for they are part of the life of this poem. What is remarkably important is the idea that, in reality, some of these writers are still alive (e.g., Sophia de Mello Breyner, Agustina Bessa-Luís, Mário Cesariny), which means that, when their names are inserted into the poet's universe, they become invested with new forms; they also become eerie beings, mysterious gods, or shadows. This literary heritage cannot but be a painful, heavy weight—when the poem travels from place to place, from poem to poem, some of the literary relics are left behind while others are carried in his baggage.

History, as well as poetry, has many actors, many witnesses, and Fernandes Jorge uses them to conjure up a certain theatricality, which is another name for the ordered delirium of his memory. When he visits shadowy regions, establishing dialogues with sacred beings half-hidden in the past and behind artistic masks, assuming his role of messenger between sea and myth, time and heaven, the poet crafts poems as eternal miscellany of different eras. Therefore, someone who is seen, still in a coffee shop, in a modern city may be confounded with a "librarian of Alexandria copying *The Laws*, / written by Plato on little wax boards" ("Fed Up With the Others and the World"); on other occasion, Dionysus is seen singing a hymn in the Azorean landscape. The sight of an ordinary person evokes mythical activities and places, and memories of remote, mythological beings are transposed to the present time. There are commonplace activities that endure for centuries, without being lost or forgotten, and this poetry is a physical process that permeates the mystery that bridges different times and different heroes. With the help of the boat of imagination, "time run away from one century to the / other century" ("Twelve Nocturnes of Ceuta,

1"). Each place reminds the poet of another place, each face brings back the memory of another person, real or imagined, who, at a certain moment, came across the poet. Above all, each seascape is a reminiscence of the dreamt life of the poet on his distant, imaginary Olympus. Every moment is an eternal new beginning, an eternal repetition, for "I turn the streets of / Bairro Alto into roads full of caravans leading to the // ports of Syria, to the Persian Gulf, to the sea of Eritrea" ("Actus Tragicus, 21"). And we are here, traveling with him, following his random itinerary, dreaming his dream within a dream, seeing him weaving his immortal plots. His mysteries will be illuminated by the same gods that conceived them: the always absent and always present spirits of poetry.

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