JOSÉ MIGUEL SILVA

(1969 –)



The Portuguese contemporary poet José Miguel Silva (born in 1969) published, until 2017, the following books: *O Sino de Areia* [The Sand Bell] (1999), *Ulisses já não Mora Aqui* [Ulysses Doesn't Live Here Anymore] (2002), *Vista para um Pátio seguido de Desordem* [View of a Patio Followed by Disorder] (2003), *Movimentos no Escuro* [Movements in the Dark] (2005), *Walkmen* (with Manuel de Freitas, 2007), *Erros Individuais* [Individual Mistakes] (2010), *Serém, 24 de Março* (2011) e *Últimos Poemas* [Last Poems] (2017). In 2002 he participated in the anthology *Poetas sem Qualidades* [Poets Without Qualities], organised by Manuel de Freitas. He has also been regularly publishing poems and essays in the magazines *Telhados de Vidro* e *Cão Celeste*. He keeps a frequent presence in the blogosphere writing in *Achaques e Remoques* (https://eumeswill.wordpress.com/), a personal *blog* created in March 2009.

Although José Miguel Silva assumes the "political vocation" of his poetry (*apud* Bonifácio 2011: s/p) and assiduously reflects about the contemporary world, the word *Europe* and its derivatives are almost inexistent in his poetry. Even so, the reader can easily perceive what this author thinks about Europe.

In his second book, *Ulisses já não Mora Aqui*, there is, right in the title, the idea of loss, reinforced by an epigraph by Bernardo Soares, which the author selects to open the first part of the book: "We inherited the destruction and its results". *Ulisses já não mora aqui*, i.e. we live at a time in which there is *no more* space for heroes (nor myths). Without ever explicitly mentioning Europe, José Miguel Silva still includes countless references to Ancient Greece, contrasting a past of values and ideals with a hollow and disenchanting present. The ironic illustration of this opposition is made, for example, in the poem "Colheita de 98" [*Harvest of 98*], in which the poetic subject approximates "Good, Beauty, Truth" [Bem, Beleza, Verdade] (2002: 38) to "a bottle of red mature wine from Ribatejo", bought "yesterday at the supermarket" (*ibidem*). In another epigraph chosen by José Miguel Silva, this one by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, preceding a poem of *Erros Individuais* one can read: "The first

theme of Greek reflection is justice" (*apud* Silva 2010: 22). But justice, José Miguel Silva concludes in another poem ("Lamento e exortação") [Regret and Exhortation], "is an oath written in Esperanto / and the law the hard axis where privilege circulates" (2017: 7).

Therefore, the sole ideal the poet observes nowadays in Europe is that of capitalist profit, in which "only the invisible spirit / of credit cards punctures, rodent, / the nickel of human hearts" (2005: 17). Consequently, the language of economics inserts itself in an obsessive way in many poems, of which "Too big to fail" is one of the starkest examples: "My only fear is that we will wake / the envy of Gods, in Brussels Olympus, / and that Market, the monstrous Titan, decides / to lower to trash, the *rating* of our relation" (2011: 18). José Miguel Silva's vision, actually seems to be in concordance with that of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who in the same year published *O Afável Monstro de Bruxelas* [The Affable Monstrous from Brussels] *or Europa sob Tutela* [Europe under Jurisdiction], essay in which he foresees the "failure" of the European project (*idem*: 68).

On the other hand, in a poem like "Feios, Porcos e Maus — Ettore Scola (1976)" (Silva 2005: 42-43), the poet registers the promiscuity of Portuguese politics (where "only the worst" manage to reach the most important positions), in lockstep with the European reality ("executive director, ambassador in Provence"). And so, "the bumpy bubble of democracy" (Silva 2017: 31) seems to prevail globally: "between the ridicule and a black hole, we choose, / today and yesterday, the elite that represents us so well: / no difference" (2005: 45).

There is not, in José Miguel Silva's poetry, the faith in a Europe united around values like justice, liberty, nor compassion. There is, essentially, ironic pessimism, denunciation of globalisation and capitalism. Cities like London, Paris and New York (*idem*: 54) are equivalent as urban centres where all concerns are, firstly, economic. Accordingly, Europe is, for the poet, mirror of a selfish world where "compassion [is] reduced / to the complacent taste of a cheap liberality" (2010: 22) and where the apocalypse is materialised as a more plausible future reality: "While we omitted limits, / disguised as a unbridled titan / we celebrated the stain of progress / and oil for lunch (thinking / that we ate Portuguese stew!) / entropy

entered the scene and declared, / emphatically: «The fun is over»” (2017: 41).

Brief Anthology

Darkness

And the worst is calling freedom

To a mat that, rolling, does not listen anymore

To our feet’s opinion, taking us

where we concede, aloof

to the mechanical designs of power.

We breathe padlocks, we consume

injustice, the two of us go around several times

the smiling tourniquet that we use as

a hat permutating the head

for a plate of aspirins.

The life classics with no sadness

nor remorse (Cinderella, Varadero,

off-shore) illuminate the scenery where

we sleep, innocent as bullets,

and I do not even know how we are not happier.

To the centre of hell, we drive

this son, this car's son, captive

of the conquered right to deliver

our days, like cattle,

to the chopper of unfaithful dispatches.

To live, in this siege, is a question

of extending discouragement: we seal

a suicidal door, undo

the tie, give thanks when the ice

in the drink slowly melts.

If we look at the floor, the horizon

disappears, if we look at the sky

we get lonely. I do not understand how we laugh

when they ask to pose for the family

photo. Somebody fooled ourselves.

Confused by the outbreak of lie,

Auctioned by the last hypnosis,

grafted onto the peduncle of death,

tell me if these faces of crumpled cardboard,

if this soul mirrors a stony field,

if these feet grow fond the thorn,

if this that we see is a man.

in Ulisses já não Mora Aqui (2002: 18-19)

***Down and Dirty* — Ettore Scola (1976)**

At fourteen they buy the first tie

with the colours of the party that deceives them best.

at fifteen they show off in the congress

of the youth organisation, follow the rank and file caravan, they cheer

or jeer according to the leaderships' frowns, they experiment

the ball of the students' federations.

Always willing, always ready,

For the post-combat cleaning chores.

These are called the training years. There they learn

To set the gesture, to interpret humours,

To lie honestly, there they learn of

the words' lightness, to choose the wine, to froth

with a smile, the yes and the no

when appropriate. At twenty they already know,

by scent, the charisma of some, the minor worth

of others, while they pursue vague studies

in Law or Economics. Afterwards, they start

using the membership card: the first

positions in sight, there is groundwork ahead,

one needs to undermine, to demine, to intrigue, to unite.

Only the worst can overcome this phase.

There are others who go the city council way, those who prefer

the public administration — all depends on the shrewdness

or the sponsorships you have, or not.

At thirty-two is the moment to start

integrating the lists, preferably in an electable

position, always placing lowness above everything else.

Once in Parliament, anything can happen:

Manager of a county company, coordinator of,

a minister's advisor, minister, commissar or

executive-director, ambassador in Provence,

chairman of Caixa**, or PT**, or PQP and, further ahead

(jubilee and the corollary of a solvent career),

the *golden-share* of a chair at the sunset.

At the end, for the more obstinate, there can be

A street name (with or without a statue)

and panegyric flowers, bombards, formaldehyde fanfares.

in Movimentos no Escuro (2005: 42-43)

Too big to fail

How can such a reliable investment

guarantee this growing return, in a

daily distribution of kisses and other gains,

and, to top it all, tax-free?

Although I trusted your competence

to create value, I confess I did not expect

this much when I decided to invest in your sensitive bonds

my scarce emotional assets.

The strangest thing, in today's world, is the fact that this is,

apparently, a business without losers

immune to the nervousness of your shares

or to the fluctuations of my libidinal commerce.

My only fear is that we may arouse

the envy of the Gods, in the Olympus of Brussels,

and that Market, the monstrous titan, decides

to lower to junk the *rating* of our relation,

leaving us without credit in the Romanesque square

and the heart in *default*. But, let us not be

pessimistic. Actually, both of us know that Cupide

helps us with his invisible hand. And even if

we fell into depression, I am

sure that the Portuguese state would give us

full support, concurring that a love like

this is simply too big to fail.

in Serém, 24 de Março (2011: 18-19)

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