

FIVE SONNETS



Antero de Quental

translated from the Portuguese by RICHARD ZENITH

Born in the Azores in 1842, Antero de Quental followed a path often taken by young Portuguese men from “good” families: he went to the University of Coimbra to study law. He was a rowdy student, which in those days was almost more the rule than the exception, but his rowdiness had a serious intent. Antero wanted to shake Portuguese institutions out of their stagnant complacency and to incite his fellow countrymen to embrace European modernity. One of his early essays, “Good Sense and Good Taste” (1865), sparked a national debate between the conservative literary establishment and the iconoclasts of the younger generation, and Antero was likewise a thorn in the side of the political body, being one of the founders of Portugal’s socialist movement.

Antero de Quental’s most ardent ambition was to be a philosopher, and his essays frequently deal with philosophical themes, but he did not have much talent for organising his ideas into an original system of thought. Or perhaps it was his mental instability that prevented him. Clinical treatments in Paris did little to stave off the hysteria that periodically afflicted Antero, much less his chronic pessimism, which only worsened with age. In 1891, back in the Azores after many years spent in mainland Portugal and abroad, Antero shot himself to death on a park bench.

Antero’s psychological demons are readily detectable in his poetry, which seems to have thrived on his rather dark vision of the world. The sonnets, translated into German and Italian in his own lifetime, have endured as this writer’s greatest literary legacy, and they may perhaps be considered his most important intellectual achievement. Their influence is discernible in one of Antero’s most ardent admirers, Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935), who described himself as “a poet animated by philosophy”, an epithet that could just as well be applied to his Azorean precursor.

—R. Z.

IGNOTO DEO

What mortal beauty do you convey,
O vision that my soul has dreamed
And that reflects in me your gleam
Like sunlight mirrored on the waves?

In this vast world, my longing makes me
Seek you on Earth. I humbly plod
The planet in search of a clement God
But find only his altar... old and naked...

Your immortality inspires my worship.
But what are you here? A solace I feel,
A drop of honey in a cup of lye...

Pure essence of the tears I weep
And dream of my dreams, if you're real,
At least reveal yourself in the skies!

DESPONDENCY

To let go the bird that was cruelly
Despoiled of her young and nest...
May the infinite air of loneliness
Waft where broken wings took her...

To let go the boat, hurled about
On choppy waves amid the blackness
When night rose out of the vast expanses
And gales arrived from the South...

To give up the soul—which so regrets
The faith and peace and trust it lost—
To that ever still and silent death...

To let go of the lingering note
Of a final song... what hope is left...
And life... and love... to let life go!

WORDS OF A CERTAIN DEAD MAN

I've been dead for over a millennium,
Exposed, on this cliff, to wind and rain:
Not even a ghost has a thinner frame,
And no abortion is more misshapen...

Only my spirit lives, absorbed
By a single, inexorable thought:
'Dead and buried in life!' That
Is my torment... the rest I ignore...

I know I lived... but it was all of a day,
Just one—and the next day Idolatry
Built me an altar... ah! they all bowed

As if I were *someone!* as if Life
Could be *someone!*—and they decided
I was a God... and wrapped me in a shroud!

THE UNCONSCIOUS

The familiar ghost who accompanies me
(Without, however, showing his face)
And whom I often regard with distaste,
Though I usually view him hopefully,

Is a solemn, sober, ancient ghost,
Who doesn't seem to like to converse...
Before this figure, ascetic and reserved,
My words always stick in my throat.

I dared to question him just once.
'Phantom whom I hate and love,
Who are you?' I asked with shame.

He said, 'Your fellow human creatures
Have called me God for centuries...
But I myself don't know my name...'

DIVINE COMEDY

Lifting their arms to the heavens on high
And addressing the invisible gods,
The men cry out: 'Immovable gods,
Who gains from invincible fate? Why

Did you create us?! Time unfurls
Relentlessly, and only produces
Pain, sin, strife, illusions,
In a cruel and delirious whirl...

Wouldn't it have been better for us
To remain in the peace of pre-matter,
In the eternal sleep of nothingness?

Why were we made, if pain is our greatest
End?' But the gods, with a voice yet sadder,
Say: 'Why, O men, did you create us?'