

Introducing Castro Alves

Antônio Carlos Secchin

Antônio de Castro Alves was born on 1 March 1847 on the Fazenda das Cabaceiras (Cabaceiras Farm) in the state of Bahia, and died in July 1871 in Salvador, the state capital. For this short twenty-four year span of his life he represented, as no one else in Brazil did, the myth of the Romantic poet and hero.

His literary vocation became clear very early on. Coming from a well-to-do family, he studied law in Recife (the capital of Pernambuco), Salvador and São Paulo. He fell in love with a Portuguese actress, Eugênia Câmara, ten years older than himself, and had the deep experience of a love affair with her that shocked the moral provincialism of contemporary Catholic monarchist Brazil. Like many writers of the period he wrote plays, and had great success with the drama *Gonzaga, or the Minas Revolution*, about the (abortive) attempt to free Brazil from the Portuguese yoke, which had been made in Minas Gerais in the eighteenth century. But it was in poetry – *Espumas flutuantes* ('Floating Foam', 1870) as well as the posthumous *A cachoeira de Paulo Alfonso* ('Paulo Alfonso's Waterfall', 1876) and *Os escravos* ('The Slaves', 1883) – that Castro Alves stood out on the country's literary scene. In Brazil he probably has the honour of being the last poet who was literally acclaimed by the public. The 'dramatic' character of his work, expressed in the rhetorical tone of many of his lines, made it easier for the artist to communicate with the public, especially young people, who were hungry for social change and encouraged in this by the poet's charisma. As the dates reveal, Brazilian Romanticism was long-lived, lasting into the 1870s; its high point and its end can be symbolized respectively by the publication of *Espumas flutuantes* and the death of Castro Alves.

Some think the best aspect of his creative work is his lyricism, which was enhanced, contrary to the sugary melodious tradition of ultra-Romantic '*mal-de-siècle*', by a decided note of vigorous sensuality. But others hold the view that the high point of his work can be found in the poems that earned him the title of "poet of the slaves". In an agricultural, patriarchal society completely dominated by whites, Castro Alves dared to write, in support of the oppressed, some memorable pages, particularly in the long poems: '*O Navio negreiro*'¹ ('The Slave Ship') and '*Vozes d'Africa*' ('Voices out of Africa'), where the drama of the slaves is treated with great emotional intensity. The abolition of slavery did not take place till 1888, seventeen years after the poet's death and when the Monarchy was coming to an end. But the poet's voice is still alive today in the strains of his song of freedom.

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(translated from French by Jean Burrell)

Vozes d'Africa

*Deus! ó Deus! Onde estás que não respondes?
Em que mundo, em qu'estrelas tu t'escondes
 Embuçado nos céus?
Há dois mil anos te mandei meu grito,
Que embalde desde então corre o infinito . . .
 Onde estás, Senhor Deus?*

*Qual Prometeu, tu me arramste um dia
Do deserto na rubra penedía,
 Infinito: galé! . . .
Por abutre – me deste o sol ardente
E a terra do Suez – foi a corrente
 Que me ligaste ao pé . . .*

*O cavalo estafado do Beduíno
Sob a vergasta tomba ressupino,
 E morre no areal.
Minha garupa sangue, a dor poreja,
Quando o chicote do simun dardeja
 O teu braço eternal.*

*Minhas irmãs são belas, são ditosas . . .
Dorme a Ásia nas sombras voluptuosas
 Dos haréns do Sultão,
Ou no dorso dos elefantes brancos
Embala-se coberta de brilhantes,
 Nas plagas do Indostão.*

*Por tenda tem o cimos do Himalaia . . .
O Ganges amoroso beija a praia
 Coberta de corais.
A brisa de Misora o céu inflama;
E ela dorme nos templos do deus Brahma,
 – Pagodes colossais . . .*

*Europa é sempre Europa, a gloriosa! . . .
A mulher deslumbrante e caprichosa,
 Rainha e cortesã.
Artista – corta o mármore de Carrara,
Poetisa – tange os hinos de Ferrara
 No glorioso afã! . . .*

*Sempre a láurea lhe cabe no litígio . . .
Ora uma c'roa, ora o barrete frígio
 Enflora-lhe a cerviz.
O Universo após ela – doudo amante –
Segue cativo o passo delirante
 Da grande meretriz.*

.....
Mas eu, Senhor! Eu triste, abandonada
Em meio dos desertos desgarrada . . .
 Perdida marcho em vão!
Se choro . . . bebo o pranto a areia ardente!
Talvez . . . p'ra que meu pranto, ó Deus clemente!
 Não descubras no chão.

E nem tenho uma sombra de floresta . . .
Para cobrir-me nem un templo resta
 No solo abrasador . . .
Quando subo às pirâmides do Egito,
Embalde aos quatro céus chorando grito:
 "Abrija-me, Senhor! . . ."

Como o profeta em cinza a fronte envolve,
Velo a cabeça no areal, que volve
 O siroco feroz . . .
Quando eu passo no Saara amortalhada . . .
Ai! Dizem: "Lá vai África embuçada
 No seu branco albornoz . . ."

Nem vêem que o deserto é meu sudario.
Que o silêncio campeia solitário
 Por sobre o peito meu.
Lá no solo, onde o cardo apenas medra,
Beceja a esfinge colossal de pedra,
 Fitando o morno céu.

De Tebas nas colunas derrocadas
As cegonhas espiam debruçadas
 O horizonte sem fim . . .
Onde branqueja a caravana errante,
E o camelo monótono, arquejante,
 Que desce de Efraím . . .

.....
Não basta inda de dor, ó Deus terrível?!
É pois teu peito eterno, inexaurível
 De vingança e rancor? . . .
E o que é que eu fiz, Senhor? Que torvo crime
Eu cometi jamais, que assim me oprime
 Teu gládio vingador?!

.....
Foi depois do dilúvio . . . Um viandante,
Negro, sombrio, pálido, arquejante
 Descia do Arará . . .

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*E eu disse ao peregrino fulminado:
"Cam! . . . serás meu esposo bem-amado . . .
Serei tua Eloá! . . ."*

*Desde este dia o vento da desgraça
Por meus cabelos ululando passa
O anátema cruel.
As tribos erram, do areal nas vagas,
E o nômade faminto corta as plagas
No rápido corcel.*

*Vi a ciência desertar do Egito . . .
Vi meu povo seguir – Judeu maldito –
Trilho de perdição . . .
Depois vi minha prole desgraçada
Pelas garras d'Europa arrebatada
Amestrado falcão! . . .*

*Cristo! Embalde morreste sobre um monte . . .
Teu sangue não lavou de minha fronte
A mancha original.
Ainda hoje são por fado adverso,
Meus filhos – alimária do universo . . .
Eu – pasto universal . . .*

*Hoje em meu sangue a América se nutre:
– Condor, que transformara-se em abutre,
Ave da escravidão,
Ela juntou-se às mais . . . irmã traidora,
Qual de José os vis irmãos, outrora,
Venderam seu irmão!*

*Basta, Senhor! De teu potente braço
Role através dos astros e do espaço
Perdão p'ra os crimes meus! . . .
Há dois mil anos . . . eu soluço um grito . . .
Escuta o brado meu lá no infinito . . .
Meu Deus! Senhor, meu Deus!*

Voices out of Africa²

*God! O God! Where are you, why do you not reply?
On which world, which star are you hiding
Disguised up there in the heavens?
I have called to you for two thousand years
And in all that time my cry has sounded in vain through infinity . . .
Where are you, Lord God?*

*One day you bound me like Prometheus
To the scarlet rocks of the limitless
Desert: what a sentence! . . .*

The vulture was the burning sun,
And the soil of Suez was the chain
 You fastened to my foot . . .

The Bedouin's exhausted horse
Falls down under a lash from the whip
 And dies on the sands.
My back bleeds, I sweat with pain,
When your eternal arm brings down
 The whip of the simoon.

My sisters are lovely, they are fortunate . . .
Asia sleeps in the voluptuous shade
 Of the Sultan's harems,
Or on the backs of white elephants
She sways, covered with diamonds,
 In Hindustan.

Her tent is the Himalayan peaks . . .
The Ganges lovingly kisses the sands
 Strewn with coral.
The Mysore breeze turns the sky to fire
As she sleeps in the vast temples
 Of the god Brahma . . .

Europe is forever Europe the glorious! . . .
A dazzling, capricious woman,
 Queen and courtesan.
An artist who sculpts marble from Carrara,
A poetess who fervently sings
 Songs from Ferrara! . . .

Laurels are always involved in their disputes . . .
Now a crown, now a Phrygian cap
 Adorns her head.
Behind her, the captive Universe – like a crazy lover –
Follows in the intoxicating steps
 Of this grand whore.

.....
But I, Lord! I who am sad and neglected,
Wandering amid the deserts . . .
 Aimlessly I walk in vain! . . .
If I weep . . . the burning sand absorbs the drops!
Perhaps . . . so that you may not see, o merciful God!
 My tears bathing the earth.

I do not even have the shade of the forest . . .
For shelter not a single temple remains
 On the burning earth . . .

Introducing Castro Alves

When I go up to the pyramids of Egypt
Vainly in tears I cry to the four corners of the sky:
"Lord, give me shelter! . . ."

As the prophet covers his forehead with ashes,
I hide my head in the sands swirled
By the fierce sirocco . . .
When I pass over the Sahara, enveloped in my shroud,
Alas! They say: "There goes Africa, wrapped
In her white burnous . . ."

They do not see that the desert is my shroud.
May silence reign alone
In my breast.
On the earth where thistles can hardly grow,
The huge stone sphinx yawns,
Eyeing the dull sky.

On the fallen columns of Thebes
Storks lean forward and peer
At the endless horizon . . .
Where the wandering caravan is like a white spot
And where the monotonous panting camel
Comes down from Ephraim.

.....

Is this pain not enough, o terrible God?
Are the vengeance and rancour in your eternal breast
Inexhaustible?
What have I done, Lord? What horrible crime
Did I ever commit for your avenging sword
To oppress me so?

.....

It was after the flood . . . A traveller
Black, sombre, pale, panting
Came down from Ararat . . .
And I said to the thunderstruck pilgrim:
"Ham . . . you will be my beloved bridegroom . . .
I will be your Eloa! . . ."

From that day a wind of misfortune
Sends howling through my hair
The cruel anathema.
Tribes wander, from the sands to the waves,
And the famished nomad crosses the wide spaces
On his swift courser.

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I saw science abandon Egypt . . .
I saw my people follow – accursed Jew –
 Damnation's path . . .
Then I saw my unfortunate offspring
Carried off in the talons of Europe,
 That well-trained falcon! . . .

Christ! You died in vain on a mountain . . .
Your blood did not wash from my forehead
 The original stain.
Still today through adverse fate
My children are the world's beasts of burden . . .
 And I am food for the world . . .

Today America feeds on my blood:
– Like a condor that has turned into a vulture,
 The bird of slavery,
She has joined the others . . . treacherous sister,
Just as the base brothers of Joseph once did
 When they sold their brother!

.....

Enough, Lord! With your powerful arm
Send rolling through stars and space
 Forgiveness for my crimes! . . .
For two thousand years . . . I have been crying . . .
Hear my groans up there in infinity . . .
 My God! Lord, my God!

Antônio de Castro Alves

Notes

1. This poem shows signs of Castro Alves's possible reading (in a French or Portuguese translation?) of a poem by Heinrich Heine: *Das Sklavenschiff* ('The Slave Ship'). In any case, the Brazilian poet often put quotations from Heine (in French) at the head of his libertarian poems. But though Heine's influence may be glimpsed in Castro Alves's *O Navio Negreiro*, the difference in tone between the two poems is evident. It is possible to recognize Castro Alves's own originality and the alterations in sense he made to these few memories if one reads the new French translation of *Das Sklavenschiff* (forthcoming) by Nicole Taubes, who has most pertinently drawn our attention to this point. We have here a good example of intertextuality and creative reading. (Editor's note)
2. This is a translation into English of the French text which was published in 1998 in *Anthologie de la poésie brésilienne*, trans. Isabel Meyrelles (Paris: Chandeigne).