

Voluptuousness and Love and Aborted Spring

Raul Brandão



Translation and Introductory Note by Anna-Lisa Halling and Rex P. Nielson

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The prolific Portuguese writer Raul Brandão (1867-1930) remains best known as a novelist, dramatist, and essayist whose literary interests focused primarily on social concerns. Janet Pérez notes that although Brandão trained for a career in the Portuguese army, and even achieved the rank of captain before retiring in 1912, his literary vocation both began earlier and lasted longer.¹ Born in Foz do Douro, a coastal parish of the city of Porto that lies at the mouth of the Douro River where it meets the Atlantic Ocean, Brandão spent his childhood and youth among the working-class fishermen of the delta region, and this formative experience often found expression in his literary works, which frequently addressed economic inequality and social injustice. As Rui Torres observes: “[Brandão’s] first contact with the humble and underprivileged people who struggle with the sea in their daily lives later manifested itself as a social concern and as a theme in his work.”² While serving in the military, Brandão traveled extensively throughout Portugal and Europe, and he also worked as a journalist.

In 1890, Brandão made his literary debut with the publication of *Impressões e paisagens*, a collection of stories imbued with naturalist themes, but it was around this

time that he began to associate with a bohemian symbolist group based in Porto called the Nefelibatas. The influence of this group, who saw themselves as “mavericks on the literary scene,”³ appears in his next work *História dum palhaço*.⁴ Throughout the 1890s, Brandão collaborated on a number of periodicals and literary magazines including *O Imparcial*, *Correio da Manhã*, *O Dia*, and *Revista d’Hoje*. Brandão’s wide-ranging interests extended beyond social and political realms to include metaphysical and aesthetic subjects.

Though somewhat underappreciated for his literary contributions during his own time, today Brandão’s work represents “the transition between the literary movements of realism, naturalism, and symbolism in the nineteenth century and premodernism in the twentieth.”⁵ Brandão eschewed realist aesthetics and conventions even as he experimented with new literary forms to address the social problems he saw plaguing society. For example, Torres observes that in 1903 Brandão published several newspaper articles in the periodical *O Dia* on the deplorable conditions of hospitals, jails, and mental institutions. These stories exerted an important influence on the novel he published shortly thereafter, entitled *Os pobres* (1906), which one critic has called “talvez o livro mais negro da Literatura Portuguesa” [the darkest book

¹ Janet Pérez, “Brandão, Raul,” *Dictionary of the Literature of the Iberian Peninsula*, edited by Germán Bleiberg, Maureen Ihrie, and Janet Pérez (Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 233.

² Rui Torres, “Raul Brandão,” *Portuguese Writers: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, edited by Monica Rector and Fred M. Clark, no. 287, p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ António José Saraiva and Óscar Lopes, *História da Literatura Portuguesa* (Porto Editora, 2001), p. 980.

⁵ Rui Torres, “Raul Brandão,” *Portuguese Writers: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, edited by Monica Rector and Fred M. Clark, no. 287, p. 43.



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of Portuguese Literature]⁶ and which is a “blend of poetry, philosophical meditation, novella, short story, and chronicle, [...] a mature attempt at explaining the existence of misery and sorrow.”⁷ In response to human affliction, Brandão developed an aesthetic approach that blended romantic, realist, and symbolist tendencies to address philosophical questions about poverty, sorrow, love, death, and the purpose of life.

These concerns likewise appear in his second book, mentioned above, *História dum palhaço* (1896), an unusual text that takes the form of a fictional autobiography of one K. Mauricio followed by a series of K. Mauricio’s dreams, vignettes, and short stories. The story “A Voluptuosidade e o Amor,” here translated as “Voluptuousness and Love”⁸ appears in this volume with K. Mauricio as the attributed author. The story adopts a symbolist aesthetic to address questions of love and death, fatalism, escapism, solipsism, and spirituality. The story exhibits a tendency of

Brandão’s work to turn to fantasy and dreams as a way of addressing tragic reality and injustice.

In his ensuing work, the aforementioned *Os pobres*, the character of K. Mauricio evolves into the character of Gabiru, a figure who believes that “attachment to a dream is the only solution for the absurdity of a life of sorrow.”⁹ Gabiru subsequently appears in Brandão’s most famous novel *Húmus* (1917), a symbolic dreamwork that synthesizes many of the concerns and problems present throughout Brandão’s oeuvre.

In 1926, Brandão again returned to the character of K. Mauricio and he published a new edition of *História d’um palhaço* under the title *A Morte do Palhaço e O Mistério da Árvore*. In this reworked text, Brandão made a variety of changes and alterations as in the story “Primavera Abortada,” here translated as “Aborted Spring,”¹⁰ an extensive rewriting, and pessimistic version, of his earlier “Voluptuousness and Love.”

⁶ Ataliba T. de Castilho, “Recursos da Linguagem Impressionista em Raul Brandão,” *ALFA: Revista de Linguística*, 1965, p. 22.

⁷ Rui Torres, “Raul Brandão,” *Portuguese Writers: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, edited by Monica Rector and Fred M. Clark, no. 287, p. 44.

⁸ The translated is based in the following edition: Raul Brandão, “A voluptuosidade e o amor,” *História dum Palhaço (A Vida e o Diário de K. Mauricio); A Morte do Palhaço e a Morte da Árvore*, edição de Maria João Reynaud, Lisboa, Relógio d’Água, 2005, pp. 141-144.

⁹ Rui Torres, “Raul Brandão,” *Portuguese Writers: Dictionary of Literary Biography*, edited by Monica Rector and Fred M. Clark, no. 287, p. 44.

¹⁰ The translated is based in the following edition: Raul Brandão, “A voluptuosidade e o amor,” *História dum Palhaço (A Vida e o Diário de K. Mauricio); A Morte do Palhaço e a Morte da Árvore*, edição de Maria João Reynaud, Lisboa, Relógio d’Água, 2005, pp. 299-304.

Raul Brandão

Voluptuousness and Love

In the harrowing hour of twilight, how many creatures, numbed by life, begin to weave chimeras, fleeting dreams, clouds! ... The earth starts to exhale the violet breath of its evaporation: in souls there arise the tenuous outlines of dreams, beloved illusions. I feel an impulse to weep and yet today no misfortune has befallen me ... Some fashion specters black and disappearing, to others comes Ophelia, with fevered hands raised to be kissed on the lips. Tell me, my dear who has lived with me since childhood — and who never truly existed — tell me of them with your sad heartbroken smile: — Dream, it's all a dream! ... — As if I were not certain of meeting you in eternity, for nothing is lost except vain reality! I have many times even gone to the heights of the stars, dreaming of you, my love; I created you out of tears, ambition, everything that was in me immortal, and now, here by my side, tell me the soul of this story, which I will work into the clay of my prose ...

There once was an enormous and silent Forest. The black skeletons of the trees seemed as though petrified for centuries. Nothing stirred: life there had stopped suddenly, halted and afflicted. The clawed roots gnawed the earth among the trees, the God appeared vague — the result of awe and astonishment. It was made of stone and it had been there since the beginning of things, quiet and rigid, waiting. Its misshapen body lost in the eternal night; its head buried in its paws, its cavernous mouth ready to crunch both men and things. Unclear and hard to describe: one part lost in the darkness, one part astonishing, built with the ruins of nightmares, pieces of dreams and scattered sorrows. A wing had fallen to the earth, like a world collapsed: the rest of its body was darkness with nightmares, tortures, and doubts ... Up close, one could see only the

horror, but from a distance, one felt surprised by its ferocious and lascivious appearance. Everything had fled the forest: the trees, which had grown there since the creation of the world, sickened and stopped giving shade or flower, the birds fell frozen, the water dried up, and Spring and Life, upon encountering the Monster, had turned into Death. Terror and Silence were petrified there under the hand of crazed giants. It was made of mountains stripped bare, mysterious and frightening, like all things that one does not know at first. Unfinished, crude, its eyes and its hands, all of its body, were involved in the Dream and each man willingly gave it features and details ...

It was believed in that country that it had been formed from Dreams and scattered Grievs, unrealized aspirations, anxiety, the fevered nights of the Sick, the Dreamers, and the Poets; of everything that has no destiny, the vague sorrows of twilight, unfinished chimeras, crimes, the Dream of the grotesque, which had amassed there in its immobility, within the forest of terror and silence ...

The God lived on Love. Among the betrothed of each year, they arbitrarily chose who would be sacrificed. Priests, clothed in white tunics, like those who pick off the petals of flowers at the edge of a grave, offered to the Monster the life of those in love. The purpose of the sacrifice was to end the harvest, when the earth was left filled with the lilies of youthful bodies, blood-stained poppies ...

In the terrified country, to pacify the anger of the God, each year at the beginning of Spring they would choose from among the betrothed. No one dared to look upon it: its claws seemed to be fixed upon the whole land, to wipe out Life and Love ...

And each Spring, during the period of betrothals, a great terror rested in every heart.



Voluptuousness and Love

Who would live? Among those with hands embraced and eyes turned to the stars, speaking of Love at night, who would escape Death? And the uncertainty filled the souls of suitors like a black specter prowling about. If the eyes of lovers met, they would immediately look away with horror, and many hands turned suddenly cold in the hands of their beloved. Where have you come from, my love? Do you truly exist or are you but an image created by my imagination? If I kiss you, I fear that you are dead. Speak, speak up, though your words be vain, to convince me that you still exist ... And Love turned into something else. From year to year, in this country where the God ruled, each soul purified itself, for no one knew whether their beloved would remain or be sent to eternity. They spoke in low voices, and with each word, eyes were filled with tears. So much so that when the golden-haired Poet came to marry the Princess and gather together all who were betrothed that year, none wondered at his words. His words perhaps may be incomprehensible and metaphysical to you, my reader, but they were not so to the Betrothed of the chimerical country, where the God existed. The Poet said that Love was immortal — and only in eternity was it fully realized. Two creatures who died for love, pure, would be bound in eternity beyond the stars, where dreams took shape and aspirations attained.

He said everything that only the intuition of the Poets can perceive and the wise ignore. And, because the Spring was approaching, everyone accepted his words, and everyone wished for Death. Each began to yearn for infinite Love and each pair of lovers anxiously looked in the trees for the first flowers — and in the stars each night they hung their desires. They would stay for hours, holding hands, looking at the sky, smiling ...

— And there, what will we be like then? ...

— Like purity, like whiteness ...

Each year, in April, the procession of the

Betrothed entered the forest like a sob passing through it. It was at the end of the afternoon, the end of a pale and melancholic day. The line walked forward in a vague, uncertain sadness, filled with the sorrow of one who has lost all hope and dreams. White, all unclothed, the couples were bound together. Among these would be chosen those who would die — and, as they entered the rigid and black forest, they knew not whether they were walking towards Death or towards Love ...

Behind them came the priests, dressed in linen and singing. Along with everyone else, it was only on this day of the year, this day of sacrifice and Death, that they too would see the God ...

In previous years they walked with sadness. How many kisses would be lost if they died! How many hours of voluptuousness lost, if the God chose them! But this April they would laugh and sing for Death, who would cause them to experience for eternity Love eternal.

Suddenly, the first of the Betrothed who arrived stopped short in surprise.

What had happened to the God this Spring? What had happened to the forest this year, which discharged an ecstatic and mirthful murmur of life? ...

Swarms of bees had formed hives in its mouth and this was enough to humanize the monster. The honey dripped inside between its teeth, and it drooled, golden. The ancient granite from which it had been formed, from a beautiful tone of dead leaves, seemed to tremble in joy. Brambles had grown up around it, and the green foliage fluttered on the black trunks. Water ran alive, and above its Cupid eyes, above its besotted face, butterflies courted ...

Around the God, Betrothed couples laughed — and at the close of that April afternoon, it was unclear whether the whiteness perceived came from the unclothed bodies or the trees in flower ...

Raul Brandão

Aborted Spring

It was an enormous and silent forest. The black skeletons of the trees seemed as though petrified for centuries. Nothing stirred: life stopped there, stagnant and lugubrious. The clawed roots gnawed the earth, and, among the trees, a sinister God appeared — the vague realization of dread. It had been there since the beginning of things, quiet and rigid, waiting, deep in the forest. Its misshapen body lost in the night; its head buried in its paws, its cavernous mouth ready to crunch both men and things. Unclear, and hard to describe; one part lost in the darkness; one part built with the ruins of nightmares, pieces of dreams and scattered anxieties. A wing had fallen to the earth, like a world collapsed.

Up close one could see only the horror, but from a distance its ferocious and lascivious appearance surprised. Everything had fled the forest: the trees, which had grown there since the creation of the world, were afraid and gave no more shade nor flowers, the birds fell frozen. Through the terror and the silence, the God dominated, mysterious and frightening like all things with unknown origins. Unfinished, crude, its eyes and its hands, its whole body immersed itself in the Dream and each man willingly added to it new features and details . . .

It was believed in that country that it had been made of unrealizable aspirations, anxiety, the fevered nights of the sick, the dreamers and the poets; of everything that has no destiny, the vague sorrows of twilight, unfinished chimeras, crimes, the grotesque dream, which had petrified there in the solitary and incomplete God, staggering in its immobility, within the silent forest, and always demanding suffering, cries, tears.

The God lived on pain. Among the betrothed of each year, they arbitrarily chose

sacrifices to appease him. Priests, clothed in white tunics, like those who depetal flowers at the edge of a grave, offered the lives of those in love to the monster. The purpose of the sacrifice was to end the harvest, in which the earth was strewn with young bodies, bloodied poppies.

In the terrified country, each year at the beginning of Spring, to pacify the anger of the God, they would choose from among the betrothed. No one even dared to look upon it: its claws seemed to be embedded in the whole land, to wipe out Life and Love ...

And each Spring, during the season of the betrothed, a great terror rested on every heart. Who would live? Among those with clasped hands and eyes turned to the stars, speaking of love at night, who would escape death? And the uncertainty filled the souls of the betrothed like a black specter prowling about. If the eyes of the lovers met, they soon looked away from each other with horror, and many hands turned cold in the hands of their beloved. Where have you come from, my love? Do you truly exist or are you but an image created in my imagination? If I kiss you, I sometimes fear that you are dead. Speak, speak up, though your words be vain, to convince me that you still exist ... And year after year, in this country where the God ruled, each soul purified itself, for no one knew for certain whether their union would continue into the infinite. Love transformed itself. People now spoke in hushed tones, and eyes were filled with tears: love, little by little, transformed into a religious sentiment. So much so that, when the flaxen-haired Poet came to marry the Princess and gathered together all the betrothed that year, none wondered at his words. His words perhaps may be incomprehensible and metaphysical to you, my reader, but they were not so for the



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betrotted of the mythical country, where the ferocious God existed. The Poet said that love was immortal — and only in eternity was it sublimated. The creatures that died, sacrificing themselves for others would be bound for eternity beyond the stars, where chimeras take shape and all aspirations are realized. He said everything that only the intuition of the Poets can perceive and the wise ignore. And, because Spring was arriving, everyone accepted his words, and everyone surrendered themselves to death. Each desired infinite love and each pair of lovers looked for the first flowering among the trees — and each night they hung new aspirations on the stars. They would stay for hours holding hands, looking at the sky, smiling ...

— And there what will we be like then? ...

— Like purity, like whiteness ...

Each year, in April, the procession of the betrothed entered the forest like a sob passing through it. It was at the end of the afternoon, the end of a pale and melancholic day. The line walked forward, in a sadness made of longing for what is lost with a life full of aspirations and dreams. White, the couples were bound together. Those who would die would be chosen from among them — and, as they entered the forest, they knew not whether they were walking toward death, or toward love ... They knew they were going to die to appease the God and so that there would be less pain in the world.

Behind them came the priests dressed in linen and singing.

Now at the beginning of April, of that year, it had been exceptionally hot. There were some days of rain and strong wind, and later, from one day to the next, a magnetic current traversed the space.

The wind ceased, the sun came out: gold steeped in blue — vertigo — and the trees, pierced by light, trembled and soon unraveled

themselves in flowers. Quiet nights, silent, tepid, and a majestic moonlight.

At night, late, I went out. It seemed like Summer. Still the end of Winter and a night like this! A translucent night, a mysterious and suspicious night ... Each night that passes fills my soul with longing and terror. It wounds me and leaves me ecstatic. And one that escapes! and yet another! ... And many more, to never see them again, to never again feel this magic splendor? One by one they disappear in silence, in the depth of this silence, so large that I feel it as it hits my chest — and one by one I gather them and silence them within myself, to take them to the grave ... But this night of Summer still in Winter disquiets and surprises me; this night so still, white, impassive and silent, afflicts me. I stop. I take two more steps and halt. I wait a few moments, and suddenly a drama that I did not expect unfurls in front of me ...

The warm wind calms, the temperature changes, and I have the immediate sensation that the night crystalizes. Then the most extraordinary pain that I have ever felt passes in front of my eyes — a pain that is not heard. A tragedy in the silence. A tragedy without screams, without noise, beneath the sky covered with stars. A tragedy that I never read in any book and that not even Shakespeare remembered. In front of me there were trees weighed down with flowers, wild cherry trees, blackthorn shrubs, all of the immense forest that envelops me, eviscerated in emotion, deluded by that anticipated and fictitious Spring. Flowers everywhere, on all the branches; flowers on the brambles; flowers on the hedges; flowers on the apple trees weighed down by flowers. And suddenly an instantaneous and deadly cold, a cold that tightens and cuts like fine barbs that enter the skin, collecting and destroying the blossoms. The frozen flowers fell apart.

My heart hurt. I almost screamed. And the silence grew greater, the anguish grew heavy ... Not even a stirring. Only a torrent of



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moonlight, the magical moonlight and that innocent pain, that monstrous pain in the frozen immobility. At this very moment in the vast world the pain treads on and grinds feet, without being deterred by shouts, insatiable like the old God of the forest toward which the line of the betrothed advances, white and resigned. How many lost kisses may die! how many lost hours if the God chooses them!

I looked up. Never was the sky more lovely nor the stars more beautiful. Such is the harmony of worlds ... Because harmony endures. There is nothing that alters it — I thought. Or is that thing there above also pain that is not heard? Is that golden thing disordered pain, immense, frenetic pain, whose screams do not reach here below? ...

The whiteness of moonlight or the whiteness of snow, it does not matter here. They are many. They are innocent and they die. Their eyes interrogate in vain this same sky, where the stars seem like sparks of my flame thrown out to space ... Is everything pain? Is all that only pain?

The cold grew in the concave night, as white as the snow of the steppes. I divine in the silence an “ah!” of astonishment: the trees shriveled and shouted with affliction (every flower died); but, as they have no mouth with which to scream, the scream was not heard. And what does screaming matter, if the sound only travels a hundred steps in distance? Afterwards some mysterious communication passed, some current of sensibility, from trunk to trunk, from root to root. An interrogation in the air: — Why? But why? ...

The trees, taken by surprise, do not understand because they suffer. No one knows why they suffer. And the glacial silence, the atmosphere more and more gripped by cold, almost bursting like glass, and there on high, always, the unalterable celestial panorama ... All the flowers withered. No one hears the immense scream that in this very moment emanates from so many innocent mouths — from the mouths of the sacrificed, from those that die obscured by an idea or a dream, or more simply from those who offer their life for another life. The monstrous God always claims more victims.

Only the pain exists, only the blind pain without a mouth to scream, that in this extraordinary world squirms — the unknown pain. It is an immense thing, it is a limitless thing that advances to the tombs in the universe. It is an immense thing, whose shouts no one hears. It is the pain made of all the sacrifices, of all the unknown and silent pains ... There above, Procyon and Vega shine white and blue, Aldebaran and Arcturus red like fire, and the marvelous Vega twinkles with a blue, green and scarlet brightness; it is another immense flowering of pain.

On the earth, a pool of blood; on the blood, the devastation of the flowers; around the immense and bare forest, the tragic forest that sees itself again in the putrid pond as in the gaze of a dead man. Only the God — pain, made of old granite, the unalterable God buries its monstrous paws in the loam and continues demanding more victims ...