

Pissing Out the Poisons of the Past: Rui Lage's Ambivalent Portrait of Rural Portugal in *Estrada nacional*

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Abstract: Over several decades, Portugal has experienced significant demographic and economic decline within its inland rural settlements, alongside substantial population growth in its urban centers and coastal communities. These transformations have contributed to widespread fears and laments of “o fim do mundo rural” in contemporary public discourse and cultural production, all of which is a starting point for studying the poetry of Rui Lage (b. 1975). Concentrating primarily on Lage’s *Estrada nacional* (2016), this essay argues that despite the seemingly “elegiac” manner in which the poet depicts rural settlements and landscapes in twenty-first-century Portugal, his 2016 collection presents an ironic, ambivalent, and resistant approach toward “mourning” Portuguese rural communities. Furthermore, this text maintains that Lage repeatedly undermines, destabilizes, and reacts against extant preconceptions of “rural loss” and bucolic nostalgia in contemporary Portuguese society, while critiquing anthropocentric attitudes toward existence and survival within Portugal’s contemporary natural environment.

Keywords: Portuguese poetry, rural decline, elegy, nostalgia, Anthropocene

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In multiple Western nations, lamentations of an impending “rural demise” frequently punctuate contemporary sociopolitical discourse, and often provoke profound political consequences. First, one can highlight the so-called “left-behind” narrative, which contends that government neglect and deterioration of nonurban human settlements has angered and radicalized such communities, driving them toward populist and/or reactionary political philosophies. While such sentiments of “rural decline” have dominated analysis of Donald Trump’s election as US President (Wuthnow 1), there is some evidence for this trajectory in Portugal, given the far-right party Chega’s recent success in sparsely populated communities of the eastern Alentejo, during the 2021 presidential election (cf. Comissão Nacional de Eleições; Dores). Such trends arguably express anxieties regarding socioeconomic transformations in Portugal’s agrarian areas, given that, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, several authors, artists, and public figures have apocalyptically lamented “o fim do mundo rural”—the end of a long-standing “rural” existence and lifestyle that the Portuguese have historically associated with the country’s eastern inland regions.

Simultaneously, one can note the development of an ecologically conscious commitment to mitigating humanity’s “Anthropocene”¹ domination and increasing devastation of the natural world, through an increasingly “eschatological” discourse (Northcott 104–5). In Portugal, this concern has manifested itself through numerous environmental organizations, from the establishment of the Movimento Ecológico Português in the 1970s (cf. Soromenho-Marques 25) to the more recent Partido pelos Animais e pela Natureza (PAN), which contests what it terms the “antropocentrismo e especismo dominantes na história da civilização.”

For some writers, however, a meaningful creative response to notions of rural decline in contemporary Portugal necessitates a questioning of that very premise, rejecting acritical mourning for “lost ways of life,” elegy, and ruralist nostalgia. Specifically, this article examines the work of poet Rui Lage (b. 1975), whose collection *Estrada nacional* (2016), despite its apparent “elegiac” pretensions, ironically reflects upon whether Portugal’s “traditional rural communities” are in

¹ The Anthropocene has been defined as the current geological era, which began with the Industrial Revolutions of the 1800s and is characterized by “claims that humans have become a telluric force, changing the functioning of the Earth,” through a “human hijacking of the Earth’s trajectory” (Hamilton et al. 3–4).

fact deceased. If, on the one hand, Lage appears to mourn the end of a particular “world”—agrarian settlements within Portugal’s hinterlands—on the other, he refuses either to accept that such ways of life have categorically ceased to exist or, indeed, to celebrate their limited survival in certain pockets of the country. My analysis considers two interrelated dilemmas that *Estrada nacional* forces the reader to contemplate: (a) are Portugal’s “traditional” rural communities definitively deceased; and (b) if so, should their demise be lamented? In this way, I examine Lage’s dismissal of atavistic “nostalgia” and his simultaneous critique of myopic, anthropocentric attitudes toward Portugal’s natural environment in the twenty-first century.

The “End” of Rural Portugal(?)

First, some context: is the “end of rural Portugal” a real or an imagined loss? Certainly, Portugal (alongside its Western European neighbors Spain and Italy) has suffered increasing transformation of rural communities since 1960, through a process that the geographer Álvaro Domingues has termed “desruralização” (*Vida* 75). Several studies affirm that Portugal’s agricultural population declined 37.5 percent between 1989 and 1999 (cf. Correia et al. 67), whereas the “interior” (encompassing Portugal’s inland territories north and south of the Tagus River such as the Eastern Minho, Trás-os-Montes, the Beira Alta, and the Beira Baixa) lost 1 million inhabitants between 1960 and 2018 (Carvalho). According to demographers, multiple factors are at play: “abandono rural” (domestic and international emigration from Portugal’s agricultural communities since the 1960s) has been linked to declining birth rates in nonurban settlements, and to human and environmental “desertification” by the early twenty-first century (Vizinho 72). Alongside this “despovoamento” of the country’s interior, scenes of quasi-eschatological destruction have ravaged such areas over the past fifty years. For instance, the Portuguese authorities’ decision to forcibly evacuate and submerge the village of Vilarinho da Furna in 1970 to construct a hydroelectric dam might be viewed as an “apocalyptic” event, in its creation of an Atlantis-like “drowned” community (Schiffmann). In addition, images of Portugal’s frequent forest fires over the past two decades—most devastatingly illustrated by the deaths of sixty-four people in 2017, close to the town of Pedrógão Grande (cf. Wise)—not only invite comparisons with the Book of Revelation, but also function as a disturbing “icon of the Anthropocene” (Haraway 45) in an age characterized by omnipresent

climate disasters. As a result, there is a considerable tendency in Portuguese public discourse to characterize large swathes of the country's interior as suffering a "crisis": in a 2005 lecture, for instance, President Jorge Sampaio expressed concern regarding "[r]egiões em perda, demograficamente rarefeitas e envelhecidas com uma economia rural em crise ou em completa desagregação" (10).

Nonetheless, the prospects of survival and even future development for such inland communities are not uniformly pessimistic: demographers have noted certain demographic "pockets of resistance" against depopulation in Portugal's eastern hinterlands (cf. Ferrão 23), whereas international observers have highlighted the recent revitalization of small settlements in the Serra da Estrela mountains, through innovative entrepreneurial ventures (cf. Balch). While the current Socialist government has introduced financial incentives for rural development with its Programa Nacional para a Coesão Territorial (2017), commercial initiatives like "turismo no espaço rural" have provided much-needed income for inland communities that were previously characterized by agricultural practices (cf. Silva). Nonetheless, some observers contend that such spaces have been gentrified and "commodified" in the process, leading to irrevocable transformation and to a loss of "authenticity" (cf. Pereiro 61).

Therefore, there is conflicting empirical evidence concerning the definitive "demise" of Portugal's "mundo rural" over recent decades. In fact, it can be argued that frequently expressed lamentations of rural decline in Portuguese society correspond to imagined, symbolic, and culturally constructed notions of loss. Over several centuries, Portugal has developed a particularly "bucolic" cultural discourse, most strikingly evoked in the 1933–1974 Estado Novo dictatorship's "pastoral ideology" (Figueiredo 164) and in the "domesticated natural sublime" of its visual propaganda (Vieira 117), with an "emphasis on traditional values, evidenced in the exaltation of the rural family unit and the celebration of the timelessness of village life" (Sapega 15). It is precisely this mythical, intangible, and romanticized image of rural existence that Álvaro Domingues denounces in his 2011 text *Vida no campo*:

No fundo, o trauma da perda de um mundo rural mitificado está longe de se resolver e apaziguar. É disso que se trata neste jogo de espelhos onde não se percebe exactamente o que é que objectivamente se perdeu, mas muitos crêem que o que realmente

se perdeu foi o próprio paraíso, a versão bucólica e pastoral do mundo rural perfeito ... (60)

Domingues suggests that lamentations of rural decline derive entirely from nostalgic sentiment as opposed to engagement with robust sociological or demographic evidence: “Maior do que a perda, é a consciência da perda o que verdadeiramente importa” (“Destruição 2). To a certain extent, these unsubstantiated assumptions of rural demise have been weaponized by contemporary successors to the dictatorship’s reactionary ideology: in 2019, Chega strategically deployed the language of “extinction” when participating in a “concentração pelo mundo rural” (Lusa/Jornal de Abrantes).

Clearly, such sentiments are not new or unique to the Portuguese case: the pastoral scholar Terry Gifford dates the concept of a lost rural idyll back to the Roman poet Virgil’s *Eclogues*, which romanticized Greece’s Arcadia region (cf. 14). Since that time, Gifford argues, Arcadia has functioned as a “literary distancing device [from the present]” (19), and as “a poetic paradise, a literary construct of a past Golden Age in which to retreat by linguistic idealisation” (20–21). For Raymond Williams, manufactured mourning for a seemingly departed rural past is a continuous historical “escalator,” potentially stretching back to Eden (cf. 16), which deliberately obscures material realities and transformational socioeconomic processes in both countryside and city. Williams summarizes this “false consciousness” in the following terms:

I felt, because I think I had been told, that the rural experience, the working country, had gone ..., and that as time went by this would be so everywhere. I accepted this, at one level, for much longer than now seems possible.... And I cannot clearly remember when I suddenly realized that it was not really true at all. (430)²

In accordance with such comments, one can describe anxieties in contemporary Portugal of a “fim do mundo rural” as a *perceived* loss, with sentimental

² Williams’s iconic study *The Country and the City* (1973) conducts an anticapitalist critique of the historically shifting portrayals and socioeconomic realities in England’s agricultural and urban environments. Although I do not view Rui Lage’s poetry in the same political terms, Williams’s observations demand a critical understanding of urban vs. rural dynamics in all literary production.

attachment to certain “rural ways of life” taking precedence over a practical engagement with evolving material realities in the Portuguese countryside.

Indeed, this notion of rural decline is a repeated trope in Portuguese cultural production over the past century. As Viriato Soromenho-Marques notes, “Portuguese literature presents the image of a countryside that has been shaped by human labor for millennia” (18–19), with demographic shifts away from agricultural work subject to “eschatological” treatment in numerous instances. This is apparent in novels by Fernando Namora, Soeiro Pereira Gomes (cf. Soromenho-Marques 19) and, most memorably, in Aquilino Ribeiro’s “quasi-apocalyptic” 1958 narrative *Quando os lobos uivam*, which portrays a Beira Alta community’s doomed struggle for survival against government afforestation and destructive intervention (cf. Haysom 5–15). Furthermore, multiple Portuguese films of the past two decades have contemplated whether the nation’s agricultural communities and “traditional pastoral practices” are doomed. Such themes are exemplified by Jorge Pelicano’s documentary *Ainda há pastores?* (2006), Miguel Gomes’s playful “docudrama” *Aquele querido mês de agosto* (2008), João Pedro Plácido’s drama *Volta à terra* (2014), and Pedro Clérigo’s *Nós, portugueses: Nascer para não morrer* (2020), among other examples (cf. Vieira 127–31). While these examples reveal some legitimate concerns regarding demographic changes within Portugal’s inland agricultural communities (e.g., emigration, declining birth rates, population aging), they also reinforce the culture of mourning, bereavement, and elegy that has increasingly characterized perceptions of rural settlements within Portuguese society, regardless of actual material conditions within the country.

The “Mournings” of Rui Lage

Enter the author Rui Lage who, in addition to his career as a prolific poet and novelist, has engaged in detailed academic study of elegiac literature. Tellingly, Lage’s doctoral thesis *A elegia portuguesa nos séculos XX e XXI: Perda, luto e desengano* expands the definition of “elegy” beyond the standard definition of mourning/commemorating human death, to encompass the loss of childhood innocence, birthplace, or rural “memory”:

[A] terra natal é amiúde concebida enquanto metáfora da terra mater, das raízes primordiais, da origem cósmica. O que origina,

por sua vez, alguma contaminação com a elegia da natureza quando esta é entendida como expressão da perda de um estado ideal de harmonia e inocência primitivas entre o ser humano e a Natureza (inclusive de harmonia estética: a Arcádia), mas não quando o objecto da perda é a natureza domesticada e aculturada, deplorando-se nesse caso a degradação ou extinção do mundo rural e o desaparecimento de rituais campestres arcaicos. (35)

Lage, then, clearly regards “o fim do mundo rural” to be a legitimate object of mourning and, therefore, a potential theme of poetic elegy. To understand his own poems, however, it is necessary to consider certain “transgressive” and “resistant” characteristics of modern (post-1900) elegiac poetry, as outlined by Jahan Ramazani and R. Clifton Spargo.³ According to Ramazani, “modern poets reanimate the elegy not by slavishly adopting its conventions; instead, they violate its norms and transgress its limits. They conjoin the elegiac with the anti-elegiac, at once appropriating and resisting the traditional psychology, structure, and imagery of the genre” (1). Spargo, for his part, concentrates on “an aspect of dissent that is proper to mourning” (6), affirming that “as I describe herein a strain of melancholic or anti-elegiac lyric that foresees no end to mourning ... [,] I attribute ethical meaning to the elegy’s resistances to elegiac convention, to social commemoration, and even to the mourner’s own wishfulness” (13). If one is to project these concepts of “anti-elegiac” and “dissenting” mourning back onto Lage’s own poetic work, the poet’s attitudes toward the communities in inland Portugal that he initially purports to “eulogize” become ambiguous and somewhat dissident.

Native to Porto, Lage has repeatedly evoked his ancestral links to the northeastern region of Trás-os-Montes, loosely describing his poetry as an “elegia pela perda do campo” (“Lançamento”). The poet published five collections on rural Portugal between 2004 and 2016 (*Berçário* [2004], *Corvo* [2008], *Um arraial português* [2011], *Rio torto* [2014] and *Estrada nacional* [2016]), in what the author and critics have termed a “ciclo do mundo rural” (Pinto)—a poetic rendering of twenty-first-century rural Portugal. Throughout these collections,

³ Lage’s dissertation incorporates Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (1994) and Spargo’s *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (2004) into his own working definition of literary elegy.

numerous poems can be associated with the “demise” of this country’s agrarian settlements: *Corvo*, for example, is described by Osvaldo Manuel Silvestre as an “Arcadian” portrayal of “sobrevivência e resistência num interior desertificado” (“Et in Arcadia ego”), in which “a tribo transmontana era revisitada em modo elegíaco” (“E nós, portugueses, pimba!”). From this collection, one can highlight the pointedly named “Auto da horta destruída,” which depicts the country as a “widower” of its agricultural heritage (“Ficas viúvo, país, e até que falem / de novo os animais / o teu luto / dá pelo nome de turismo rural”) and gestures toward Portugal’s interior/littoral demographic divide, with its claim that only the “paltry” and “salty” half of the nation still survives: “Fábulas contadas, sobra / a metade mais salgada / e pífia de Portugal” (Lage, *Corvo* 13). In Lage’s *Um arraial português*—which takes as its theme the Portuguese village summer festival—“Agosto em Portugal” depicts communities that are forgotten and left in darkness outside of the summer festival season: “Em tal museu de trevas, / dir-se-ia ninguém esperar o espírito do povo / a caminho da montanha”; “tias viúvas arejaram de véspera / salas há muito trancadas” (19). Moreover, Lage’s collection *Rio torto* contains reflections on socioeconomic change in Portugal’s rural settlements, as seen in the poem “Motor de rega,” which, in an environmentally conscious manner, laments the pollution caused by modern agricultural machinery: “Pã em agonia, / tossia nos remansos fluviais / fumos de gasóleo queimado” (15).

It is Lage’s *Estrada nacional* that has garnered the greatest national acclaim, however; following its publication by the prestigious Imprensa Nacional/Casa da Moeda, this collection won the Inês de Castro Literary Prize in 2016 and the Ruy Belo Prize in 2018. José Carlos Seabra Pereira, president of the Inês de Castro Prize’s jury, praised the book’s ludic tone (“cética, cheia de humor e de ironia”) and its depiction of a rural existence “[que] às vezes se quer esquecer que ainda existe, mas que está lá” (qtd. in Simões). Critical reviews of *Estrada nacional* have concentrated on its “telluric” characteristics (cf. Pinto), its evocation of the mental landscapes of childhood (cf. Pinto), and its “sentido de um mundo que morreu” (Cortez 16). António Carlos Cortez’s “Rui Lage: Um bucolismo intranquilo” is particularly insistent on the poet’s affiliation with bucolic “linha de continuidade” within Portuguese poetry (dating back to Sá de Miranda and Camões), although he does acknowledge certain ambivalences in this collection’s discourse; for Cortez, despite the “tom funéreo” that traverses many of these poems, Lage’s “bucolismo” contains “finigimento,” “caricatura,” and “um olhar ... frio” (16–17). As insightful

as these readings are, I do not believe that they do sufficient justice to *Estrada nacional*'s complexity and internal contradictions regarding the poet's treatment of "rural decline," nostalgic tropes, and the elegiac mode.

First of all, although *Estrada nacional* loosely divides its poems into parts I ("Partida") and II ("Regresso"), initially suggesting a dynamic of departure and return, the poet has himself complicated this apparently fixed structure, defining his collection as "[uma] metáfora para o vaivém entre o passado e o presente, ... entre as origens, as raízes, e o futuro" ("O vaivém"). Significantly, Lage has described this 2016 collection as a "farewell" to the topic of rurality in his literature ("é a minha despedida. Quer porque esgotei já o meu olhar sobre esse mundo E também porque há o reconhecimento de que o regresso é impossível" ("O vaivém"), but such comments do not preclude readings of this poetry as interrogating or undermining the notion of *finality*. Rather, they suggest that the poet's thematic interest in "o mundo rural" has been definitely exhausted through this 2016 collection.

Before analyzing the poems themselves, I must first acknowledge the paratext: Lage cites two Portuguese poems as a kind of epigraph/epitaph at the beginning of *Estrada nacional*, which sets an apparently "elegiac" tone for the collection. The first of these is Fernando Pessoa's line "Aldeias perdidas já para viagens e nos mapas nada ..." (7)—from "O último cisne"—which suggests the demise of villages in national cartography, if not necessarily in physical reality. The second citation is somewhat more ambivalent, with its evocation of Manuel António Pina's "Farewell Happy Fields": "(adeus palavras, sonhos de beleza, / montanhas desoladas da infância / donde tudo se via: a alegria / e a cegueira do que não se via)." Here, it is significant that Lage maintains the original poem's use of parentheses, which, alongside Pina's references to "seeing the blindness of what could not be seen," posit *Estrada nacional* as an explanation, revelation, and reevaluation of the circumstances facing rural Portugal in the early twenty-first century.

The Poisons of the Past

Regarding Lage's poetry itself, part I depicts a journey (or series of journeys) across Portugal's interior, which is geographically traceable only through the roads and motorways that give the poems their names, including "EN 15" (Estrada Nacional No. 15, which links Porto and Bragança), "EM 582" (Estrada Municipal

582, in Guimarães), and “A4—Viaduto sobre o Rio Corgo” (the A4 motorway connecting Matosinhos and Amarante). These titles overwhelmingly denote spaces of transit through the Portuguese countryside, as opposed to rooted settlement or habitation. The poetry of part II eschews localized titles in order to offer a space for reflection, with poems that make direct reference to rural Portugal’s apparent decline: “Museu rural,” “Louvor da vida no campo,” and “Confissão póstuma de um tal que traiu os antepassados.” There are also two explicit “elegies” in this second half (“Elegia de Pã na ETAR” and “Elegia de Maria do Carmo”), although my analysis of *Estrada nacional* is more concerned with poems that problematize this notion of “elegy” (or, indeed, “eulogy”). In order to emphasize the ways in which this collection subverts and complicates preconceptions of “rural demise,” I conduct close readings of specific poems that illustrate this tendency most patently: “EN 15,” a suite of three poems entitled “Aldeias vistas da estrada às três da madrugada” (“EN 308,” “EM 582,” “EM 557”), “Google maps,” “Museu rural,” and, finally, “Confissão póstuma de um tal que traiu os antepassados.” As I argue, Lage not only challenges the vague sentiments of ruralist nostalgia inherent to reactionary political projects, but also proposes ecologically conscious ways of perceiving Portugal’s natural environment that surpass anthropocentric understandings of “o mundo rural.”

First, let us consider the collection’s opening poem “EN 15,” from which I transcribe the first of its three stanzas:

Encosto à berma da estrada nacional 15
 para tirar a bexiga do aperto
 em que se achava.
 Faço pontaria a uma esteva
 cativa de moita empoeirada,
 na caruma um delta depois
 uma enseada.
 Miro de soslaio as aldeias agarradas,
 quais carraças,
 ao dorso insone dos montes
 e verto, sob um pinheiro, as toxinas do passado. (11)

At the outset, this stanza is one of the most evocative and humorous renderings of someone relieving their bladder that I have yet come across in Lusophone poetry. Specifically, the expression “*verto as toxinas do passado*” can be translated as either “I pour out the poisons of the past” or, more vulgarly, “I piss out the poisons of the past.” While I would favor the latter, given that the poetic subject is indeed urinating in this poem, both of the above readings firmly reject “poisonous” nostalgic perceptions of an imagined bucolic past. Indeed, the first three lines of the stanza suggest that Portugal’s rural heritage is, in fact, undesired waste; a redundant, painful nuisance that “tightens the bladder,” with the imperfect tense (“*em que se achava*”) implying a preexisting pain or discomfort. This disparaging impression of the past is contradicted, however, by the fact that the poetic subject aims his liquid waste at a rock rose that is being “held captive” by a dusty thicket, thereby “freeing” the plant and creating a protective “*enseada*” (cove) on the pine-laden earth. In parallel to this metaphor, the poetic subject observes the surviving villages strewn across the surrounding hillsides with scorn: the sharp assonance of “*as aldeias agarradas*” instantly implies animosity toward those settlements, which are anthropomorphized as “ticks” clinging to the backs of the hills, keeping their natural hosts “*insone*” (restless) at night. This image holds some affinity with ecocritical discourse, particularly when one considers Michel Serres’s comments regarding humankind’s “parasitic” inhabitation of the natural world (cf. 36); for Serres, equilibrium between the human “parasite” and nonhuman sentient beings must be restored through a “natural contract” of “symbiosis” between species, in order to prevent the destruction of both. Lage’s evocation of the tick, then, suggests an implicit critique of anthropocentric exploitation of Portugal’s “*mun-do rural*.”

At the same time, Lage sows confusion concerning the legitimacy of bucolic, idealistic commemoration of surviving rural communities. Namely, it is significant that the poet subject’s view of the villages surrounding him is askew (“*de soslaio*”), suggesting that his perception of such settlements is distorted and, therefore, potentially erroneous or misguided. Accordingly, the reader’s own view of “*as aldeias*” and “*o passado*” throughout the poem becomes uncertain and inconclusive. In the second stanza, the poetic subject is interrupted by a mysterious renegade vehicle, “*outro carro fugitivo*,” which, in the final stanza, is allegorized as a dubious and untrustworthy future (“*só pode ser o futuro, esse gatuno*”). From the first poem of this collection, then, Lage’s playful “*vaivém*” between “*passado*,

presente e futuro” becomes apparent, with Portugal’s rural heritage and future prospects for its agrarian communities already brought into question.

With this paradigm of ambivalence established, the three poems that comprise *Estrada nacional*’s “Aldeias vistas da estrada às três da madrugada” section metaphorize Portugal’s villages in different ways, although each of them commemorates rural decline (and, simultaneously, undermines that commemoration). The first of these is “EN 308,” which I transcribe here in its entirety:

São lustres no vestíbulo das serras,
castiçais, crostas incandescentes
que amortalham calvários passados,
são braseiras viradas nas encostas
por algum deus desastrado,
farinha de estrelas peneirada
no firmamento
e ardida na masseira do fomento
e da coesão regional.

Vou aprendendo a esquecer-las, sem poesia
me demoro agora junto às coisas,
calo-me, desconverso, descaminho,
contento-me só com o pão e o vinho,
porque é demasiado tarde
para se ter chegado tarde,
e porventura um pouco cedo para o medo. (18)

What is immediately striking at the beginning of this poem is the relegation of “aldeias” to “lustres [chandeliers] no vestíbulo das serras”—mere decoration/lighting in a mountain range that has been reduced to the status of a hotel vestibule; in other words, a “rural tourism” resort, as opposed to a settled, inhabited space. The subsequent line “castiçais, crostas incandescentes” reinforces this notion of illumination, but its biting alliteration and harsh consonance also suggest resentment or anger on the part of the poetic subject. Furthermore, the effect of such artificial lighting is ambivalent, in that it shrouds (and therefore

obscures) past martyrs (“calvários passados”), while the poem’s description of the villages as “upturned braziers” denotes both the destructive potential of human settlement and the annual threat of forest fires. One is again reminded of Serres’s conception of a human presence as a self-destructive parasitic entity, which the poem further develops in its image of a “flour of stars” that is “filtered through the heavens” and, subsequently, burned (rather than baked) “in the mixing bowl of development and regional cohesion.” Here, Lage alludes to twenty-first-century government policies of “regional development” and “territorial cohesion,” and makes a further reference to seasonal forest fires (through the verb “arder”), implying that each of these elements is somehow implicated in the ruin of Portugal’s rural interior.

In the second stanza, Lage’s enjambment of the first two lines, through the subclause “sem poesia,” creates a noticeable semantic ambivalence: given that the end of the first line is not punctuated, this section can be read as either “I’m learning to forget the villages *without poetry*” or “Learning to forget the villages, *without poetry I linger.*” Although both of these potential interpretations reflect upon nostalgic sentiment and attempt to romanticize Portugal’s agrarian past, the latter implies a rather more atavistic attitude than the former, which explicitly rejects a “poeticized” commemoration of deceased rural communities. In common with the first stanza’s reference to the “Firmament,” the second stanza evokes Catholic iconography through elements of the Holy Communion (“contento-me só com o pão e o vinho”), which gestures toward impending sacrifice as well as impending resurrection. Finally, the poem ends on a note of purgatory, when the poetic subject declares that it is “too late to have arrived late, and perhaps too early for fear.” This incompleteness of rural demise (and consequently, of Portugal’s collective mourning process) is a theme that permeates several other poems in *Estrada nacional*.

Directly after “EN 308,” “EM 582” also deploys the language of bereavement in its depiction of Portugal’s inland villages, while using distinct poetic devices. An abbreviated transcription of this poem follows:

Perdem-se em corta-matos,
trepam encostas, vão de tochas
penitentes, por íngremes caminhos,
pernoitar nos vales despovoados

com rios encaixados em fragas rumorosas.

Muitas estão mortas, longínquas
como estrelas de neutrões,
fechadas umas após outras as portas
que o progresso não pôde restaurar.

Impune as frequenta o assobio do vento,
o mesmo que há milénios nos sacode desatento.
(19)

In contrast to the preceding poem, this one personifies the villages as active agents in the landscape, which “lose themselves” on cross-country treks while wielding “penitent torches” —an image of pilgrimage. Curiously, these “aldeias” are portrayed as exercising a transitory, “overnight” presence within the countryside (via the verb “pernoitar”), as if they are themselves tourists rather than inhabitants of these “depopulated valleys.” The following stanza signals the demise of many of these villages, which clearly contradicts Lage’s animation of these same settlements in earlier lines. The poet’s description of the aldeias as “longínquas” indicates a distance or remoteness from “civilization” that is simultaneously geographical, temporal, and cultural, whereas their comparison to “neutron stars” implies a prior demise—a death that significantly predates the poetic subject’s observation of them in the present. There is also some semblance of (nonhuman) continuity and survival in rural Portugal, though, with Lage’s reference to “the wind that has been shaking us for millennia.”

“EM 557,” the final poem of this sequence, portrays a reduced number of remaining villages in their final death throes, suffering gradual desertion and being reclaimed by natural vegetation:

Muitas agonizam à míngua de olhos
que nos espiem as andanças
rua acima, rua abaixo.
Algumas subsistem porque dão passagem
para sítios mais povoados, mas não sei o que comem
enquanto as come a paisagem,

[...].
Certas, mastigadas pelas silvas,
salivam não sei que passadas contrições,
outras, submersas por barragens,
têm sinos onde os peixes vêm desovar.
[...].
Podem morrer à vista, estropiadas,
rosas degoladas nas portagens do poente
— sois vós, cidades, que sangrais
pelo umbigo. (20)

An initial observation is that this poem does not depict communities that are already dead, but that are in the process of dying or that are at risk of death. Personifying the “aldeias” once again, the first stanza begins by describing the desertion of village neighborhoods (and, consequently the lack of “nosy neighbors”), before acknowledging the limited survival of some communities owing to the fact that they are favorably located places of transit. Nevertheless, Lage’s caveat “mas não sei o que comem / enquanto as come a paisagem” suggests a dual crisis of starvation and decay. The second stanza deploys past participles to indicate multiple ways in which the villages have been “murdered,” including being “chewed up by trees” and “submerged by dams”—a possible reference to the aforementioned submersion of Vilarinho da Furna in the early 1970s. Once again, though, Lage highlights nature’s survival *after* human habitation, as indicated by his reference to “fish spawning” above drowned church bells. In the final stanza, the poetic subject does not affirm definite demise, but only the potential for death (“*podem* morrer à vista”), with the images of “maimed villages” and “decapitated roses” functioning as a worst-case scenario rather than an inevitable reality. Finally, the poem addresses the country’s “cidades” (using the archaic “sois vós”), to imply a synergy between the “bleeding” taking place within small rural communities and the ailing health of the national body politic. Such imagery might be viewed as having direct political relevance, given the reactionary Chega’s recent success in stoking anger and resentment within Portugal’s “*mondo rural*.”

Maps, Museums, and Confessions

Numerous poems in part II (“Regresso”) establish an explicit connection between the destruction caused by twenty-first-century infrastructure and agricultural policies, and the scarcity of human life within Portugal’s countryside. This is true of “Louvor da vida no campo,” for example, which contains the lines “Louvadas as auto-estradas e à conta delas as serras / esfoladas, [...] As estrelas dão-se a morte lá no alto, / e só nelas nas suas vastas e atrozes parcelas, / no seu mudo e disperso povoamento, / ainda há vida no campo” (50). Nonetheless, “Google maps” is significant for its reflections on how an increasingly digital and virtual mode of human existence has become physically detached from its rural historical precedents. Specifically, the poetic subject ironically contemplates the ways in which software can be used to “map out” the remains of previous human settlement (“poderás / mapear os pastos e os pomares / onde suaram derreados teus avós, [...] *zoom in zoom out* no cemitério / que lhes arrecada os ossos” (46). Simultaneously, the poem denounces the alienation that such mapping effects produce (“Estarás sempre com o campo. / E sem tocares o chão, / sem sujares os sapatos”), with the sibilance of “sem,” “sujares,” and “sapatos” suggesting bitterness toward this state of affairs. Lastly, the final stanza of “Google maps” overtly denounces anthropocentric presumptions of what should constitute “life” and “existence” within twenty-first-century rural Portugal: “O homem não é a medida de todas as coisas. / O homem é aquele que mediu as coisas. / Somente à escala humana / as coisas morrem desmedidas.” In this declaration, Lage’s poem enters into a direct dialogue with Donna Haraway’s ecological notion of the “Chthulucene” epoch, which she describes as being “made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet” (55). Affirming that all forms of life are “at stake to each other,” Haraway defends a worldview according to which “human beings are not the only important actors,” “[t]he order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story” (55). Lage’s poem appears to view Portugal’s “mundo rural” in similar terms; while denouncing humanity’s lamentable detachment from the remnants of its past, the poetic subject rejects the erroneous narrative of rural decline—but only as long as human inhabitants can coalesce with their companion species and achieve natural equilibrium.

Immediately following “Google maps,” the curiously titled “Museu rural” is useful for examining the discourse surrounding rural decline as opposed to its reality. In this extremely intimate poem, the first-person poetic subject outlines numerous “home truths” regarding the fate of Portugal’s agricultural communities over recent decades:

Eu que não rezo, eu que não me mexo o que devia,
eu que desisti de cavar e regar, eu que levo livros
para a horta, e roupa de marca
e água de garrafa,
que me presto a vindimar só da parte da tarde
porque muito tempo nisso maça,
[...],
não me façam zelador deste museu
onde as estátuas estão todas mortas
e os quadros são todos falsos.

Porque nos retratos começais a não ser vós,
avós, e começo a não ser eu,
e um dia o vosso rosto será só meu,
um dia o vosso serei eu.
[...]
Então voltarei a estar convosco,
deposto a vosso lado sem desgosto,
em mausoléu onde bata categórico o sol
a salvo do inferno e a salvo do céu. (47)

From the first stanza, the poetic subject admits to having renounced traditional agricultural practices and to having adopted a touristic and consumerist attitude toward the countryside as an increasingly gentrified leisure destination (“levo livros / para a horta, e roupa de marca / e água de garrafa”), with a reference to Portugal’s “agritourism” industry: “me presto a vindimar só da parte da tarde / porque muito tempo nisso maça.” Hence, the subject demands to be disqualified from the role of “caretaker” within this rural museum, while simultaneously critiquing the redundancy and deceptiveness of the enterprise’s “dead statues” and

“false paintings” (“as estátuas estão todas mortas / e os quadros são todos falsos”). In subsequent lines, Lage’s concentration on his forefathers’ “retratos” (portraits) gestures toward a larger issue with the manner in which Portugal has memorialized its rural heritage: the country’s repeated claims of a “lost agrarian existence.” Specifically, the poetic subject’s conviction that his own face will one day occupy the place of his ancestors (“um dia o vosso rosto será só meu”), and that his body will be laid to rest alongside those of previous generations, holds considerable affinity with Raymond Williams’s critique of bucolic nostalgia as a continuous “escalator”: “Nostalgia, it can be said, is universal and persistent; only other men’s nostalgias offend. A memory of childhood can be said persuasively, to have some permanent significance.... What seemed a single escalator, a perpetual recession into history, turns out, on reflection, to be a more complicated movement” (16–17). In my view, “Museu rural” engages in a similar historical analysis to Williams, insofar as it reveals the cyclical commemoration of (and yearning for) rural antecedents. In this poem, Lage suggests that Portugal’s “mundo rural” is not simply deceased, but is instead evolving, characterized by distinct economic demands and material conditions (specifically, the economy of stress-relieving, relaxed *agroturismo* is replacing the serious agricultural toil of times past). Once again, the final lines of this poem produce imagery connected to purgatory, with the poetic subject imagining himself lying buried “em mausoléu onde bata categórico o sol / a salvo do inferno e a salvo do céu.” In this sense, the apparent “rural demise” with which Lage’s poetry confronts the reader is somewhat unfinished, or at least unresolved according to Catholic doctrine.

This inconclusive tone is further explored in *Estrada nacional*’s closing poem, which is somewhat fatalistically entitled “Confissão póstuma de um tal que traiu os antepassados”:

Perdoai-me, antepassados, perdoai-me avós
 porque embrutei como penedo e tive medo
 do vento, e receei não ter sustento;
 porque pastoreei pedras, ordenhei o ar
 [...];
 perdoai-me porque plantei e não colhi, mas antes me diluí
 em estéticos, iludidos regatos,
 porque quis regressar mas quando regresssei estava tudo morto.

[...]

Digo-me que voltarei quando for para velho,
para vergar-me ao lume em escuro canto que foi vosso.
Digo-me que definharei com a calma,
que escoarei a vida no campo
feito lesma nas ervas do pasto.

[...]

Quis regressar, mas estava tudo morto.
Até a minha alma tinha morrido.
Eu sou afinal o vosso maior inimigo.

Digo-me que voltarei, quando for para velho. (57–58)

In this instance, Lage's verse situates itself midway between the language of Catholic confession and the conventions of poetic apostrophe. Both of these traditions are problematized, however: first, instead of seeking pardon from God through the mediation of a priest ("forgive me father, for I have sinned"), the poem directly addresses agricultural grandparents and earlier ancestors; second, although this poem fulfills the criteria for apostrophe with its absent addressee, this lyrical tradition is undermined by the fact that Lage's poetic subject is *also* posthumous. Moreover, while the first two stanzas of "Confissão póstuma" repeatedly plead for forgiveness from the addressee ("Perdoai-me"), from the third stanza onward the poetic subject begins to question his *own* beliefs ("Digo-me que"), suggesting a change of tone from confessional to introspective.

Among the poetic subject's extensive list of "sins," one can highlight an abandonment of long-standing responsibilities for preserving traditional agrarian practices ("plantei e não colhi"), a blinkered idealization of rural areas ("me diluí / em estéticos, iludidos regatos"), and a decision to "shepherd" inanimate monuments/ornaments rather than agricultural livestock ("pastoreei pedras"). Accordingly, the notion of irrevocable damage caused by the poetic subject's neglect is implied in the desire to "wither away" alongside the shrinking, "slug-like" countryside ("Digo-me que definharei com a calma, / que escoarei a vida no campo / feito lesma nas ervas do pasto"), as well as the refrain "quis regressar mas quando regresssei estava tudo morto." Lage's use of the preterite and imperfect tenses in this line initially suggests finality, in that "everything was *already* dead"

when the poetic subject attempted to “return” (“regressar”). Nonetheless, it must be stressed that the poem does not proceed in a linear manner toward a definitive acceptance of rural decline; rather, Lage alternates between an acknowledgment of death (“estava tudo morto”) and another, more hopeful desire to “come back” (“voltar”): “Digo-me que voltarei quando for para velho.” In fact, it is on this second note that the final poem of *Estrada nacional* ends, on a single line, this time with a comma after “voltarei.” This interrupted cadence concluding Lage’s collection strongly indicates *denial* of what had previously seemed an accepted demise—the first of five stages of grief, according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (33)—once again leaving the poetic subject and the reader in a state of limbo. I would further venture that this end to “Confissão póstuma” expresses “unresolved mourning,” which, returning to Spargo, “becomes a dissenting act, a sign of an irremissible ethical meaning” (6).

Is it legitimate to describe Lage’s most recent poetry as an elegy or eulogy for a “lost agrarian Portugal,” then? I would suggest not; although the theme of rural decline permeates *Estrada nacional*, the poet’s tone is constantly elusive and ambivalent. These poems juxtapose elements of the traditional elegy with aspects of *antielegy* (cf. Ramazani 1) and, in several respects, “foresee no end to mourning” (Spargo 13), which defies the conventions of classical elegiac poetry. Do his poems commemorate or ridicule the death of agricultural communities, in this case within Portugal? I would reply that, while Lage’s poetry “pisses out the poisons of the past,” it does not piss *on* the past, so much as it pisses on excessively bucolic, hyperidealized preconceptions of the country’s rural heritage.

If, as the American philosopher John Davenport has argued, “the very notion of ultimacy is originally eschatological” (207), then extant anxieties regarding the “inexorable” or “definitive” decline of Portuguese rural communities can certainly be viewed as apocalyptic (or, indeed, postapocalyptic) in tone. However, Rui Lage’s *Estrada nacional* destabilizes the ultimacy and inevitability that has come to be associated with “o fim do mundo rural” in Portugal, with ironic, ambivalent, and internally contradictory poems that neither fully accept the death of such settlements nor engage in mourning for an apparently lost bucolic idyll. Instead, Lage’s poetry can be read as a form of “resistant elegy” and as a unique perspective on rural heritage in contemporary Portuguese cultural production. The result of this approach is twofold: on the one hand, these poems contest the simplistic, nostalgic, and atavistic claims of “o fim do mundo rural” that have characterized public

debates in Portugal over recent decades, and that have increasingly been adopted by populist, reactionary political movements such as Chega. On the other hand, Lage's collection repeatedly challenges anthropocentric assumptions in relation to the "survival" of Portugal's natural environment, defending a peaceful and productive coexistence between human and nonhuman sentient beings for centuries to come. In this way, the poisons of the past are indeed "pissed out," but the future of rural Portugal looks promising.

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