

vanitas
51, AVENUE D'IÉNA

A STORY BY Almeida Faria
AND A TRIPTYCH BY Paula Rego

With an introduction by Eduardo Lourenço



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years

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two vanitas

¶ In Almeida Faria's story, the Protagonist whom he resuscitates in such an extraordinarily dream-like way, regrets never having succeeded in buying one of those *vanitas* in which the beauty of life serves only to exalt death. Despite this, his fine story is entitled *Vanitas* and is not a portrait of the famous collector set against a backdrop of death, but that of a man with, literally, one foot in death and the other in life – as if life and death were two sides of the same coin – although by the time we find this out, it is always too late.

¶ His whole text seems to me as vivid as a well-dreamed dream. That was my first impression on reading it, like my feeling, as an adolescent, when I first read the venerable Edgar Allan Poe. I enjoyed stepping into his written dream as if it were my own, having once myself woken up in that same ascetic nabob's mansion, but lacking Almeida Faria's gift for recreating the atmosphere of that enchanted house.

¶ His evocation of the highly practical soul of that new magus from the East, who sought refuge from the atrocities of life amongst the flowers of Fantin-Latour, is both extravagant and precise. His story is, ultimately, a hymn to what does not die and, in that sense, is an *anti-vanitas vanitas*. It is a tale immersed in the pleasure of its own telling, the child of that always slightly perverse curiosity which we call 'art'. I loved the cool exaltation with which he walks, as if he were the 'medium' of that brilliant patron of the arts, through the garden of images that serves him as paradise. In *Vanitas*, I believe, his sense of irony and his ambiguous fascination with fiction as both everything and nothing, find their clearest and most exact voice.

* * *

¶ In the central panel of her triptych – which is half portrait of the artist in majesty, half realistic self-portrait – Paula Rego presides, arms folded, over the ceremony of life, caught between sleep where death is forgotten and life which, with eyes wide open, seems prepared to 'murder death', as Shakespeare so boldly put it. As if the ancient panoply of Christian *vanitas* paintings no longer had the power to remind us of our former state of nothingness. The folkloric scythe is in our hands now, without the fearful shadow of Goya, surrounded by all the toys with which we divert ourselves, indifferent to Time and its mortal music. As if this human assumption of Death now embodied the universal indifference with which we experience it and as if it were no longer the supreme muse installed in our heart in place of God, as a reminder of his existence. This *Vanitas* is not being used as a mask of God or of his absence, and that is precisely what makes it so magnificent. It is a contemporary-ascetic, almost child-like version of *Vanitas*. And perhaps, as far as we are concerned, that is what death is, a life without significance.

ALMEIDA FARIA

vanitas
51, AVENUE D'IÉNA

¶ *The nights I spent, in 1996, at the quasi-palace that Calouste Gulbenkian rebuilt in Avenue d'Iéna, Paris, gave me the idea for a story entitled Vanitas and which was published by the review Colóquio/Letras. Ten years later, Emilio Rui Vilar, president of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, suggested reprinting it as a book and, at my request, made available to me the unpublished exchange of letters between Saint-John Perse, the future Nobel Prize winner, and Calouste Gulbenkian, his patron during the difficult days of the poet's self-imposed exile. My curiosity wanted to know more about the collector's relationship with the works of art he acquired over the years, and in his letters I found an aesthetic sense and sophistication that made me eager to imagine my way into his mental world, taking, of course, certain fictional liberties and adding a few pages to the original story. Paula Rego later 'illustrated' this new version with her triptych Vanitas, a visual reflection on the concept of vanitas itself as an image of the precariousness of our frail human existence.*

A. F.

¶ I only realised that I had fallen asleep with the light on when I woke suddenly and noticed that the light shed by the two bedside lamps was trembling. Still only half-awake, I thought I could hear slow footsteps immediately overhead. Old wooden floors tend to creak with any change of temperature, so perhaps they were creaking in response to the cool of the night. Creak, yes, but make the walls shake? I got up and, bewildered and barefoot and still in my pyjamas, stumbled over to the door of the room and peered out into the corridor – silence, no one. I continued on to the next door, wider and taller, which once separated the servants’ quarters from the rest of the house. Nothing – only a bust on a column of the goddess Pallas Athene multiplied by the mirrors lining the gallery that led to the main part of the house. For a few brief seconds, I convinced myself that a pair of wings had just brushed past above me. I instinctively ducked, and, when I looked around, I saw in the mirrors a grotesque grimace of fear, my own. With the uncomfortable feel-

ing that I had witnessed a similar episode before, involving a monochordic raven once upon a midnight dreary, I walked across the marble landing and stopped at the foot of the staircase with its pale stone, oval steps and wrought-iron banister that matched the iron-work doors on the lift, and suddenly I heard again those slow footsteps. Who was the insomniac wandering about at that hour, on the top floor of a mansion in which no other guests were staying?

¶ The man at reception, when he handed me a card bearing the code to the front door, had warned me that he would not be back until Monday morning. The concierge and her husband, who lived in the basement, were too far away to hear anything. Perhaps the footsteps belonged to the guard who, according to the receptionist, usually took a nap on the sofa at the top of the principal staircase, next to the library. However, those heavy, deliberate footfalls were being made by someone determined to waken the dead.

¶ At the risk of coming face to face with thieves – or with one of those Furies whom the darkness unleashes from the cellars of even the most respectable houses – the demon curiosity propelled me upwards to the floor where the owner of the house had once kept his private apartments. At the top of the twenty-seven steps – for some reason I counted them – I encountered a carved wooden door of imposing size, the probable access to exceptional secrets. Very slowly, I opened it. In a rectangular room much longer than it was wide, at the head of a table surrounded by twenty or so chairs with leather seats and backs, and lit by a candelabra, sat a gentleman – whose face I thought I had seen before, although quite where I didn't know – looking calm and unsurprised. His pale skin and his old-fashioned suit, blue overcoat, silk tie, grey trousers, waistcoat and jacket, all came from another time or from outside of time.

¶ He was bald, had fleshy ears, a straight nose, and a round face dominated by a moustache and two very bushy eyebrows; he was staring at me, his bright,

Levantine eyes half-closed. The arch of his left eyebrow suggested a slightly ironic air of superiority, the air of a man accustomed to being in command. There was even a certain wry delicacy in the sharp, knowing smile, on the lips of someone who seemed to be more of a sybarite than a plutocrat. Despite his stocky build, short neck and square trunk, and the way he sat sunk in his chair, he cut a rather impressive figure. He motioned to me to take a seat. I muttered something about preferring to stand because of a problem with my back which made it difficult for me to sit down and get up. He shrugged and, in a guttural voice, almost ordered me to make myself comfortable. I couldn't possibly be more comfortable, I lied. Another shrug of the shoulders, followed by the usual questions proper to a host: was my room comfortable, was I pleased with the way my exhibition had been curated, had the paintings been hung to my satisfaction, would I like a cold drink? Although my mouth was dry, I said that I wasn't thirsty, and wanted nothing to drink at that moment. The

gentleman then launched into a long monologue, as if this had been his sole reason for wrenching me from sleep. In almost accentless French, he told me that this room had been one of the galleries of his ‘private hotel’ – this is how he described the mansion when not referring to it, more modestly, merely as his ‘house’ – and that the ample windows to my right had once provided the perfect light for his paintings, which is why some of his favourites had always hung there.

‘For example? *The Reading* by Fantin-Latour, for instance, a painting I know intimately. It’s in Lisbon now, but a few years ago, you would have seen it on that wall over there, between the columns and the door leading to one of my offices. It would be pleasant always to have near at hand the two sisters it depicts: in the shadows, slightly set back, the reader has her index finger poised on the line she had reached when she realised that her listener, who is looking away, lost in thought, was not paying proper attention. I deduce from the

austere dress and the black veil – or, is it perhaps a black mantilla – that the distracted daydreamer has suffered a recent bereavement. But the red shawl on her lap – on which she is resting her hands – and the very blue ribbon in her hair, give me pause for thought. One of the sisters was the painter’s fiancée, the other remained unmarried. Can you guess which was which?

¶ Without waiting for an answer, he went on: “The reader is the fiancée, Victoria; the fair future sister-in-law is Charlotte. I would have chosen the latter; Fantin, however, married the former, an amateur painter, a frequent visitor to the Louvre, a friend of other artists and the subject, at around that time, of a portrait by Degas; and yet, despite all this, I feel that it was Charlotte he adored, as evidenced by the number of times he painted her. Perhaps the feeling was mutual, although it’s hard to tell from the lovely spinster’s eyes and her haughty demeanour. I sought out other portraits of her: the Musée de Lille’s seventeenth-century-style portrait in red pencil; the pastel – a technique Degas took from the

Rococo period – in the Rijksmuseum at Otterlo; and the one that moved from the Jeu de Paume to the Musée d’Orsay and which you saw yesterday. How do I know that? I was there as well. Fantin often takes me to see the new museum. On the way, I drop in at the apartment that once belonged to me, at 27 Quai d’Orsay, and which I kept on after this house was finished. Whatever the nature of Charlotte’s relationship with her brother-in-law, the fact is that Fantin infected me with his enthusiasm. The interiors in which she appears are, along with his *natures mortes*, his finest works. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but the Lisbon painting, with its vase of flowers, combines both genres in the same canvas: the *nature morte* and the intimacy of a family portrait. I dislike using the term *nature morte* to describe these depictions of flowers, food or cutlery, of books, papers, domestic objects or musical instruments. It would be more correct to call them *still-lives* or *Stilleben*, but in French I have no option. A friend of mine used to say, just to poke fun, that I was more on the side of *natures vives*, since for me



FANTIN-LATOURE, *The Reading*, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

natures mortes are *natures vives*. And Fantin's – of which I owned several – are more *vives* than any others. I donated a very late painting of some *Roses* to the Museu das Janelas Verdes in Lisbon, and I was foolish enough to give another – of a basket of apples and pears, a vase and a knife – to a Mr Cayrol, the director of an oil company with whom I did some very good deals. Fortunately, the painting I gave to Mr Cayrol ended up in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Do you know it? Young people nowadays travel so much that I really don't know how they'll fill their time when they reach my present state. Of course, this business of life and death is very relative. Life is a brief wind, but so is death for those who choose to continue the chain of dying and being born. I don't want that, no, *nevermore*. I lived well, and the joys of art make my situation more than bearable.'

¶ He stopped speaking for a moment, as if afraid he had said too much. My silence must have irritated him. To break it, he asked if I had seen the still-life

by Fantin in the Musée de Lyon, which Claudel described as *carré de silence*. No, I hadn't seen the Lyon painting or, indeed, many others. My ignorance calmed him, and, feeling reassured, he went on:

‘I continued to loan paintings by Fantin and by others to diverse and disparate places, first to the British Museum and the National Gallery in London, then to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and thus I was deprived of them until I had built and restored part of this ‘private hotel’, whose cellars – lined in white tiles, just like the corridor outside the room where you’re staying – were fitted with reinforced doors, so that I could store the paintings down there if I needed to. I gave ‘my’ works of art space to breathe and I devoted the same attention to them as I did to the Church of St Sarkis in London, a project I commissioned in order to have somewhere to house both my mausoleum and the cenotaph in memory of my parents and of the Armenian martyrs. Did you know that, in a single day, many thousands of Armenians were massacred, in

an attempt to eradicate our race once and for all? I turned fifty in that year, and I wept like a child. But I don't usually speak about the horrors we've suffered, nor do I nurse any resentments. I was a citizen of the world, and felt no more bound to Scutari, Istanbul, where I was born, or to Armenia, which I only visited after I had abandoned your existence, than to London where I became a British citizen in 1902, or to Paris and Lisbon, cities I never grow weary of. Not having been much given to religious fervour, I worshipped only two gods: art and nature. Nature has a repellent face: bestiality, death and stench. Art, however, rises above all that, even when it's dealing with terror or portraying ugliness. Art can be disquieting and terrifying – in the way that angels are said to be terrifying – but it also consoles and pacifies. Besides, I don't know if angels *are* terrifying; I imagine them flying, invisible and untouchable, between the dead and mortals. Now that I have ceased being reincarnated and have stepped free of the cycle of successive rebirths, I do not intend join-

ing their circles, something which I both regret and don't regret. Angels must be alarmingly immaterial. Nature is more palpable. Not that I was mad about nature. When I bought a property in Normandy, I didn't even go and live there. I bought it in order to design and create an English garden and park. I started the project two years before the last war. At weekends, I would stay at the Normandie, which was, at the time, the best hotel in Deauville, and then I would spend the day directing, and correcting, the suggestions made by my landscape artist. On other weekends, I would walk in the Bois de Boulogne, in order to learn about botany, and note down the names of the trees and bushes I intended to plant, forming a mental image of the park I dreamed of having. What attracted me was that I could shape it in my own way.

‘I was luckier with this house, which served both as my private museum and my official residence. It was my wife and my children, Nubar and Rita, who actually lived here. I came because of the family, because of commercial and

social contacts, in order to control things, check the finances, keep discipline amongst the staff, and generally put up with the more tedious aspects of being a millionaire. I was in the financial heart of the city, near the banks with whom I worked, and I only began to like the house when I gathered together under its roof some of the furniture you will have seen round and about and the collections that finally went to Lisbon, and which led me to spend whole days in this gallery, in the library or in my office, studying investments or contemplating my treasures. Wicked, envious people, even people very close to me, called me a miser, suggesting that I used to go through the waste-bins to make sure the secretaries weren't wasting paper. Nothing but lies and pettiness, of course, from people who did not understand that I preferred the company of my paintings to theirs. After supper, I would go to the Place Vendôme to sleep in my suite at the Ritz, alone or with whomever I wished. Not because I was a libertine, nor even, as I told my family, for reasons of security. The truth is

that I hated spending my days and my nights in the same place, and if I come back here now at night, it's because I no longer live here. No, my nights at the Ritz bore little resemblance to the licentious scenes depicted by Lafrensen, a secretive, sensual, Swedish painter, a number of whose works I owned. They were not even nights of passion. After a certain point, my one passion was the struggle to conquer and possess certain works of art, some at ridiculous prices, others at the cost of patience, persistence and not a little cunning, still others that proved impossible to attain. Have you never noticed how few still-lives I have in my collection? One of them, the largest and showiest, by Jan Weenix, used to be on display above the fireplace in the Salon Rond, with its long-tailed peacock and its hunting trophies, including a dead swan in rather dubious taste. There's another, smaller, more discreet one by Monet, which I never much liked. My favourite, not surprisingly, was by Fantin, now in Lisbon; it shows a round vase of mauve and old-rose hydrangeas on a cloth whose folds



JAN B. WEENIX, *Peacock and Hunting Trophies* – detail, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



FANTIN-LATOURE, *Still Life*, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

are the work of a master painter – do you know the one I mean? There’s a dish full of fruit and a pudding plate with strawberries on it, next to a bunch of redcurrants, two cherries and half a peach, with the other half peach reflected in the shining blade of a knife which has been deliberately positioned at the edge of the table to show the painter’s skill at making it stand out in relief from the rest of the painting. And don’t you find the tiny reflection of the window in the curved surface of the vase sublime? To see if I’m right, why don’t you visit my museum when you go back to Lisbon?

‘I was always sad not to own anything by Whistler, Fantin’s American friend. He had the same almost feminine weakness for flowers, and in their portraits, they both had a way of not just showing bodies and faces, but including the house or the workplace of the people they painted. Yes, they were friends for many years, which is why their paintings are hung together now at the Musée d’Orsay. As you will doubtless have noticed, in *Homage to Delacroix*, Fantin

placed Whistler right in the middle next to him, as counterparts to Manet and Baudelaire on the other side. Of course, you were looking at the painting only yesterday, but you may perhaps have forgotten that the two men first met in the Louvre, when the young Fantin was copying details from Veronese's massive *Wedding Feast at Cana*. Fantin was a shy, introverted, unremarkable young man, scraping a living by making copies of famous paintings. During the winter, he would sit in bed drawing because the house had no heating. Whistler was earning enough to buy Fantin the occasional bowl of consommé at the Café Molière and to invite him to London, where he installed him in his brother-in-law's house. Fantin reciprocated by introducing Whistler to Courbet, who went on to paint the portrait of Whistler's Irish model as *La Belle Irlandaise*. Do you know it? Now she really *was* a beauty!

¶ There was a pensive silence before he took up the thread again. 'Whistler then introduced Fantin to Swinburne, who was living in Paris at the time and

sported long, Romantic, auburn locks; in fact, I went to see Dante Gabriel Rossetti's portrait of him in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. And Swinburne, as part of this circular dance, introduced them to Rossetti's group of friends, who found rich, bohemian clients for both of them. Fantin felt as much admiration for the ease and wealth of the British bourgeoisie as he felt respect for the old masters. To go back to Whistler, though – who spent part of his adolescence living like a prince in St Petersburg, where his father, working directly for the Czar, was in charge of building the Moscow railway – I made enquiries in St Petersburg to see if any of his early paintings were available. Alas, there was nothing for sale. I even went to Stockholm, where I go quite often to see and see again Christian Thum's skulls crowned with laurels; the sumptuous simplicity of Osias Beert's cherries; or the painting by Jan Davidsz de Heem of glasses of wine, fruit, open oysters and even a snail, with the sun glinting on its horns, advancing across a red cloth; or the tulips with frog and

butterflies by Johannes Bosschaert. But no Whistler. I never visited St Petersburg in that other life, although I negotiated with the Soviet department of antiquities, who sold me works from the Hermitage. I paid dealers I knew, who were expert at such transactions, but always in vain. It was one of my great frustrations, just as I never managed to buy one of those mysterious still-lives known as *vanitas*, which translate into images the words *memento, homo, quia pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris*.

“Those vivid depictions of fruit and flowers where, perversely, there is always a faded petal, a rotten core – some evidence of putrefaction; the wealth of the Earth out of which worms and mould suddenly emerge; molluscs and insects laden with messages, the fly symbolising perhaps the devil or evil, the snail whose shell alludes, according to some, to the emptiness of riches, to the hollow drum of vainglory and fame. How I struggled to obtain one of these marvels! Unfortunately, the good ones never came on the market; those who

owned them didn't want to let them go, or else they were already in museums, in the Louvre, in Berlin and Vienna, and in the great Dutch collections. I went to Strasbourg especially to see *The Great Vanity* by Stoskopf. You don't know it? Oh, but you should. There is the hourglass, the skull, the world as theatre – an engraving shows some character from a harlequinade, I can't remember which. It's worth going there just to see it, and I speak as one who has made many, many visits to the very best museums in the world. Unfortunately, in my previous life, I never went to America because, just as I was about to, war broke out. How did I know that you would appreciate such works? Do you not find it odd that I didn't interrupt you when you were reading that writer Herbert?

¶ Only a ghost could know what I had been reading before I fell asleep! I had, indeed, been reading a few pages by Zbigniew Herbert about Jan Simonsz van der Beeck, who adopted the name Torrentius and was admired in his time as the most perfect imitator of visible life, who was forgotten for three centu-

ries and has only recently been rediscovered. An enigmatic, semi-clandestine painter who would make a good companion for me in this house where I am about to exhibit *The Tears of Eros*, which I never imagined would ever be shown in such a solemn place. When they invited me to present the *whole* series, emphasising the word *whole*, I accepted without hesitation because I loved the idea of coming to Paris and spending entire days in the Louvre. I am so obsessed by painting that I judge a city purely by the quality of its fine arts museums. Years ago, Paris, for me, began in front of certain canvases in the Louvre and ended minutes before the museum closed, when the zealous guards would hustle me out of one of those rooms in which there was always something I needed to have just one more look at. These were rooms that made me levitate – enough in themselves to justify the whole trip – and which have become even more attractive now that one can see from the windows the interplay between the lightness of the glass pyramids, the effect of the wind

on the water in the triangular pools and the concentrated exuberance of the façades of what was once the royal courtyard. I was stirred, too, by the challenging contrast between my scandalous drawings, never before shown, and the sober seriousness of the vestibule of this small Olympus in Avenue d'Iéna, whose rules and foibles the housekeeper had explained to me on my arrival, as the Art Déco lift – made out of glass, wood and wrought iron and with its own upholstered bench – bore us unhurriedly up to the second floor.

¶ I had a glimpse then of how splendid the house must have been when its owner lived there. The doors and their bevelled mirrors – with hinges and locks and handles as yellow as the frames of the chairs, sofas and armchairs gilded in the same tones as the three-branch wall-lights – made the narrow gallery seem larger, reflecting, as they did, the furniture, the Persian rugs, the inlaid floor, and creating a series of intersecting images that left me feeling slightly disoriented. Through one of these doors, to the right as you go in, the housekeeper

showed me the so-called service corridor, with its black-and-white floor and with walls and ceilings tiled in the kind of off-white shade favoured by hospitals, and where the maids had once had their rooms. I was given room number ten, with a west-facing window, and I was pleased at the prospect of being able to enjoy the evening sun. I unpacked my bag and went out for a walk to stretch my legs. Strangers strolled past me looking relaxed, perhaps because it was the eve of the weekend, the beginning of the holidays for some, and of summer, with its long days, for everyone. At Étoile I took a taxi to the Musée d'Orsay, where I wanted to revisit Rimbaud and Verlaine in Fantin's *Coin de table*, and the group portrait in Manet's studio. But at no time had I noticed the presence of this intelligent, cultivated gentleman.

‘As you see, I did not interrupt you, either at the Musée d'Orsay or while you were reading. I respect those for whom reading is a pleasure, as it once was for me. As a young man, I dabbled in a little travel writing which merited

the praise of Saint-John Perse, and that love of reading lies perhaps at the root of my obsession with Fantin's *The Reading*. Perse was a good poet, I think, although rather too courtly for my taste. Do you know his poems? No? Well, they're not so much poems as oracular verses, with a kind of oceanic breath, an ardent, touching eloquence, with lines that roll in like slow waves. They made a real impression on me. In *Exile* – where he plays curious phonic games with the name Alexis (one of the names he was baptised with) and *exile* – the aura of words is as important as their meaning. Perhaps all poets are like that, I don't know, but he was the poet I read most, and I know that he savoured words as if they were concrete things with substance and weight. We shared a respect for the concrete. His studies of mineralogy, geology and ornithology – especially seabirds – and his skill as a sailor, together with his other talents, made of him a singer of the cosmos, of the immemorial world, of myths, the air, the sea, of the elements seen as if they had just been born. As an expert botanist, he advised

me on planting my Normandy garden and, after the war, he asked me if the lofty wisdom of my trees – that was how he put it – had been saved from the barbarian furies. He had a very intense relationship with nature, more intense even than mine, and the part of this house he liked best was not the library, but the roof terrace. Have you been up there? Before the war – in the brief years when I was gathering my treasures together in this house in order to surround myself with my past – tame pheasants used to flutter about the columns and the obelisks, and trout swam happily in the long pool-cum-fountain, where water leapt from spouts and jets. We would sit there talking in one slightly raised corner of the terrace, and Perse was not one of those timid, complex-ridden men; Perse was more than just a conversationalist, he was a hypnotist, who could mesmerise you with tales of his time in China, the politicians he had known, and scenes from his childhood in Guadalupe, Pointe-à-Pitre, in the West Indies.’

My host seemed to lose himself for a moment in those distant islands, from which he returned shortly afterwards: ‘Since you like reading, and if you were interested in getting to know Perse, I would suggest that you start with *Exile*, one of the books he sent by hand, via a friend, to Portugal, and where I found echoes of my own experience – far from my origins and far from my first language. Exile for both him and for me was not just *an* experience – no, exile was *our* experience, a *via sacra* which, given our nomadic condition, provided only temporary, provisional sojourns along the way. He liked disguises and resorted to various pseudonyms; indeed, in our six-year correspondence, he invented another – Douglas – which we both adopted. Out of a love of secrecy, neither of us ever gave interviews: being talked about was not one of our aims. I didn’t have the patience to speak to journalists, and they took their revenge by going to Lisbon and asking irrelevant questions of the staff at the Hotel Avis or to the Ritz in Paris or other hotels where I stayed. Perse’s case was different, and

I think his discretion brought him many licentious advantages. He married very late, when he was seventy-one, an age at which only poets or millionaires dare to marry. It is said, however, that before he married – his wife was American – he had had a series of long affairs. His fascination with the feminine can be seen in poems that resist classification – miniature epics, elegies or odes, all with something Biblical or erotic about them:

— *Jeunes femmes! et la nature d'un pays s'en trouve toute parfumée...*

lines to which I am perhaps particularly sensitive because I, too, worshipped at the altar of the feminine as can be seen in many of 'my' paintings, for as well as Fantin-Latour's sister-in-law, whom I have already mentioned, there's Ghirlandaio's *Portrait of a Girl*; a *Dona Leonor*, Charles V's sister and twice a queen – first of Portugal, and later of France – painted by Van Cleve; Rubens' portrait of *Helena Fourment*, Renoir's *Madame Claude Monet*, and others, like Velazquez's sad *Infanta Dona Mariana*, or the *St Catherine* attributed to



GHIRLANDAIO, *Portrait of a Young Woman* – detail, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



VAN CLEVE, *Queen Leonor* – detail, National Ancient Art Museum, Lisbon

Cranach. I battled for years to acquire a Goya lady which I never managed to buy, and I still consider that failure something of a defeat. In my lifetime, few had the privilege of seeing these paintings. I may have had a European education, but I preserved the habits of the Near East, and we Orientals never show our harems to anyone. A prudent custom. My artistic beauties had to make do with the privilege of my company. I don't consider myself – nor, I hope, do others – to be an old-style petty tyrant. But I dealt with 'my' works of art as a sultan would his harem, as a wise man treats his dearest friends and as a father worries about his children. After all the hard work they had cost me – the care with which I studied them, the way in which I haggled over prices or accepted them without argument, the way in which I did my very best for them once they were mine and housed them here so that they would never be separated – my one wish was to preserve them all in one place, to provide a safe haven where they would feel at ease, where they would, in short, be happy. Is it legiti-

mate to attribute to works of art the right to happiness? I believe so. I did not collect them in order to perpetuate my name as a collector, I collected them in order to have the right to see them whenever I wanted to. Since I had the necessary means, I was moved by the principle that every acquisition should be pondered and chosen with the greatest attention to detail, from the object's intrinsic quality to the authenticity of its patina. Of all these acquisitions, the most prestigious will always be that androgenous figure by Rembrandt, which some call *Alexander the Great* and others *Pallas Athene*, the one who sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus. I incline to the latter hypothesis. I like the idea that the head belongs to a woman, or, rather, to a goddess. It cost me so much effort and money and gave me such pleasure, that I made myself quite ill thinking that some harm might befall it. Today the painting is safe in Lisbon. Here, however, well lit and without any glass between us and her nobility, she revealed the full force of her character. Without 'my' masterpieces, this



RUBENS, *Portrait of Helena Fourment* – detail, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



VELAZQUEZ, *The Infanta Doña Mariana* – detail, National Ancient Art Museum, Lisbon

building became unrecognisable. And the terrace lost all its charm; the trout and the pheasants disappeared; for lack of water, the earth dried up; the box hedges, and all the other hedges too, withered and died; the flowerpots were left empty; and my dialogues were left hanging in the air for lack of anyone with whom I could talk.'

¶ He fell silent, in a moment of grief for the current desolate state of his roof terrace. I hesitated between sitting down and telling him to his face that my curiosity was beginning to wane. I feared that he might not even take any notice, and indeed, like a very talkative sleepwalker, he resumed his monologue: 'Collecting is like being a sultan whose subjects are not people, but things. It's a search for a harmony between certain objects towards which we feel protective, even though they will outlive us. Every time I bought something, I would allow both it and myself a period of adaptation in order to ascertain whether it and I belonged together. I took this honeymoon period to

unimaginable extremes. Even though reason told me otherwise, no one could convince me that my collection could live without me. I felt that these works, these books, these pieces of furniture had been reborn through me alone, and that before they had belonged to me, they had been vegetating in some indeterminate limbo, at the mercy of indefinable, but nonetheless terrible dangers, the danger of becoming damaged or of disappearing had they not been saved by my concern for them. While most passions threaten us with the risk of chaos, the passion of the collector has the advantage of imposing method on the immense disorder of the world and its objects. Every object collected has a story to tell, bringing with it traces of its creator and some of the joys and torments of its creation, torments that are sometimes violent, even though they may not always be obvious. Anyone who gives in to the impulse to hunt down beautiful objects, and thus has recourse to various tactics and stratagems, knows what I mean, knows that, like anyone else in the grip of passion, they will not



CRANACH, *Saint Catherine* – detail, National Ancient Art Museum, Lisbon

rest until they have attained what they want. Am I exaggerating when I say that objects live in the soul of the collector, just as the soul of the collector remains alive in those objects? Don't you agree? What do you think?

¶ My eyes, heavy with sleep, were already drooping when these questions fell upon me, obliging me to open them and murmur a polite 'No', which my host probably didn't even hear. Pricked by my conscience, I found myself thinking that I couldn't even remember where many of my own paintings were, for they leave me as soon as I finish them and blithely get on with their own lives, as if they had never belonged to me. They don't belong to me really, but I doubt this fact is of much interest to anyone else. Certainly not to this phantasmagorical host who was interested only in questions, not answers. Determined to prove that my presence predisposed him to soliloquy, he went on: 'On nights when I lose myself, I pick up a book, it doesn't matter what, and once again I understand my old devotion for books, their capacity to make me dream.'

During my moderate bibliophilic phases, I met bibliophiles who never read anything, they just looked for the date of publication, the quality of the paper and the book's general condition. Or, if they *were* readers, they would buy two copies, one to be read and the other to rest peacefully on the shelves, intact and virginal. But how did I get on to this subject? Ah, yes, because of the praise the poet Perse bestowed on my memoir, written in French, of my visits to Transcaucasia. Perse used to say that if I kept at it, I would become a writer. He was flattering his patron, of course, but it's true that I did read a lot. Gradually, though, happiness for me became associated with looking. I even began to take more interest in books with exceptional bindings. Not out of some nouveau-riche aesthetic, but because I was content with just looking. That is why my now definitive existence suits me, with no desire or pain or illness. My physical appearance is just that, pure appearance, nothing else. This was how I looked when I had to change status and state. I am more my own master now

that I merely contemplate masterpieces. But you'll be thinking that I'm keeping you from your bed and abusing the laws of hospitality, which, of course, I am. My only excuse is that I don't often find myself with an artist willing to listen to me.'

¶ Clearly tired, he paused for a moment to ponder, and I took advantage of this pause to sit down, for, by then, I was barely able to feel my legs; my feet were frozen and my chest and back covered in goosebumps. He, however, interpreted this as an invitation to further ever more chaotic and erratic ramblings.

'Although, generally speaking, contemporary art irritates me, I like the title of your exhibition; it reminds me of the emotions and the melodramas of the living. What a relief to be done with all that! Tomorrow morning, since there's never anyone here on Saturdays, I'll go and have a look at these mysterious works of yours about death and Dionysus. I liked the poster, and I like to view paintings or

drawings in the crepuscular light of evening or morning. No, don't thank me, I'm not doing it out of duty; I'm doing it for the same reasons that led me to collect 'my' paintings, sculptures, glazed tiles, jewels, tableware, tapestries, everything that was once here. You notice that I refer to them as I would refer to 'my' wife, 'my' daughter. Not to my son, though, who has ceased to exist for me. Do you understand my desire to gather all 'my' works together under the same roof, out of love for them, not out of vanity? Walter Scott, Victor Hugo and other extremely vain men required mansions built in their own image. *À maison visionnée habite visionnaire*. Only someone very vain could write such words. Hugo, of course. In 1919, the year of the most monstrous massacre of Armenians, I bought the torso of Hugo that Rodin sculpted in white marble, in three-quarter profile and turning his head a little so as to look straight at us. Ever since then, I've associated Hugo with the massacre. A stupid idea, I know; pay no attention. Since I cannot aspire to artistic creation myself, I try to live in its aura. Without suffering though, unlike

artists, who are said never to be satisfied. Are you like that? Just as well. Unless you're only saying that in order to convince me or yourself that you are an artist. I'll make up my mind when I've seen your work. If never being satisfied were a criterion, then I would be an artist too, because I was never satisfied with what I had. In fact, if you'll allow me, I will make the following confession. In the twenties, when a descendant of Mallarmé gave to the Louvre Manet's portrait of that famous symbolist – the one in which he's resting a meditative hand on an open notebook while the smoke from his cigar rises lightly up, and which was inspired by Courbet's portrait of Baudelaire – I got it into my head to buy another portrait of the poet, one of the most frequently painted poets I know. He was often painted by Whistler, for whom he posed countless times, and by Munch and Gauguin, perhaps because Mallarmé used to receive all these artists on Tuesdays in his salon in Rue de Rome, and called them his *Mardistes*. I gave up trying to buy a portrait of Mallarmé when I saw that there was no point in continuing the search, but I

got my revenge with the *Pallas Athene*, which, though neither signed nor dated, is certainly by Rembrandt. I bought it from the Soviet government in a lot of five works, amongst them Gerard ter Borch's *The Music Lesson*, also known as *Lady and Gentleman Playing*. Except that, in order to keep my intermediary Wildenstein out of the competition, I agreed that I would have the Rembrandt and give him the four remaining paintings. I kept my word with my usual rigour, but the loss of that fine Ter Borch smacked somewhat of defeat.

‘Perhaps I’m boring you. If the architecture of business is not your forte, you’ll soon be falling asleep in your chair. Before you do, though, I’d like to thank you for your kindness. Tomorrow, I’ll listen to you. You’re not a great talker? I’ll tell you how it works, this so-called eternity, in which everything happens inside infinite spheres whose centres are everywhere and whose perimeters – which, regarding circumferences, are known as lengths – exist nowhere at all. The spheres are made of transparent material, turning and turning, perfectly insulated, nothing



REMBRANDT, *Pallas Athene* – detail, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

like your state of continuous noise. These spheres do not lie as far from Earth and the barriers are not as insurmountable as the living might believe. We, shadows of shadows, live very close to your meteoric existences. But enough, forgive me for going on so long. Thank you for today. Good night.'

¶ He did not offer me his hand, whose touch would not have been exactly warm. I closed the huge door and, standing there in the darkness of the atrium, was in such a state of agitation that I could not find the illuminated switch. I fumbled my way through the gloom and down the stairs. On the second floor, the lights were on, either because this was the custom of the house or because of my presence there, and so I found it easy enough to make my way back to my room. In a burst of unforgivable ingratitude, I found this former maid's room rather plain after the luxury of the third floor, even though it had been completely refurbished and fitted with an en-suite bathroom. As I locked my door, my fingers were trembling and my teeth chattering. Having lost

the connecting link between events, I reviewed the day, unable to tell when, precisely, reality had gone off the rails. Had the kingdom of reason abandoned me when I left the Musée d'Orsay? I went to the Café des Lettres, 53 Rue de Verneuil, and ordered an *assiette Nobel*, consisting of salmon, herring and Skagen toast, covered with prawns in a dill sauce; indeed, I kept the menu as a good luck charm for a friend who, in his vanity of vanities, hopes every year to receive both the cheque and the glory associated with that prize.

¶ I then went into a bookshop, where I leafed through and bought the book by Herbert. Determined to wander aimlessly, I stopped outside the Deux Magots to watch a *jongleur de boulevard*, who was disguised as an explorer, complete with binoculars and pith helmet, and who kept either pretending to be searching for some distant oasis and scribbling in his travel journal or else unfolding a map on the roof of one of the cars stopped at the traffic lights and whose driver, when the lights turned green, would start honking furiously because

the performer did not move or show any sign of abandoning his perusal of the map. The watching public laughed gaily and, at the end of the show, gave him money, receiving in return a photo of this real or pretend adventurer, who stamped it on the back, thus authenticating his effigy as transient celebrity.

¶ In order not to have to bend down to get into a taxi, I took the metro as far as Avenue Kléber and got out at the station opposite the Majestic. I turned up Avenue des Portugais, into Rue Jean Giraudoux, and shortly after that into Avenue d'Iéna. When I reached number 51, my fear of all things technical made me think with dread of grappling with the code to open the front door. For no logical reason, I feared the worst, even though the lock opened with no difficulty at all. The difficulties came later, when I got undressed, and, with only my pyjama bottoms on, lay down on the bed to read the book I had just bought.

¶ Had I been deflected from my tranquil day by that study of Torrentius, of whose life we know far more than his art? There are descriptions of some of

those paintings, but however many nouns and adjectives are strung together, and however many arsenals of dictionaries consulted, words can never bring us what our mind receives from an image in a single second. Torrentius may well have been a Rosacrucian, a perjurer, a debauchee, a precursor, a John the Baptist almost, of the Marquis de Sade, accused and persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and destroyed by Calvinist puritanism. *Still-life with Bridle*, his only known or surviving painting, is probably an allegory of temperance, the golden mean, and mastery over one's instincts – all things absent from his own life – and is currently to be found in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Is there some hidden link between Torrentius' stormy life and the events that led me into the presence of the former owner of this house? Did anyone else see him on the third floor?

¶ Or did that *assiette Nobel* contain one of those magic philtres that provokes fantasies and unscrews our reason? And what will it be like tonight and tomor-

row night and the next night? If I hear any footsteps, I'll simply ignore them and put in some earplugs. The trick worked when it came to resisting Ulysses' sirens; so it will be sure to work on a ghost. Did the stars perhaps send the restorer of this house merely in order to make me consider the *vanitas* inherent in all art? If only my work were balanced between the golden mean of the masters – Van de Beeck's bridle – and unfettered freedom, uncurbed thought, free rein, excess! But I'm not sure it is and I despair even of the title: *The Tears of Eros*. How pathetic that sounds now. It's late. The worst thing is that I got so cold upstairs that not even two sleeping-tablets will put me to sleep. I simply cannot get warm, which is as it should be – that will teach me to go wandering about bare-chested in a vast mansion like this. ■

PAULA REGO

vanitas

COLA

Almeida Faria was born 6 May 1943 in Montemor-o-Novo. He studied and has taught philosophy, in particular the fields of aesthetics and philosophy of art. One of his first contacts with contemporary literature occurred while he was at secondary school in Évora, where one of his teachers was Vergílio Ferreira, who wrote a preface for Almeida Faria's first book, *Rumor branco* (*White Noise*), published in 1962, when he was only nineteen. He was writer-in-residence at the International Writing Program in Iowa City in 1968 and was the recipient of a grant from the Berlin Artists-in-Residence Programme in 1969.

He then began work on a trilogy, which went on to become the celebrated *Tetralogia Lusitana*, with the publication, in 1965, of *A Paixão* (*The Passion*, adapted for the theatre in 1998 with the title *Voices of Passion*), and the subsequent publication of *Cortes* (*Cuts*, 1978; winner of the Lisbon Academy of the Sciences' Aquilino Ribeiro Prize); *Lusitânia* (*Lusitania*, 1980; winner of the Dom Dinis Prize given by the Casa de Mateus Foundation); and *Cavaleiro Andante* (*Knight Errant*, 1983; winner of the Prize for Best Original Fiction awarded by the Portuguese Writers' Association). In 1982 he published the short story *Os Passeios do Sonhador Solitário* (*The Trollings of the Lonely Dreamer*), and in 1990 the novel *O Conquistador* (*The Conquistador*). As well as receiving other distinctions such as the Portuguese Medal for Cultural Merit and the Vergílio Ferreira Prize, Almeida Faria's work has also been the subject of university theses in several countries (Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Brazil, and Portugal). His books have been translated into various languages.

Almost all his novels have been illustrated by Mário Botas, about whom he wrote the essay *From Poet-Painter to Painter-Poet*. The idea of setting the story *Vanitas* in 51 Avenue d'Iéna arose when the French translation of this essay was published as a companion piece to an exhibition of Mário Botas' work in Paris, at the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian, which has its headquarters in the very building where Calouste Gulbenkian lived.

Paula Rego was born in Lisbon on 26th January 1935. Initially, she studied with a private tutor (1943-45), but was then sent to St Julian's School in Carcavelos (1945-51). In the 1950s, Portugal, under Salazar, was going through a difficult time. Following her father's advice: 'Leave Portugal. It's no place for a woman,' the artist embarked for London, where she studied painting at the Slade School of Art (1952-56). In London, she met the English painter Victor Willing, whom she later married, and in 1956, their first daughter was born. Between 1957 and 1963 she lived in Ericeira and had two more children, in 1959 and 1961. At the end of the 1960s, Victor Willing was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, the illness that led to his death in 1988, a year in which Paula Rego produced several works about separation, absence and the family.

Paula Rego exhibited three collages at the II Exhibition of Plastic Arts (1961) sponsored by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (CGF), who went on to offer her a bursary in 1962-63. Her first solo show was also in Lisbon, at the Sociedade Nacional de Belas-Artes (1965-66).

After a period of constant coming and going between Lisbon and London (and after representing Portugal at the São Paulo Biennial in 1969 and 1976), Paula Rego settled in London in 1976.

In 1988, the Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azeredo Perdigão/CGF organised a retrospective of her work, and a smaller version of that exhibition later travelled to the Serpentine Gallery in London. The following year, she was made Senior Fellow of the Royal College of Art and, in 1990, became the first Associate Artist at the National Gallery of London. Two years later, Phaidon published a long monograph about her by John McEwen, a new edition of which was published in 1997, the year of a major retrospective held at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool and at the Centro Cultural de Belém in Lisbon.

At the end of 2004, the Fundação de Serralves organised an exhibition of works chosen from the last seven years of Paula Rego's work. Simultaneously, the Tate Britain put on an exhibition of the artist's paintings from the 1960s to the present day.

Paula Rego now lives and works in London. As the artist says, every day, habit and necessity take her to her London studio to paint, because 'it's horribly difficult to paint' and inspiration only comes when she's working. The creation of the characters in her paintings involves constant changes, adjustments and improvements. These figures, frozen in theatrical fear, exist in an unfamiliar time and space; they are born out of characters from Buñuel's films or Burroughs' fiction, out of works on show at the British Museum or childhood memories. Terror is a constant presence, and as Paula Rego herself has said, her aim is to give terror a face.

