

In Between Wor[l]ds: The Image of the ‘entre-lugar’ in João Cabral de Melo Neto’s *Agrestes*

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João Cabral’s group of poems entitled *Agrestes* was published in 1985, and can be read as the poet’s reflections on his life and his anxieties about death. Perhaps more than any of his earlier volumes, *Agrestes* demonstrates the poet’s more personal and intimate engagement with the theme of death, which seems to have had a strong bearing on the manner in which he revisited some of his most favoured themes, particularly his reflections on his own writing and his concerns with social inequities, especially in relation to his native North-east. The title itself provides a starting point in the analysis of the treatment given to the themes of life and mortality in this group.

Critics such as Félix de Athayde have generally taken *Agrestes* to derive from the adjective *agreste* and to signify *rude* and *aspero*.¹ With this in mind, they have held the term to express Cabral’s desire to write ‘unpoetic’ verse and an additional proof of his wish not to be included in what he defined as the ‘clube dos líricos’.² However, I would argue that Cabral’s choice of the word stems from his own experience of the North-east of Brazil and anticipates the sense of indeterminacy that seems to shape the group.

Indeed, the *agreste* is the region between the fertile lands of the *zona da mata* and the arid expanses of the *sertão*. It is, in fact, a semi-arid region, an ‘in-between’ land, through which he seems to capture the essence of existence as a state of limbo, in precarious balance between life and death. The image it encapsulates will guide this reading of the group of poems.

Cabral acknowledged to the Brazilian journalist Norma Couri his deep understanding of the complex reality of the North-east in one of his last interviews:

Meu engajamento é com a realidade. Sou pernambucano e não posso deixar de ser. O nordestino é mais telúrico que o carioca ou o paulista. Meu mundo é outro, fui criado num engenho, minha família é de senhores de engenho, a classe da Casa Grande, da zona da mata, longe da miséria do sertão, mas conheço bem os dois lados. Meu pai

¹ Félix de Athayde, *A Viagem ou Itinerário Intelectual que Fez João Cabral de Melo Neto do Racionalismo ao Materialismo Dialético* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2000), p. 102.

² Cabral employed the expression in his acceptance speech for the Neustadt Prize, awarded by the University of Oklahoma in 1992. See João Cabral de Melo Neto, ‘Agradecimento pelo Prêmio Neustadt’, in *Obra Completa* (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1994), p. 800.

comprou uma casa em Carpinha, nos Angicos [. . .] que ficava bem na divisão entre uma zona e outra.³

The theme of the ‘in-between’ space which Cabral explores in *Agrestes* operates on three levels. First, in his definition of his own writing, which he saw as standing at the margins of Brazilian literary tradition, in an imaginary space between poetry and prose. Secondly, on a social level, the *agreste* encapsulates a space inhabited by those excluded and marginalized by society. In this marginal space, Cabral recognizes and explores the subversive power of the voices of the oppressed, which he presents as a challenge to the dominant order. Thirdly, the *agreste* is an in-between space where he pitches his dialogue with literary tradition as a post-colonial writer.

In this study of the theme of the *entre-lugar*, particular attention will be given to Cabral’s dialogue with the poetry of Fernando Pessoa and of his Brazilian master, Manuel Bandeira. Such dialogue seems to provide a clear illustration of his position as a post-colonial writer. However, this study by no means purports to offer an exhaustive appreciation of Cabral’s dialogue with literary tradition in *Agrestes*, undoubtedly a prominent feature of the collection. For example, of the six sections in which *Agrestes* is divided, the third, entitled ‘Linguagens Alheias’, is almost entirely devoted to the author’s readings of other writers. The collection is structured as a sequence of six sections in which *Agrestes* roughly follows Cabral’s own itinerary as a diplomat. The first section focuses on Pernambuco (Cabral’s native land), followed by a section on Seville. The fourth section comprises poems on West Africa, while the landscape of the Andes is the theme of the fifth section. In the sixth and final section Cabral explores his anxieties in relation to death on a more acutely personal level. The intimate tone of the section indicates a shift from the social dimension conferred to the theme of death in the other sections, and indeed in many of Cabral’s previous works, such as in *Morte e Vida Severina* (1955). A reason for this shift to a more personal mood is to be found in the fact that João Cabral’s writing of *Agrestes*, from 1981 to 1985, coincided with a period fraught with personal tragedy. Indeed, it was during that time that Cabral’s first wife, Stella, was diagnosed as suffering from cancer, of which she eventually died in 1986.

In an article written in 1971, the Brazilian critic Silviano Santiago analysed the relation between the discourse of Latin American writers and the cultural production of former colonial powers and the economically dominant countries of the West. Santiago questioned the categories of ‘source’ and ‘influence’ and formulated the theory of the *entre-lugar*, which he defined in the following terms:

³ Norma Couri, ‘Poesia Precisa de Provocar Emoção’, *Jornal de Letras*, 26 January 2000, p. 9.

Entre o sacrifício e o jogo, entre a prisão e a transgressão, entre a submissão ao código e a agressão, entre a obediência e a rebelião, entre a assimilação e a expressão, — ali, nesse lugar aparentemente vazio, seu tempo e seu lugar de clandestinidade, ali, se realiza o ritual antropófago da literatura latino-americana.⁴

It is in this *entre-lugar* that Cabral situates his response to Bandeira and to Pessoa. With regard to the latter, Cabral centred his dialogue on *Mensagem*, which he appeared to have read primarily as a celebration of Portugal's colonial endeavours. It is important to note that Cabral preferred this collection of poetry to the rest of Pessoa's work. In fact, in his interview with Norma Couri, Cabral stated: 'Do Fernando Pessoa gosto da *Mensagem*, o resto é muito subjetivo para o meu gosto'.⁵

The epigraph that opens the collection introduces the image of the *agreste* as a poetic locus to which Cabral is drawn. The quotation, 'Where there is personal liking we go. | Where the ground is sour', from the poem 'The Hero' by the modernist American writer Marianne Moore (1887–1972), invites the reader to follow the poet along a journey through inhospitable ground.⁶ The epigraph echoes Cabral's choice of title for the poems by conjuring the idea of travel, which we find in the different locations featured in *Agrestes*, and a taste for at first sight rather unwelcoming lands.

However, Cabral is deliberately misquoting Moore in his epigraph. This is because the 'sour' ground featured in Moore's poem is where 'love won't grow', and where the 'hero' learns to go in spite of his personal liking.⁷ Moore's hero treads sour ground as part of a process of individuation and of learning social conventions, as we read in these lines from the second stanza of the poem:

We do not like some things, and the hero
doesn't; deviating headstones
and uncertainty;
going where one does not wish
to go; suffering and not saying so; standing and listening where something
is hiding (p. 8)

The hero deviates headstones, causing them to turn, thus attempting to uncover the secrets of the dead. Struggling against his dislike for what is not fully comprehensible, the hero sets out to probe the unknown. Indeed,

⁴ Silviano Santiago, 'O Entre-Lugar no Discurso Latino-Americano', in *Uma Literatura nos Trópicos* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1978), p. 28.

⁵ Couri, p. 9. It is significant that Cabral's preference for Pessoa's homonymous poetry should also be shared by Bandeira, who wrote: 'Confesso que prefiro a obra do Fernando Pessoa ele mesmo à dos seus personagens fictícios': Manuel Bandeira, 'Os Vários Fernando Pessoa' in *Poesia Completa e Prosa*, 4th edn (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar: 1983), p. 691.

⁶ Melo Neto, p. 516. All quotations from *Agrestes* are taken from this edition.

⁷ Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems* (London: Faber Faber, 1967), p. 8. All quotations from Moore's work are taken from this edition.

the hero does not deviate from the headstones but rather undertakes to explore the uncertain. By employing the verb ‘deviating’ transitively, Moore emphasizes the hero’s courage to confront death, which conceals the greatest of uncertainties. Cabral seems to endorse the qualities displayed by Moore’s hero. However, in contrast to the traveller of sour lands, Cabral shows no distaste for the inhospitable.

This becomes apparent in the opening poem of *Agrestes*. In this composition, entitled ‘A Augusto de Campos’, Cabral dedicates the collection to his fellow Brazilian poet, brother of Haroldo de Campos. Cabral claims to be writing on ‘as mesmas coisas e loisas’ and trusts Campos to find in *Agrestes* ‘coisas não mortas de todo’ (p. 517). This last image captures Cabral’s fascination with existence at the interface between life and death, which is one of the features through which the image of the *entre-lugar* is explored.

The central image in the poem, and the one in which we find an example of the ‘in-between’ space in which Cabral visualizes his own writing, is that of the *aceiro* and, more precisely, that of the ‘*aceiros da prosa*’ (p. 517). Interestingly, the *aceiro* is the strip of uncultivated land kept clear to prevent fire spreading across contiguous crops and thus symbolically represents Cabral’s own dislike of sentimental expression. It is also, significantly, the boundary, an ‘in-between’ land at the margins of poetry and prose.

Cabral situates his own poetry within the ‘*aceiros da prosa*’, in a visual representation of his subversion of mainstream poetic conventions. This is clear in the second stanza, where Cabral deliberately disrupts a metric pattern of seven-syllable lines by incorporating an eight-syllable line, less favoured in Portuguese tradition, in line 17, ‘o pouco-verso de oito sílabas | (em linha vizinha à prosa)’, and opts for the ‘imperfect’ assonantal rhyme, ‘que apaga o verso e não soa’ (pp. 517–18).⁸

Cabral, therefore, defies poetic conventions from ‘within’ tradition. In Augusto de Campos, on the other hand, he appears to see an example of a writer who has actually transposed these same limits of conventional

⁸ In an interview with Arnaldo Saraiva, Cabral spoke of his use of eight-syllable lines and assonantal rhyme as aimed at challenging readers’ expectations and creating a less harmonious verse: ‘O tipo de verso mais comum entre nós é o septissílabo, enquanto em França é o de 8 sílabas, que é o menos espontâneo da língua portuguesa — e que é o que eu prefiro, embora usando a liberdade típica do verso de 7 sílabas, de acentuar onde eu quiser. O que é importante é que o leitor não leia como quem canta, não deslize. Eu me crio dificuldades. E por isso também é que o meu verso é assonantado, havendo muita gente que pensa que ele não tem rima.’ *Jornal de Letras*, 7 September 1987, p. 7.

poetry. And indeed Campos's involvement in the Concrete Poetry Project is an example of this (for instance his abolition of actual verse form).⁹

It is with this in mind that, in a typically self-deprecating stance, Cabral contrasts his own poetry with the 'pureza extrema' (p. 517) achieved by Campos. Indeed, the poem is constructed on a play on oppositions between the two writers: while Cabral sees his poetry as still firmly fixed to the ground, 'pé no chão', Campos's is 'perdida de vista', suggesting an upward movement towards the 'ponto extremo' (p. 517). This image is developed in the third stanza, in the image of the woman at the window who enjoys her status at the margins, 'rindo de ser sem discípula' (p. 518).

Cabral's reasons for dedicating the collection to Augusto de Campos are made explicit in the final stanza of the poem. Here, Cabral foregrounds Campos's standing as a literary critic, as a 'leitor contra' (p. 518). This is emphasized by the reference to Pound (p. 518), whose *ABC of Reading* Campos translated into Portuguese. It is, therefore, Campos's defiance of poetic norms and his critical appreciation of other writers that lie behind Cabral's tribute.

Such qualities are also immediately displayed by Cabral himself in the opening section of *Agrestes*. Indeed, it is as a 'leitor contra' that Cabral engages in dialogue with Fernando Pessoa's *Mensagem* and with Manuel Bandeira's poem 'Evocação do Recife' (which was first published in *Libertinagem*, in 1930). It is well known that Bandeira's poetry had an enormous influence on Cabral. Bandeira's incorporation of colloquial language and themes drawn from everyday life was a revelation to the younger poet. His reading of 'Não sei Dançar' marked a turning point in his formative years: 'Aquilo foi para mim um choque tão grande. Poesia podia dizer: "Uns tomam éter, outros cocaína"'. Manuel Bandeira me abriu um horizonte que era uma coisa fantástica.'¹⁰

The opening poem of the first section of *Agrestes*, 'O Nada que É' (p. 519), indicates Cabral's intent on engaging with Pessoa's *Mensagem* and juxtaposing his own bleak view of the heritage of the discoveries, and the 'birth' of Brazil, with what he read as Pessoa's positive images of the mythical birth of Portugal. Thus, Cabral reflects on his condition as a

⁹ The exponents of Concrete Poetry, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari, saw in Cabral one of their forerunners and acknowledged their debt to him in their 'Manifesto da Poesia Concreta', published in *Noígrandes* in 1958. Augusto de Campos also published a study of Cabral in *Poesia Antipoesia Antropofagia*. Significantly, in the introduction featured on the dust jacket, Campos described his book as a collection of essays on poetry, 'mas poesia que provoque discussão'. In the essay 'Da Antiode à Antilira', Campos emphasizes the self-reflective nature of Cabral's writing: 'A poesia-crítica de João Cabral, poesia de protesto ético e poético, começa por desmistificar o próprio conceito de poesia': Haroldo de Campos, 'Da Antiode à Antilira' in *Poesia Antipoesia Antropofagia* (São Paulo: Cortez, 1978), p. 52.

¹⁰ In Flora Sussekind, *Cabral, Bandeira, Drummond. Alguma Correspondência* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa/Ministério da Cultura, 1996), p. 10.

nordestino and as a writer of the North-east through his dialogue with the Portuguese poet.

Indeed, the title of Cabral's poem immediately suggests a reference to Pessoa's 'Ulysses', of *Mensagem*.¹¹ For Pessoa, 'O mytho é o nada que é tudo' (p. 6), myth is a crucial component in the formation of Portuguese national identity and gives a meaning to reality. Myth is for Pessoa the only lasting legacy of the past, beyond which there is only oblivion: 'Em baixo, a vida, metade | de nada, morre' (p. 6).

It is interesting that Cabral should introduce his own poem with a paradox constructed from a fraction of Pessoa's first line. Indeed, through this device he is immediately highlighting the juxtaposition of the 'tudo', propounded by Pessoa, and the 'nada', which he sees as expressing the bleak reality of the North-east. Pessoa celebrates the arrival of Ulysses by sea as the image on which Portuguese identity as a nation of seafarers was constructed. Conversely, Cabral centres his poem on the image of the sea seen as incommensurable and unknowable:

Um canal tem a extensão
ante a qual todo metro é vão.

Tem o escancarado do mar
que existe para desafiar
que números e seus afins
possam prendê-lo nos seus sins. (p. 519)

The sea and the 'canal' are images of discovery, the former having been 'conquered' by the Portuguese, the latter being a reminder of colonial exploitation. Both, however, defy man's ultimate control and the sense they convey is of emptiness: 'de um nada prenhe como o mar' (p. 519). For Cabral, both the sea from which Brazil was 'born' and that of the *canaviais* that still occupy much of the fertile lands, are images of barrenness. These contrast the image of fertility in Pessoa's poem, through which the power of legend is captured:

Assim a lenda se escorre
A entrar na realidade,
E a fecundal-a decorre. (p. 6)

Cabral also seems to be responding to Pessoa's exaltation of Portugal's cultural and historical heritage by focusing on the anonymous victims of exploitation working on the sugar cane plantation: 'povoa-o o pleno anonimato' (p. 519). Significantly, while Pessoa exalts myth, or better, what is unreal, as the only true reality, Cabral turns his focus on those who 'exist' but who are not seen. Thus, the Recife that Cabral explores in the

¹¹ Fernando Pessoa, 'Mensagem' in *Obra Poética*, 9th edn (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1986). All quotations from *Mensagem* are taken from this edition.

first section of *Agrestes* is a place, or rather a limbo, haunted by ghostly figures, whom none the less he acknowledges as social entities. Indeed, such is the perspective adopted in another poem in the first section, 'A Roda dos Expostos da Jaqueira' (p. 523).

In the poem, Cabral remembers the 'roda dos enjeitados', the gyratory window in the wall of the hospital in the Jaqueira district of Recife. It was there, usually under cover of darkness, that unwanted newborn babies were left.

The 'disappearance' of the children is ironically visualized through the images of magicians and alchemic transformation, 'passe de mágico' and 'gratuita transmutação' and is juxtaposed to the image that closes the first section of the poem, in which the tragedy of the unwanted children is foregrounded: 'ali sepultar uma vida | que ninguém viu, nem a parida' (p. 523). Cabral sees the fate of the children as that of 'living dead', and this is emphasized by the anonymity that surrounds them. In point of fact, the use of the impersonal third person, 'girando-a', 'colocavam', 'davam-lhe' and of the indefinite pronouns 'alguém' and 'ninguém' (p. 523) shrouds the images of the *expostos* in anonymity and highlights their condition as *ocultos* rather than visible creatures.

In the image of the children singing in the choir, 'em que cantavam a tuberculose | centenas de crianças com tosse', Cabral indicates the social dimension of these 'invisible' entities. Indeed, the monotone sound of the 'cantochoão' performed by the choir has a powerful impact on society:

foi o cantar pernambucano
que deformou a melodia
que pudéssemos ter um dia (p. 524)

By enclosing his final reflection in brackets, Cabral offers a graphic representation of the subversive power of the 'unseen'.

The *cantochoão* also becomes a metaphor for Cabral's own poetry. The singing of the children, 'um de pés no chão', 'mais chão que canto' (p. 524) echoes the introductory poem to the collection, in which Cabral had reflected on the nature of his writing, 'pé no chão | pelos aceiros da prosa' (p. 517). Cabral's poetry therefore purports to be informed by the voices of those who are invisible but who, in spite of their exclusion from the *entre-lugar* in which they exist, shape the reality of the North-east.

In articulating his own recollections of the North-east, Cabral opposes colonial discourse, which he appears to have read in the celebration of Portugal's myths and history in *Mensagem*. However, in so doing he also carefully avoids any nostalgic or idealized representation of Brazilian cultural identity. This is apparent in Cabral's response to Bandeira's reminiscing of the past in the poem 'Evocação do Recife' by way of his own 'Uma Evocação do Recife', also to be found in the first section of *Agrestes*.

Bandeira's poem is informed by a sense of nostalgia as the poet recreates the atmosphere of the everyday life of the Recife he experienced in childhood. Fragments of memories bring back to life the voices of the children in the street, 'Roseira dá-me uma rosa', the cries from the bustling streets of Recife, 'Fogo em Santo Antônio!' (p. 212) and the echo of the voices of the North-east, with their distinctive diction 'Capibaribe | - Capiberibe' (p. 213).¹²

Bandeira was keen to explore the voices of the people as the only legitimate way forward in forming a true Brazilian literary tradition. In 'Evocação do Recife' he writes:

A vida não me chegava pelos jornais nem pelos livros
Vinha da boca do povo na língua errada do povo
Língua certa do povo
Porque ele é que fala gostoso o português do Brasil. (p. 213)

As Giovanni Pontiero highlighted, Bandeira 'Foi um dos primeiros a reconhecer, nas formas de falar regionais, uma expressão válida da sensibilidade nacional'.¹³ Indeed, ordinary people take centre stage and are the only 'heroes' of Bandeira's childhood memories. In Pontiero's apposite assessment, "'Evocação do Recife" é o melhor exemplo para uma apreciação real da sua capacidade de elevar o lugar-comum a um mundo de "sublime" reminiscência' (p. 120).

By contrast, Cabral's 'Uma Evocação do Recife' (pp. 524–25) incorporates no such anecdotal material and responds to the 'voices' in Bandeira with 'silence'. In fact, the only voice in the poem is that of the poet himself. The images suggested by his memories of Recife, up to the 1940s when he left to pursue his career in Rio de Janeiro, are of acute social division and alienation. On the one hand, there is the industrializing and expanding Recife of the 'bonde', visualized in the 'dedos da aranha'; on the other, the 'mangues', which the lines of the 'bonde' are careful to avoid, 'se esgueirando entre as línguas secas' (pp. 524–25). The image of the dry tongues of the *mangue* evokes the plight of the *retirantes* who, having fled the drought-ravaged interior, find that any hope of overcoming their predicament is denied. Furthermore, and most importantly, it conveys their inability to 'speak'.

Recife is captured through the metonymic images of a hybrid creature, part insect, 'dedos da aranha', part human, 'dedos espalmados', part beast of prey, 'garras' (pp. 524–25). From these fragmented images we visualize a grotesque and disjointed creature that mirrors a sense of social

¹² Manuel Bandeira, *Poesia Completa e Prosa*, 4th edn (Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1983), p. 212. Quotations are taken from this edition.

¹³ Giovanni Pontiero, *Manuel Bandeira (Visão Geral de sua Obra)* (Rio de Janeiro: Olympio, 1986), p. 125.

disintegration and exclusion. It is not the receptivity of an open hand that the 'dedos espalmados' of Recife evoke.

Cabral's visual representation of his native land seems to enact what Homi Bhabha saw as the fundamental role of memory on reflecting on the post-colonial condition. For Bhabha, remembering: 'is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present'.¹⁴

In spite of the silence of the *mangue* and its failure to be represented in the written word — it is, in fact, 'ausente das letras' — Cabral focuses on the destabilizing power of the 'unseen': the 'haunting' power of the 'dead' waters, 'água cega' (p. 525), and of those who live in them. As we read in the final couplets:

está presente como mangues
de olhos de água cega, estanques,

que em pesadelo estão presentes
no sono de todo recifense. (p. 525)

The reference to nightmares seems to capture the mood of the entire poem, which rather than reminiscing about the past recreates the experience of disturbed sleep, which is essentially a marginal state, an 'in-between' state. As John Gledson suggested in relation to Cabral's first collection, *Pedra do Sono*, Cabral again seems to revisit a marginal state, this time exploring its association with death as he reflects on the question of social alienation. Gledson's assessment of Cabral's fascination with the state of sleep seems pertinent to this reading of *Agrestes*: 'he [Cabral] is fascinated, in fact, by the marginal, quasi-contradictory state of consciousness (or unconsciousness) which we call sleep, by the fact that in it we are both absent and present, alive and dead'.¹⁵

In a paper entitled 'Considerações do Poeta Dormindo', delivered in 1941 at the *Congresso de Poesia de Recife*, one year prior to the publication of his first group of poems, Cabral expressed his interest in sleep and proved to be aware of its poetic association with death:

Penso aqui existir dois tipos nessa 'predisposição', um deles realizado pela idéia de abstração do tempo, de 'fuga' do tempo [. . .] O outro, realizado por essa idéia de morte a que o sono se associa para o poeta [. . .] o sono sendo como que um movimento para o eterno, uma incursão periódica no eterno, que restabelecerá no homem esse equilíbrio que no poeta há de ser, necessariamente, um equilíbrio contra o mundo, contra o tempo. (pp. 687–88)

¹⁴ In Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory. A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 9.

¹⁵ John Gledson, 'Sleep, Poetry and João Cabral's "False" Book: A Revaluation of *Pedra do Sono*', *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 55 (1978), 43–58 (p. 45).

In 'Uma Evocação do Recife', Cabral seems to be recreating the sensations of sleep to a destabilizing effect, to bear witness to the reality of the North-east in a marginal state of existence between life and death.

Cabral's choice of the 'in-between' space also defines his position in relation to his two 'masters', one Portuguese and one Brazilian. As discussed the first section of *Agrestes*, for example, displays neither a quest for heroes of the North-east, as a challenge to the Portuguese heroic past exalted by Pessoa, nor the quest for a Brazilian 'voice' as explored by Bandeira. In contrast to both, the Brazil recreated in *Agrestes* is constituted of ghostly figures, living 'in-between' worlds. Cabral's reflection of Brazil's colonial condition stands therefore at a crossroads between an oppositionist challenge to the discourse of the discoveries (Pessoa) and an almost utopian 're-discovery' of Brazilian identity (Bandeira). It is important to note that Cabral actively engaged in demystifying the heroes of the North-east, as in his earlier *Auto do Frade* (1984) and its portrayal of Frei Caneca, one of the North-east's nineteenth-century martyrs of the republican cause.

In contrast to Cabral's reflections on the North-east stand his depictions of the city of Seville in the second section of *Agrestes*, 'Ainda, ou Sempre, Sevilha'. The sombre mood that pervades the poems on his native land gives way to a celebration of life, which in Cabral's poetics is epitomized by the Andalusian city. It is significant, however, that Cabral should visualize Seville as also existing in an *entre-lugar*, albeit manifested in quite different terms.¹⁶

While the first section of *Agrestes* was dominated by 'ghosts' and silence, in the second, the voice of the people is reinstated. Most importantly, the popular voice is viewed primarily as a challenging force to established order and is therefore openly subversive.

A complex exploration of this theme is found in the poem 'O Mito em Carne Viva' (p. 540), which raises political, religious as well as gender issues. In the poem Cabral focuses on the encounter between Castile and Andalusia and this is foregrounded from an historical perspective. Castile, stage of political power, with its strong historical links with the Catholic church (embodied by the rule of the *Reyes Católicos*, for example), comes under the gaze of the marginalized and 'Moorish' Andalusia, embodied in the anonymous *sevilhana*. Castile's expansionist endeavours and its control over Spain's conquest of the New World, however, belong to the past. And the museum it has become is now symbolically 'invaded' by the *sevilhana*.

¹⁶ Seville featured prominently in Cabral's work. Cabral served as a diplomat there (1956–58; 1962–64) and, of all his diplomatic posts, it was there that he felt most at home. Cabral often spoke of his obsession with Seville. In his interview with Norma Couri he explained: 'Porque ali o diplomata não tem o perigo de viver num mundo isolado. Eu me misturava com cantor de flamenco, toureiro. [. . .] Nunca toureei mas hoje sei mais de touro do que de literatura' (p. 10).

The woman's response to established art form (she is described staring at a painting depicting the crucifixion), is subversive. Indeed, she readily empathizes with the suffering of the mother of Christ rather than being overcome with feigned guilt at the sacrifice of the Son of Man. In a further instance of subversion, her exclamation of 'sisterly' compassion is voiced not in official *castellano* but in her own Andalusian vernacular: 'Lo quié no habrá sufr'io e'ta mujé!' (p. 540). The outburst of the *sevilhana* is, Cabral says, an expression of true life, notably of the kind the church often sees as sinful 'emoção nua e crua | corpo a corpo' (p. 540).

From the subversive, marginal position in which she is depicted, the *sevilhana* also becomes a means by which Cabral engages once more with themes central to Pessoa's *Mensagem*. Indeed, through the response of the *sevilhana*, Cabral seems to challenge the power of regeneration held by a mythical saviour and also appears to subvert the image of the *névoa* as the veil that would need to be lifted if greater times are to come. Through the image of the 'mito em carne viva', Cabral explores the concept that existence lies solely on a material rather than metaphysical plane.

Thus, Cabral unambiguously rejects the validity of myth as encoded in the painting of the crucifixion. The *névoa* that shrouds the painting becomes a metaphor for the message of the possibility of spiritual salvation through the passion of Christ. However, this message goes unheeded, as the *sevilhana*, for whom 'pouco dizia a Fé' (p. 540) fails to be inspired with awe by the great mysteries of the faith. In fact, her reaction to the painting focuses on 'marginal', but none the less crucial, elements of the scene of the crucifixion:

sem perceber sequer
a névoa que a pintura
põe entre o que é e o que é (p. 540)

The image of the *névoa* that Cabral is subverting from Pessoa can be found in the poem 'A Última Nau' of *Mensagem*. The final image of the poem is that of D. Sebastião, the mythical saviour, whose return will indicate the birth of a new Portuguese empire:

Vejo entre a cerração teu vulto baço
Que torna
[. . .]
Surges ao sol em mim, e a névoa finda:
a mesma, e trazes o pendão ainda
do Império. (p. 16)

It is clear from Cabral's treatment of Seville in his dialogue with Pessoa that he held the city to be a symbol of life and regeneration. His conceptualization of life through Seville stems from his understanding of the city as a space where the marginalized are not disavowed. The city

symbolizes a liminal space, where indeterminacy and diversity are celebrated. Because of these qualities, Seville captures the only true meaning of ‘eternal life’, as the title of the section indicates: ‘Ainda, ou sempre, Sevilha’.

The second poem in the section, ‘Lembrando Manolete’, offers another example of Cabral’s fascination with Seville’s marginal existence. In the poem, the legendary bullfighter ‘Manolete’ is captured in such a marginal condition, defying the boundaries between life and death. Manolete lives life on a knife-edge: ‘Tourear, ou viver como expor-se; | expor a vida à louca foice’ (p. 538). The tenuous balance on which life and death hang is reproduced both by way of reiterations and enjambments (which convey a sense of continuity) and, on a visual level, by the blank spaces that divide the six couplets, through which a sense of interruption is conveyed.¹⁷

The defiance with which the bullfighter parades before the bull encapsulates his defiance of death, reiterated through the repetition of the verbs ‘expor’ and ‘expõe’, and which Cabral clearly wishes to contrast with the condition of the ‘Expostos’ of the orphanage in Jaqueira, featured in the previous section.

Significantly, the poetic space of the *agreste*, which Cabral was to develop in his later collection, can already be glimpsed in his earlier poem ‘Alguns Toureiros’ (pp. 157–58), included in the collection *Paisagens com Figuras* (1956). Here, Manolete explores the fluid boundaries between life and death, as the following lines illustrate:

Manolete, o mais deserto, [. . .]
o que melhor calculava
o fluido aceiro da vida
o que com mais precisão
roçava a morte em sua fimbria (p. 158)

If the image of the bullfighter can be seen as the embodiment of Cabral’s own poetic ideal of precision and clarity, at the margins of literary tradition, it is also true that Manolete personifies an ethic of defiance of those living a liminal existence. Manolete represents the power to challenge boundaries, to subvert the determinacy promoted by the dominant order.

By celebrating Seville, Cabral is endorsing the subversive power of the margins, be it embodied in the woman gazing at her oppressor or the bullfighter defying death. Both are images of rebellion against established order, a critique of which Cabral engages in through a renewed dialogue with *Bandeira* in the last section of *Agrestes*.

¹⁷ Cabral is here employing a device similar to the one studied by Flora Sussekind in relation to another poem of *Agrestes*, ‘A Antonio Mairena, Cantador de Flamenco’ (p. 543). Sussekind defined Cabral’s manipulation of enjambments and blank spaces as ‘um notável exercício de engenho’, through which he recreated the tenuous balance between sound and silence in the voice of the flamenco singer: Sussekind, ‘Com Passos de Prosa’ in *Revista USP*, 16 (1992–93), 93–102 (p. 96).

The title of the section, 'A "Indesejada das Gentes"' is a quotation from Bandeira's famous poem 'Consoada', in his published collection *Opus 10* (1952). In 'Consoada', the poet reflects on mortality, ponders on the obscure nature of death, 'Não sei se dura ou caroável' and on the impending arrival of 'a Indesejada'.¹⁸ The setting for his imminent encounter with death is that of everyday life. Death, Bandeira suggests, pervades every moment of our mundane existence and at any moment will come to stake its claim on our lease of life.

In an atmosphere of intense *pathos*, Bandeira indicates that he is ready to confront his fate: 'O meu dia foi bom, pode a noite descer' (p. 307). The sense of the finite nature of human existence is intensified not only by the image of the modest legacy that our hard-working life will yield to those who come after us 'encontrará lavrado o campo, a casa limpa, | a mesa posta' (p. 307), but also by the realization that objects in a way survive us: 'com cada coisa em seu lugar' (p. 307). In 'Consoada', death is our only certainty, it is the 'iniludível' (p. 307).¹⁹

Cabral drew on the theme of the pervading nature of death of Bandeira's poem. His reworking of the theme, however, has a quite different aim. While Bandeira reflects on the inevitability of death, Cabral advocates suicide as a form of subversion. The following lines from the poem 'Direito à Morte' exemplify Cabral's response to Bandeira:

Viver é poder ter consigo
certo passaporte no bolso
que dá direito a sair dela (p. 579)

Quite contrary to the message of Bandeira's poem, there is in Cabral a call for us to pick the moment in which we are to tread on the 'aceiro da vida' — where Cabral visualized Manolete's defiance of death — and demonstrate our capacity to challenge the unknown.

Suicide is the ultimate act of transgression and, in Cabral's view, epitomizes the courage to encounter the 'other', that which is marginalized and ignored. It is from this perspective on life that Cabral engages with Bandeira. In 'Consoada' the image of the 'mesa posta' (p. 307) conveys the

¹⁸ Bandeira, p. 307.

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that the stance Bandeira adopted in this poem was one which he also appreciated in Pessoa's poetry. Apart from the work of 'Pessoa ele mesmo', Bandeira enjoyed the poetry of Caeiro, whose philosophy he considered to be closest to Pessoa's own: 'Simpatizo mais com Alberto Caeiro, talvez porque encontre nele muito do Fernando Pessoa. [...] Caeiro faz a gente encontrar alegria no fato de aceitar: "no fato sublimemente científico e difícil de aceitar o natural inevitável"' (p. 692).

poet's preparedness to face death on its (death's) own terms and to draw comfort from the rituals associated with the Christian faith.²⁰

In Cabral's poem, on the other hand, this image of conformity is subverted by one encapsulating the freedom to take charge of one's own destiny:

fazer, num dia que foi posto
na mesa em toalha de linho,
fazer de seu vivo esse morto,
de um golpe, ou gole, do mais limpo. (p. 580)

By way of a paradox, Cabral contends that the 'living dead', 'esse morto' (p. 580), only come to life through the act of suicide.

Such defiance epitomizes the struggle against the dominant order, where the 'other' is marginalized and silenced as, for example, we read in the poem 'O Defunto Amordaçado' (p. 576). 'O defunto' is gagged in order to prevent him from speaking and challenging the truth that only institutionalized religion, seen as an embodiment of the dominant discourse, is allowed to pronounce. From this perspective the 'defunto amordaçado' (p. 576) encapsulates the 'other', the unknown and the destabilizing power of the margins.

* * *

While denouncing the silencing of the margins, Cabral's aim in *Agrestes* is undoubtedly to give a voice to the oppressed, those who are 'dead' to society. He does so from the margins of Brazilian poetic tradition, from the *entre-lugar*, the *aceiros da prosa*, challenging commonly held notions of poetry. As a post-colonial writer, he does so also through a reflection on the traumas of the colonial past, which he expresses through his dialogue with Fernando Pessoa. However, on reflecting on the traumas of the present, he also challenges idealized representations of *brasilidade*, which he feels Bandeira promoted. Cabral endorses neither the discourse of the colonizer nor the simplistic exaltation of the colonized. Once again he positions himself in the *entre-lugar*, as defined by Silviano Santiago, 'entre a obediência e a rebelião, entre a assimilação e a expressão — ali, nesse lugar aparentemente vazio' (p. 28).

²⁰ 'Consoada' refers to a light meal taken on days of fasting as well as specifically to the Christmas meal. As Davi Arrigucci noted, in his study of Bandeira's poem, the term does in any case conjure up images of religious or ritualistic practices: 'O termo envolve reminiscências religiosas e festivas, quer dizer, ritualísticas, ligadas ao espaço doméstico e familiar': *Humildade, Paixão e Morte. A Poesia de Manuel Bandeira* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1990), p. 266. Arrigucci rightly highlighted Bandeira's use of unusual words (an example of which is 'consoada' itself) in a poem otherwise characterized by colloquialisms and common expressions. Such contrast undoubtedly duplicates the setting of the poem; a familiar scene charged with a sense of expectation of the unknown.

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It is in this *entre-lugar*, where boundaries are blurred and challenged that Cabral engages in a reflection on his own writing, on pressing political and social concerns and on a more personal level, on his anxiety in relation to his own mortality. As Silviano Santiago says, this *entre-lugar* is only 'aparentemente vazio', because it is filled with the voices of the ghosts of the past and the present, like the singing voices of the children of the Jaqueira orphanage.

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