

A. M. PIRES CABRAL.***Artes Marginais; Antes que o Rio Seque; Arado.***

In creating his poetic work, António Manuel Pires Cabral soon directed his thematic and geographical compass toward the northeast of Portugal. Born in Trás-os-Montes (Macedo de Cavaleiros) in 1941, the poet began his compositions in those lands and never left them. In *Somewhere Northeast* (*Algures a Nordeste*), his 1974 debut, the title of which refers to an overvaluation of space, the author is keen to guide the reader in the demanding task of locating and decoding the lyrical discourse. And when reading the poem “Northeast,” it becomes clear to us that this space will be much more than a reference or a poetic topos: “Whoever picks up the compass sees / eight directions of the world, / eight methods of being. / The eighth is the northeast”¹ (Pires Cabral 2006, 12). There is instead a method of being, or “soul,” as Pires Cabral explained in an interview with Carlos Vaz Marques (*Ler* October 2008): “Between Trás-os-Montes, Beira Baixa and Alentejo I find something that I can’t really explain, but that sometimes I define as a soul. They have a soul”² (Pires Cabral 2008, 34).

The poet’s lyricism thus focuses on the soul of a people, in a country’s interior, evoking all its underlying material and metaphysical elements. “His world is among those hills and vineyards, those shale stones and frosts”³ (“Ípsilon,” *Público*, April 4, 2009), as Pedro Mexia illustrates in commenting on Pires Cabral’s latest poetic work—*Plow* (*Arado*) (2009)—and this rural and interior world constitutes the basis of an earthy and eschatological form of poetry. Since interiority means soil, “the sea doesn’t mean anything to me. Indeed, what I do care about is the soil. Maybe interiority is what I like”⁴ (Pires Cabral 2008, 34–35). Pires Cabral’s poetry thereby outlines its main thematic axis, like a biblical elegy, in the natural cycle formed by the element of earth, the union of life and death.

Indeed, “Terra Mater”—the first poem in *Somewhere Northeast*—already shows the Orphic intent of a poet bent on descending to the world’s depths, not to resurrect Euridice but rather to marry Demeter:

I descend to the ground. I invent the resistance
and the day song.

I recognize in the cry the easy, fraudulent
emotion.

Yet I still descend to earth

I dare cry:

Terra mater, painful urge to create,

bright secret of giving birth,

oh earth, I want you to sing!⁵ (Pires Cabral 2006, 9)

By giving voice to the earth and putting its fertility in verse, Pires Cabral, as a starting point, appears to draw from Miguel Torga, whose art heavily influenced his poetic lyricism:

I also want to open up and sow

A grain of poetry in your womb!

Everyone is plowing,

Everyone is burying rye,

And it's time now that I plant

The seed of the verses that I grow. (Torga, "Earth," *Iberian Poems*, 1952)

And this law of telluric force in creating and destroying matter, as revealed in Torga's verses—"Everyone is burying rye / And it's time now that I plant"—is what most fascinates Pires Cabral, as shown yet again in "*Terra Mater*":

. . . my grandparents rest

gently wrapped in you:

some flowers are also born of them,

some green-colored act

a friendly greeting

of perfume.⁶ (Pires Cabral 2006, 10)

We are born from the earth and upon the earth we die, and death is to us, in the northeast of Portugal, often presented as "the last and bravest learning,"⁷ because in that land "we do not die differently—just colder. / Hellenic women pour upon us / undeceived, livid cries. / Our friends canonize us, they remember things / of camaraderie and a lot of emotion. / We are in our house, soluble and unbelieving / boycotted, in solidarity with time."⁸ (Pires Cabral 2006, 14). As has been implied, the dialectic between life and death seems to repeatedly populate the mind of the poet, together with a bucolic space metaphorically rich in poetic

elements, such as the river, soil, flowers, bugs, vines, and olives. Underneath this dialectic, and in his poetic compositions, there is an emphasis on temporal distance: on the one hand, life appears to be associated with an unfinished past time by the use of verbal forms in the past continuous (*pretérito imperfeito simples do indicativo*); on the other hand, death is linked to the current moment through verbs in the present simple (*presente do indicativo*). Therefore, and because the northeast is at the same time synonymous with life and death, the poetic discourse, situated between these two temporal poles, often entails melancholy and languid subject matter in relation to finite time and unrecoverable life. If

On September 26, 1973
 there was still life somewhere Northeast . . .
 lizards all around
 staining the surface of the stones in green
 raised their dizzy and mocking heads
 at the flight of horseflies
 in the vineyard
 the fallacious labors of the harvest. . . .
 Oddly enough
 on September 26, 1973
 there was no chemistry
 life still persisted somewhere Northeast.⁹ (Pires Cabral 2006, 12–13)

Therefore:

Today the walls are collapsing gradually:
 close to the ground where they were born.
 As if it followed
 An old memento: *quia es petra*
et in Petram reverteris.
 It's a fact: the houses are not
 the same reckless vocation
 of eternity
 plaguing their owners.¹⁰ (Pires Cabral 2009, 19)

Nevertheless, and due to the mutation of time, not only had the houses collapsed—and the houses are a synecdoche for the wider rural environment—

but nature itself had followed the improper passage of *chronos*; the river Douro, greatly praised by the poet in *Douro: Pizzicato and Chula* (2004), signals the changing human and material landscape of an area once primitive and free:

The river, they said, changed.
 Something got to him.
 He emigrated from the riverbed, overflowed
 forever.
 Neither bones nor skin remain.

...

The river
 is now—limited by walls—
 a new water, stout,
 but contradicted
 and slow, something that lingers
 between vocations: of lake,
 mirror or street.
 A river hostage
 of memories from a different generation:
 when he was a rush of anger
 taken as a dagger sheath
 or a stone thrown against glass.¹¹ (Pires Cabral 2006, 319)

Hence, the poetic subject feels betrayed by a reality that no longer seems to belong, “as if they had been removed / the eighth compass direction, / the one that pointed to a cleaner / North.” (Pires Cabral 2009, 16), and reflection, as a disintegral portion of this surrounding environment, assumes the form of a syllepsis: “Up this river / down this man.” . . . “Despite traveling up this river, after all, I travel down into myself.” (Pires Cabral 2006, 349–350).

On the other hand, in this reflection, memory turns out to play the decisive role of safeguarding the idea of a soil that was fertile but is now sterile; thus the evoked reality is also, and essentially, inner and interiorized, existing only inside the poet. Paraphrasing from a section about *Somewhere Northeast* in Joaquim Manuel Magalhães’s essay “On the Poetry of A. M. Pires Cabral,” the truth is: “Reality is not the subject of this book. It is its engine. It accompanies the slow natural rhythms, the difficulty of change, makes use of rhetorical processes accompanying this slowness (such as the relative archaism of the pronoun ‘you’

['vós'] in regard to those who read), and is related to variations on popular topics"¹² (Magalhães, as cited in Pires Cabral 1998, 162–63).

And it is precisely due to this interiorization of reality that the poet claims a "conflicting mortality in existing" ["conflituosa mortalidade de existir"] (Magalhães, as cited in Pires Cabral 1998, 164), because "In the soil / nothing is lost, everything is kept." ["Na terra / nada se perde, tudo se conserva."] (Pires Cabral 2006, 9). The rhetorical question presented by the poet in an elegy for his father is quite revealing of this existential paradox:

Or should I ask instead
exactly how many meals your flesh gives
to the crowd without restraint of all those worms
to whom your death
is a miracle of bread?¹³ (Pires Cabral 2006, 15)

From this point of view, the apparent degeneration of the old and rural *transmontano* world is no more than the realization of a simple way of life, a way of getting back to one's roots, of being reborn. Indeed, in *Plow*, the poet sings again of the motherland of his birth, exalting its perpetuity in giving life and becoming the fruit of his verses. In a clear allusion to the poem "Terra Mater"—"Well, *terra mater*, forget everything / I told you in immature times. / They were all verses of poor quality"¹⁴ (Pires Cabral 2009, 14)—the poet returns in his latest work to a homonymous poetic composition, remembering that, despite the passage of time, the engine of his poetry remains intact, an image suggested by the excessive use of adverbs:

It is still possible to see from here,
from this place chopped up by winds,
terra mater,
Now only a residue of commotion,
but, golly, it still hurts,
still thrills.
And still calls out,
With its remaining voice,
an almost mute and moribund plea. (Pires Cabral 2009 14)

The soil of Trás-os-Montes remains even today a source of inspiration for the poet, and in "Terra Mater" (from *Plow*), it is considered almost sacred:

I know now, after the hollow din
 after all these lost decades,
 that only with silence's key can I
 still open a door in your olive oil body
 and penetrate you as a temple.¹⁵ (Pires Cabral 2009, 14)

This idea of the sacredness of the soil matches the words of Gastão Cruz in "Portuguese Poetry of the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries." According to this essayist and poet, A. M. Pires Cabral "has remained faithful to a poetic austerity, guided by a strong sense of linguistic restraint, to some extent along the lines of poetry that seeks its paradigm in the dryness of the soil"¹⁶ (Cruz 2008, 367). From the highlands of the northeast of Portugal, the poet Pires Cabral has carved his best verses, which reflect the poet's mood. As a farmer who returns to his working instrument, the poet confesses himself, in *Plow*, to be faint and rusty but faithful to his destination, to the natural cycle of life and death, to his craft as a poet:

But the plow perpetuates itself in me.
 In fact, in times of perilous exaltation,
 I like to think of these verses as
 a plow that tears other lands
 more volatile and less arable,
 I believe I leave in them some seed.
 Pure illusion.
 Neither such lands allow themselves to be torn apart
 so easily
 nor my plow has a vocation for life.
 So I return to the plow
 which actually plowed.¹⁷ (Pires Cabral 2009, 13)

The semantic game between plow and poetry is evident, as Hugo Pinto Santos notes, since "Among the Romans, the verse referred to the action of the plow. . . . Through verses we reach the earth, a witness of the plundering of time"¹⁸ (Santos, August 5, 2009). But we mustn't think that in *Plow*, a brilliant revisiting of his first book, Pires Cabral "repeats any telluric connection extracted from Torga or Pascoaes. . . . His modernity is precisely shown when, in dialoguing with lyric tradition, he assumes a tragedy that is all the more Portuguese than

universal. Poetry arises in Plow under the symbol of the poet, tireless worker of his verses, he who prunes, he who waters, responsible for the flourishing of the poem”¹⁹ (Cortez 2009, 23).

In conclusion, it can be stated that the soil, and, above all, that of the arid landscapes of Trás-os-Montes, is simultaneously the point of departure and arrival of all the poetry of Pires Cabral, who, in turn, does not reduce it to a simple theme or topos. His poetry closely identifies with the soil, and the poet’s work is to keep plowing his verses, engaged in dialogue with others who have plowed, digging word by word until reaching his roots. Thus, in Eduardo Lourenço’s words, poetry itself “is an expression of one’s roots” [“é expressão de origens”] (Lourenço 1987, 29). In this case, taking into account Plow, “doing it again” means “continuing with the creation, and creating means being a poet. This means that there’s nothing except Poetry to shape us”²⁰ (Lourenço 1987, 33).

NOTES

1. In the original: “Quem pega na bússola vê / oito direcções de mundo, / oito métodos de estar. / O oitavo é o nordeste” (Pires Cabral 2006, 12).

2. “Encontro entre Trás-os-Montes, a Beira Baixa e o Alentejo qualquer coisa que não sei o que é mas que eu defino às vezes como sendo uma alma. Têm uma alma” (Pires Cabral 2008, 34).

3. Ibid.: “O seu mundo são aqueles outeiros e vinhas, aqueles xistos e geadas” (Mexia, “Ípsilon,” Público, April 4, 2009).

4. “Pires Cabral’s poetry outlines, as if it were a biblical elegy, in the natural cycle proposed by the earth element, the binomial life/death, his main thematic axis” (Pires Cabral 2009, pp. 34–35).

5. “Desço à terra. Invento a resistência / e o cântico diurno. / Reconheço no pregão a fácil, fraudulenta / comoção. / Desço à terra ainda assim, / arrisco o grito: // Terra mater, ânsia dolorida de criar, / radioso segredo de parir, / ó terra, eu quero-te cantar!” (Pires Cabral 2006, 9).

6. “. . . em ti repousam / docemente embalados meus avós: / deles nasce também alguma flor, / algum gesto de cor verde, / alguma saudação amigável / de perfume” (Pires Cabral 2006, 10).

7. “a última e tão brava aprendizagem,” a verse from the poem “A Morte” (Death), in *Alguers a Nordeste* (Somewhere Northeast): “Do longo desamor dos dias escorridos / a última e tão brava aprendizagem / é a morte. Nela é que repousamos / sós e desamparados como feno apodrecido, / cheirosos e jacentes” (Pires Cabral 2006, 14).

8. “. . . não morremos diferente—tão somente mais frio. / Derramam-nos em cima

helénicas mulheres / desenganados, lívidos clamores. Os amigos canonizam-nos, recordam coisas / de camaradagem e muita comoção. / Estamos em nossa casa, solúveis e descrentes, / boicotados, solidários com o tempo” (Pires Cabral 2006, 14).

9. “. . . em 26 de Setembro de 1973 / ainda havia algures vida a Nordeste . . . // lagartos aqui e além / manchando de verde o rés das pedras / erguiam a cabeça tonta e zombeteira / ao voo dos moscardos // na vinha / as falazes canseiras da vindima. . . // “por estranho que pareça / em 26 de Setembro de 1973 / a química não passava / a vida resistia a algures a Nordeste” (Pires Cabral 2006, 12–13).

10. “Hoje as paredes vão-se aos poucos derruindo: / aproximam-se do chão que nasceram. / Como se executasse nela / Um antigo memento: quia petra es / et in petram reverteris. // Está visto: as casas não têm / a mesma estouvada vocação / de eternidade / que atormenta os seus donos” (Pires Cabral 2009, 19).

11. From the anthology *Antes que o Rio Seque* (2006): “O rio, responderam, alterou-se. / Subiu-lhe qualquer coisa à cabeça. / Emigrou do leite, transbordou / para todo o sempre. // E não resta dele osso / nem pele. / . . . // O rio / é agora—sujeitado por muros—/ uma água nova, corpulenta, / mas também contrariada / e morosa, coisa que hesita / entre vocações: de lago, / espelho ou estrada. / Um rio refém / das memórias de outra geração: / quando era um ímpeto de ira / como um punhal tirado da bainha / ou pedra arremessada contra vidro” (Pires Cabral 2006, 319).

12. “A realidade não é o tema deste livro. É o seu motor. Ele acompanha a lentidão dos ritmos naturais, a dificuldade das transformações, serve-se de processos retóricos acompanhantes dessa lentidão (como o relativo arcaísmo do pronome ‘vós’ com que se refere a quem lê), prende-se a variações sobre temas populares” (Magalhães, as cited in Pires Cabral 1998, 162–63).

13. “Ou será que devo antes perguntar / quantas refeições ao certo a tua carne dá / para a multidão sem freio de todos esses vermes / para quem a tua morte / é um milagre de pão?” (Pires Cabral 2006, 15).

14. “Pois bem: terra mater, esquece tudo / quanto te disse em tempos imaturos. / Eram tudo versos de má qualidade” (Pires Cabral 2009, 14).

15. “Sei hoje, ao cabo da balbúrdia oca / de todas estas décadas perdidas, / que só com a chave do silêncio posso / abrir ainda uma porta no teu corpo de azeite / e penetrar em ti como num templo” (Pires Cabral 2009, 14); Gastão Cruz, “Poesia Portuguesa dos séculos XX e XXI,” in *A Vida da Poesia* (Lisbon: Assírio & Alvim, 2008), 361–67.

16. “[A. M. Pires Cabral] tem-se mantido fiel a uma poética de austeridade, norteadas por um forte sentido de economia de linguagem, de algum modo na linha da poesia que procura na aridez da terra o seu paradigma” (Cruz 2008, 367).

17. “Mas o arado perpetua-se em mim. / De facto, em horas de arriscada exaltação, / gosto de pensar nestes versos como sendo / um arado com que rasgo outras terras / mais

voláteis e menos aráveis, / e nelas julgo deixar alguma semente. // Pura ilusão. / Nem as tais terras se deixam rasgar / assim facilmente, / nem o meu arado tem vocação de vida. // De modo que retorno ao arado / que de facto arou" (Pires Cabral 2009, 13).

18. "Entre Romanos, verso remetia para a acção de arado, que, findo o seu curso, torna ao mesmo tempo, por uma volta, versus. Por versos se chega à terra, testemunha da razia do tempo." See Hugo Pinto Santos, "Arado," <http://www.rascunho.net/critica.php?id=1505>.

19. "[A. M. Pires Cabral] repete qualquer ligação telúrica extraída dum qualquer Torga, ou Pascoaes . . . é moderno na medida exacta em que, dialogando com a tradição lírica, assume toda a tragédia que é tanto mais portuguesa do que universal. A poesia surge em *Arado* sob o símbolo do poeta, trabalhador incansável dos seus versos, aquele que poda, aquele que rega, o responsável pelo medrar do poema." See António Carlos Cortez, "Parábolas, palavra, poética," *JL* (June 3–16, 2009): 22–23.

20. ". . . é continuar a criação e criar é ser poeta. O que significa finalmente não ter outro senão o que a Poesia nos modelar" (Lourenço 1987, 33).

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