

João Cabral in Perspective

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This essay begins by considering João Cabral de Melo Neto's place in Brazilian literature. One is always wondering: what is this poet's place, what position does he occupy, what circle does he belong to and what is his standing in the context of Brazilian literature? It would be no exaggeration to say that Brazilian literary critics place him in the same rank as Carlos Drummond de Andrade as one of Brazil's greatest poets of the century. But, although both are exceptional poets, they are not so in the same vein. Great poets are those that add new chapters to the history of literature, and certainly Drummond wrote some fundamental texts for Brazilian poetry. But authors such as João Cabral go beyond adding a chapter; indeed, they devise a new grammar. The difference between a chapter and grammar is that the chapter, however extraordinary it may be, occupies a place in a sequence formed by other preceding and subsequent chapters. Drummond's writings rose out of the poetic fermentation of the Brazilian modernism of 1922, of which it is the most perfect expression. In this regard, Drummond is responsible for new and important chapters in connection with a history that is explained by the literary and cultural context of Brazil of the 1920s and 1930s. On the contrary, the work of João Cabral de Melo Neto stands almost in isolation in our literary panorama, since there is no visible lineage of which it can be made a part, with the possible exception of the writing of Graciliano Ramos. Cabral does not fall in line with the generation of 1945, to which he chronologically belongs, and furthermore does not view himself as a direct continuation of the aesthetic and ideological complex of the poetry of 1922. He is an author who blazed a new trail, just like Machado de Assis and

Guimarães Rosa, who exploded (into) Brazilian literature, bringing to it a deeply personal inflection. The fact that the poet has created a new grammar also implies a certain degree of discomfort for the reader, who will have to deal with this discourse using only the grammars already known. The initial tendency is one of rejection, which leads to paradoxical consequences. João Cabral is a much-appreciated poet, but perhaps insufficiently read in his complexity. He is basically known for *Morte e Vida Severina*,¹ an extraordinary success with the public, and perhaps it is the Brazilian book of poetry with the largest number of editions published in a short span of time. Published in 1956, *Morte e Vida Severina* has already surpassed 50 editions, which is absolutely astonishing for a market that is usually so indifferent to poetry. It is actually a text read aloud, loved, and acted out on the stage, in the movies, on television, but it represents just *one* aspect of João Cabral's work, and not necessarily the most innovative.

In 1956, when the poet launched his first great collection, he significantly entitled it *Duas Águas*, explaining that the title meant two types of utterance, two styles of writing poetry.² One of them collects the "to-be-read-aloud," in which the recipient was more a listener than a reader. This "water" would of course include the most communicative texts, such as *Morte e Vida Severina*. The other "water," which I will not describe as first or second so as to avoid establishing a hierarchy, is made up of poems which would call for a reading and a *rereading*, through silent contact with the text. Almost the whole of João Cabral's work, with certain reciprocal influences, could be categorized into poems of one or the other "water," one of immediate communication, the other of meditative reading. João Cabral's true dimension only comes across when both are considered, and not if only the water that "communicates," as in *Morte e Vida Severina*, is valued. Besides the communicative ocean, there is the depleted stream from Northeastern Brazil, a stream, dry and tiny, beckoning a patient reader to slip into its flow. The ocean of communication reaches fifty editions, whereas the vein (or stream) of the most meditative, complex and intellectualized poetry remains in the neglected and poorly fed second or third edition. It is as though there were two poets at the same time, one who reaps the public's grace and the other who earns its disgrace, insofar as the public is unaware of his texts.

The reader, however, may feel attracted by that supposedly complicated poetry as well as by the simpler poetry, upon discovering that in both João Cabral expresses the same loathing for the vague and the formless. The poet's

work is clear, plenty of brightness, because it is sunny, meridian, invaded by light. It is also clear, in terms of lucidity, because it does not offer puzzles. It is not about "what does this mean? What is the hidden message?" Everything is there, right on the page, as it stands in the text. But too much clarity obscures. So we are lost vis-à-vis the poem, not because it is abstruse, but because we recoil in the face of its clarity. The game proposed is manifestly visible, and we, seekers of dazzling depths, forego the chance of accepting a treasure that is on the surface, void of any mystery whatsoever. And when I speak of the surface, I immediately think of the notion of syntax. Cabral writes poetry in which beings and objects are woven together, they are intertwined through a very elaborate syntax. The poet opens a sentence in verse 1 and, sometimes, will only conclude it in verse 32. The reader, accustomed to instant poetry ("*poesia-minuto*"), in which the poet's enlightenment lasts for only 3 verses, is stunned upon noticing that he is already in the middle of a long poem and that Cabral is yet to unroll his first thread. The urgency of speed, the cult of the instantaneous and praise for the intuitive outburst are the opposite of Cabral's poetry. His poetry calls for a reading that seeks to gently wander through the many meanderings of an intelligence that unfolds through syntactic intrigues, in a discursiveness opposed to the idea of text as an instantaneous flash. The best correlate of Cabral's art is not photography, but cinema, with its ability to project itself in space and time.

João Cabral published twenty books and it is obviously impossible within the constraints of a single essay to run through the entire range of his works. I will nonetheless attempt to stress Cabral's originality, not by following his texts in a linear fashion, but rather by cutting through to the innovative elements of his works, from the smallest—that is, the phoneme—to the largest—that is, an entire book. Between the phoneme and the book, we will also pass through the word, the verse, the stanza and the poem, in a gradual expansion of the field of reference.

Based upon the classic opposition between consonants and vowels, we used to welcome the sort of poetry associated with the tradition of the melodic-vocalic: suffice it to remember the famous poem by Rimbaud that describes synesthesias and fantasies latent in the vowels. João Cabral, however, is a writer of consonants. He declares war upon melody as numbing, a source of amusement, and instead values the rough acoustics of consonantal encounters, which flee the melodious predictability of the vowel.

In terms of a semantic correlate, such a friction of consonants presents the stone as a sign, not as an obstacle to be avoided, but rather as a supreme horizon to be reached. Somebody is absentmindedly walking along and suddenly stumbles. The stumble is the act of waking up; it implies switching from a position of daydreaming to one of confronting the ground trodden, with the bluntness of the objects that surround us. For João Cabral, that sharpness, albeit uncomfortable, is a necessary prerequisite for poetry. In a poem entitled “Catar Feijão,”³ he compares poetic creation to the prosaic gesture of sorting beans, because both involve a manual practice, though with clear differences. In sorting beans, the seeker keeps the grain and throws away the stone or the pit, while the poet does quite the opposite. In sorting beans (that is, in sifting words in a poem), the poet should keep the stones and write verse with them, combating melody by means of vocabulary, syntactic and phonetic stones. Let us recall another poet, Vinícius de Moraes, who is usually placed as a counterpoint to João Cabral. Both shared at least two circumstances. Both were diplomats, persecuted and kicked out of the Brazilian Foreign Office, and both developed an unmistakable calling for poetry, albeit in opposing directions. Vinícius is the poet of celebration, of feeling, of mystique, of the night, of metaphysics, of love, of vowels.... João Cabral would have said that Vinícius wrote poetry to lull the reader to sleep, while he wrote it in order to knock the reader down. He felt that Vinícius was the greatest talent wasted in Brazilian poetry, a poet with tremendous potential drained by his connections to popular music, who was very competent but without any greater force or radicalness.

If, from the phoneme, we move on to the next level, we arrive at the word. Cabral’s word will chiefly be concrete, linked to a sensory experience, and furthermore, socializable. Cabral argues that when the word “table” or “microphone” is uttered everybody knows what it is. But if somebody utters the words “beauty,” “love,” or “longing” (*saudade*), each individual will understand them in their own way, obstructing, through polysemy, the univocally shared dimension aspired to by the poet. We find in João Cabral’s work an undisputed prevalence of concrete substantives over abstract ones. Another interesting point is that he denies the existence of words that are *a priori* “poetic,” because that would imply the dismissal of the poet himself, reduced to merely collecting an already defined group of words. João Cabral argues that the poetic is a *syntactic* effect, obtained through the poet’s hard work with words, and he introduces vocabulary into poetry that no one had

dared to use, such as *cabra* (“goat”) *ovo de galinha* (“chicken’s egg”), *aranha* (“spider”), *gasolina* (“gasoline”), all prosaic, “pedestrian,” signs. And he makes an avowed exception: he never was able to include the word “cigar” (*charuto*) in his work, considering it the least useful term in the Portuguese language. As to the hallmark of the poetic tradition, once again Vinícius de Moraes, João Cabral’s opposite, may be evoked. When the musical movement of *Bossa Nova* appeared, João Cabral heard Vinícius sing his compositions with Tom Jobim, and he began to get upset because the word “heart” appeared in all the lyrics. However, diplomatically and politely he kept quiet. During the fourth song, the word “heart” appeared again. He couldn’t take it any more and begged: “Vinícius, is it so impossible to change organs?” How about a poem with liver, lung, pancreas...

Another important datum: João Cabral holds that in addition to nouns, there are also concrete adjectives: “crooked,” “rough” and “square” would be concrete; “beautiful” and “intelligent,” abstract. In order to differentiate them, one must check if the adjective is linked or not to a sensory reality: we perceive something to be rough or smooth, but beautiful or intelligent belongs to the same impalpable category of nouns such as beauty and intelligence. Once again it is the stone that symbolizes this universe to perfection. It is no longer the phoneme, but the word, because Cabral’s stone, unlike Drummond’s (which was in the middle of the road), accompanies him all the way: it is a portable object. In the 1968 edition of *Poesias Completas*, a rather telling fact became manifest: João Cabral’s first book was entitled *Pedra do Sono* (1942), and the (at that time) latest one, *A Educação pela Pedra* (1966). A stone planted at the outset and another at the end of the road; the first one, of slumber, comes from a Cabral unlike Cabral himself, in his only nocturnal work, typical of a strong surrealist influence. The latter book welcomes a stone awakened, active and pedagogic, which proposes a pattern of behavior to the human being: to keep in regular contact with the stone in order to learn its resistance to disintegration, its insolubleness. Instead of *projecting* a multitude of ghosts into reality, João Cabral attempts to *draw* ethical models and behaviors from reality. The poet is not a master, but an apprentice of the universe.

By inscribing the word into a larger unit, we arrive at the verse. Upon combating the melodic, he rejects the three standards that represent, *par excellence*, the singing metrics of the Portuguese language: the minor rondel, the major rondel and the decasyllable. Whence a special effect: oftentimes,

the syllables seem to be either left over or lacking in his texts. With the melodic verse, the reader can even stop listening to what is being said, in order to remain anesthetized by the background music. In order to combat such passive, automated listening, João Cabral resorts to verses of eight, nine, or eleven syllables, or in the *rondel* he cleverly shifts the tonic accentuation in the sequence of the verses, since melody becomes foreseeable only when the cadence of the syllables is strictly predetermined.

By placing the verse within a wider structure, we arrive at the stanza. Starting with "O Rio" (1954) the poet begins to work obsessively with a stanza of four lines ("*quadra*"). It is not a matter of detail or a formal arabesque, for such an option easily accedes to a very precise meaning. Cabral abhors odd numbers and chooses the number four because the odd number always leaves a number floating: one connects with three, for example, while two remains isolated. When he opts for four lines, the poet creates more self-centered, stable and solid relationships. He seeks to visualize the figure four in front of him, as a complete structure in itself. In the book *Museu de Tudo*, he succeeds in creating a poem dedicated to the number four.⁴ For Cabral, there are very few objects more admirable than a table, for the solidity of its joined legs, for the balance and distribution of its points of support. Even the wheel would be an invention of the figure four: primarily a square, but having been so rotated as to become itself an angular structure. João Cabral wagers on everything that is angular, with sharp ends and edges. He loathes what is softened and attenuated, because such configurations harbor torpor, shade, and slumber, while the edge and the angle are part of a system of watchfulness and a keen eye.

Cabral can sometimes maintain a single long stanza, seemingly unhindered by the number four. But, if we were to reckon the total number of verses, we would arrive at sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four.... With every number four a sort of insularity of meaning occurs, as if the poet actually needed this number in order to organize his thoughts. Another aspect that is somewhat less pronounced in his work is the profusion of rhymes, without its ever really becoming self-evident. His type of rhyme is not common in Portuguese lyrics. The traditional rhyme is of the resonant type in which there emerges from the tonic vowel a perfect phonic coincidence. João Cabral uses rhyme of the consonant type, as in Spanish, yet which a distracted reader scarcely notices. There is a tonic vowel coincidence, but with no clear connection for the rhyme: *negro* ("black") and *rede* ("hammock"), for

example. João Cabral once explained why he rhymed, especially since he was known for his aversion to melody, and since rhyme is, after all, a melodic resource. He argued that the consonantal rhyme was not melodic, and that, on the contrary, he needed rhyme as a challenge for writing verse. And he resorted to quite an odd comparison by Robert Frost: to do verses without rhyme was like playing tennis without a net....

If we move from the stanza to the next level, we arrive at the poem. For Cabral, the poem is conceived as a language-producing machine, where each element is fashioned with a purpose, and in turn each word or image only acquires meaning via the connection it establishes with those around it and with the poem as a whole. In an interview granted to the widely circulated magazine *Veja*, Cabral observed that the tradition of Portuguese-language poetry consists in valuing the texture at the expense of structure.⁵ The artist, rapt with wonder, embellishes the metaphor, changes a word, embroiders another image, everything within the “retail business” of the verse, and not in the “wholesale business” of the poem. The object of that criticism, I think, could be Murilo Mendes, about whose poetry João Cabral expressed at least one reservation: his failure to structure.⁶ He was a poet with abundant imagery, true, but perhaps for that very reason, he was unable to find a thread to weave them together. His poems happen by explosion and, therefore, in bits and scraps which do not yield themselves to the notion of a whole. This is important when we think of the role João Cabral grants to syntax as the element responsible for the transformation from chaos into structure. This is the thread that will run through the poem, which will sew it together and ensure the poetic fabric a degree of organicity. Besides the syntax, in the traditional sense of grammar, there is syntax of another kind in Cabral, one of images, in which new metaphors emerge from a parent metaphor upon a pathway opposite to that of a random proliferation of the imaginary. There is an imagistic *continuum*, which is similar to João Cabral’s syntactic structure. Furthermore, his poems are also bold enough to redesign poetic forms abandoned by literature since Romanticism. João Cabral affirmed, in a lecture in the 1950s, that the modern poet wrote without taking into consideration the existence of the new means of mass communication.⁷ By taking that new audience into account, it is no accident that shortly afterwards he began to publish his “to-be-read-aloud” poems. He also regretted the confusion between poetry and lyricism brought about since the nineteenth century. Until the eighteenth century, poetry was not ashamed to

tell a story. Besides being lyrical, it could be didactic, narrative, bucolic... With the inflation of the "I" in the nineteenth century, the lyric poem swept across the entire realm of verse, relegating to the backyard of literature other forms of poetic expression. Narrative in verses was welcomed as a survivor in scarcely "noble" niches, like *literatura de cordel*, heir to a tradition expelled from the scene by the great poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. João Cabral suggested the recovery of those popular forms; he proposed it in theory and accomplished it in practice. "O Rio" is a narrative poem, in which the Capibaribe river tells its story in the first person, from its birth in the interior to its merging with the Atlantic. *Morte e Vida Severina* is a dramatic poem based on the folklore of Northeastern Brazil and Spain. In both cases, popular poetry works hand in hand with sophisticated literature by revitalizing sources that had formerly been scorned.

Starting with the poem, let us now turn to its inscription within a book, understood both as an instance of organization of the material included in it and as a graphic object. João Cabral served as consul in Barcelona and there bought a press so that he could publish books made by his own hand. This practice fits in well with Cabral's concepts concerning the development of handicrafts—the poet literally got his hands dirty in seeing the work born. As for the internal organization, let us strike a contrast with the book of a Brazilian romantic poet like Casimiro de Abreu. In his work we find a poem dedicated to his mother, since the poet happened to be missing her on a certain day; later he visited the orchard, and composed some verses for the orange tree... The romantic's work was a type of mirror of existential dispersion, a portrait of the diffuse character of the artist's experiences. Cabral, obsessively given to cultivating organization, does not allow the work to merely flow in an arbitrary fashion. Often the organization of his own book is as laboriously crafted as the production of each individual text. It is a macro-structural relationship: just as the romantic creates in tune with the moment and his poem randomly becomes part of a collection, Cabral, combating randomness, will try to integrate the poem functionally into the larger frame of the book. In *Serial* (1961), he worked that mechanism down to a system that is so lucid that it seems to border on madness. The book contains sixteen poems, that is to say, four squared. The number repeats with such consistency that it cannot be a mere coincidence. In terms of rhymes, there are four poems in the pattern a-b-a-b. As for the meter, there are four texts with hexasyllables, four with heptasyllables, four with octosyllables, and

four with different combinations of hexa- and octosyllables. Each poem of *Serial* is split into four parts; four of them have parts consisting of two stanzas, another four of four stanzas, another four of six and the last four, eight. In some texts there are words in italics, which work as a thematic synthesis; there are eight poems with words in italics, and the italics occur in four grammatical categories: verb, common noun, proper noun and adjective. Lastly, the separation between the four parts of each poem is made by the use of four different symbols, each one with its own specific way of functioning in the poem: dash, asterisk, number or paragraph marker.⁸ On an increasing scale of difficulty, the poet has concretely laid out the foundations of the book and, based upon them, he has furnished it with sixteen pieces of strict measurement, thereby fashioning a laborious, arduous and beautiful poem, which is the book itself in its architectural entirety.

Following all these considerations of a generic nature, I propose that we finally examine the functioning of João Cabral's poetic engineering in a specific text, "Tecendo a Manhã."⁹ It is a fairly well-known poem, even read aloud at union demonstrations, although generally on those occasions they read only its first stanza, which is the simplest. João Cabral recounts that it took eight years to complete the text, which he finalized after more than thirty-two versions. The poem is presented here in its entirety:

1

One rooster does not weave a morning:
 he will always need the other roosters.
 One to pick up the shout that he
 and toss it to another; another rooster
 to pick up the shout that rooster before
 and toss it to another; and other roosters
 with many other roosters to crisscross
 the sun-threads of their rooster shouts,
 so that the morning, starting from a frail cobweb,
 may go on being woven, among all the roosters.

2

And growing larger, becoming cloth,
 Pitching itself a tent, they may all enter,
 Inter-unfurling itself for them all, in the tent
 (the morning), which soars free of ties and ropes,
 The morning, tent of a weave so light
 That, woven itself through itself: balloon light.¹⁰

I would like to propose three levels of reading for this poem. The first would be almost literal: one can perceive the morning being born, whose clarity does not emanate from the sun, but from a light coming from the ground, kept safe in the beak of the rooster. In this paraphrastic reading, the roosters do not shout, but release threads that become intertwined and thicken, creating the morning as a gift for all. A second level, also very visible, consists in reappropriating and stylizing the saying “one swallow does not make a summer”—“one rooster does not weave a morning.” Such a politicized line in the text implies praise for the work of solidarity. But João Cabral toys with common expectations for the setting, by introducing politics where it is least expected: amidst the roosters, and not in the dichotomy of boss, worker, slave and master, which configure an already diluted rhetoric representing good and evil in domesticated spaces and languages. In order to access the third reading, let us assume that verses 1 and 2 refer to an unproductive rooster: alone, he does not weave the morning. Such a solitary rooster would be syntactically trapped in the initial verses through a period. Here, form and content belong together: Cabral speaks about an isolated rooster and the syntax of the text reinforces the isolation in the “prison” of the couplet. In the third verse, the solitude is broken. The syntax of the poem once again expresses solidarity, because it does not isolate or enclose: a rooster crisscrosses its thread with that of another, while a sentence links up with the previous sentence and tosses it over to the following before going quiet. The verb, which would make us perceive the sentence as conclusive, is omitted. Thus, the verse is halted halfway by the poet as the thread of the rooster that had been caught in the air by another rooster. All of this occurs in a process of convergence between the event that is being expressed, the dawn of day, and the form of the poem, replicating what is being narrated. There are two threads that meet, one of light and another of syntax, in the discourse of a poet who builds the morning and the

text at the same time. Therefore, at that third level, a subtle metalinguistic exercise occurs; as with the rooster, one word alone does not weave a poem. It will always need another one to pick up that thread, which it tosses to another, until that text, beginning from a tenuous sentence, keeps weaving its way through all the words. To make material the idea of something very light, a fine gauze, taking shape, João Cabral fosters a thickening around the phoneme /t/: *tela* (“screen”) is thicker than *teia* (“web”), and *tenda* (“tent”), more than *tela* (“screen”). Then, with *todos* (“everybody”) and *toldo* (“tent”), the solidarity of meaning is once again reflected in the phonic stratum, through the paronomasian game of words that reciprocally “support each other.” The whole text unfolds in solidarity with webs of meaning, syntax and phonetics, in an irrepressible flow towards the morning. And the poem draws an object that is symmetrically inverted at the end: in the beginning, two verses with an imprisoned rooster; in the epilogue, two verses with the morning set free, in a shining metaphor of freedom.

Notes

¹ *Morte e Vida Severina*. 1956. Melo Neto. *Obra Completa*, 169-202.

² *Duas Águas*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1956.

³ “Catara Feijão.” *Educação pela Pedra*. 1966. Melo Neto. *Obra Completa*, 346-347.

⁴ “O Número 4.” *Museu de Tudo*. 1975. Melo Neto. *Obra Completa*, 396.

⁵ “Entrevista.” *Revista Veja* 199 (June 28 1972): 4.

⁶ Regarding the criticism on Murilo Mendes’ poetry see “Entrevista de João Cabral de Melo Neto.” *João Cabral: A Poesia do Menos*, 1999, 327. The interview was given on November 1980.

⁷ The lecture, “The Modern Function of Poetry,” was presented in the “Congresso de Poesia,” held in São Paulo in 1954, and was published in the same year. Melo Neto. *Obra Completa*, 769.

⁸ In my book *João Cabral: A Poesia do Menos*, I analyze in detail all those configurations, see especially 230-232.

⁹ The poem is in *Educação pela Pedra*:

1

Um galo sozinho não tece uma manhã:
 ele precisará sempre de outros galos.
 De um que apanhe esse grito que ele
 e o lance a outro; de um outro galo
 que apanhe o grito que um galo antes
 e o lance a outro; e de outros galos
 que com muitos outros galos se cruzem
 os fios de sol de seus gritos de galo,

para que a manhã, desde uma teia tênue,
se vá tecendo, entre todos os galos.

2

E se encorpando em tela, entre todos,
se erguendo tenda, onde entrem todos,
se entreendendo para todos, no toldo
(a manhã) que plana livre de armação.
A manhã, toldo de um tecido tão aéreo
que, tecido, se eleva por si: luz balão.

Melo Neto. *Obra Completa*, 345.

¹⁰ João Cabral de Melo Neto. *Selected Poetry, 1937—1990*. Djelal Kadir. Ed. Translations by Elizabeth Bishop et al. Hanover: University Press of New England [for] Wesleyan University Press, 1994, 137. The poem “Tecendo a Manhã,” was translated by Galway Kinnel.

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