

# João Cabral de Melo Neto and the (Re)Shaping of the Luso-Brazilian Poetry Canon

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*É bem conhecida a adoção por parte de João Cabral de Melo Neto da racionalidade e da objetividade como fundamentos de sua poesia. As causas de tal escolha, mantida com determinação por Cabral em toda sua obra, tornam-se mais claras mediante a análise do impacto de suas leituras e reflexões literárias em sua poesia e em sua personalidade como poeta. A utilização de numerosos elementos intertextuais e metaliterários em seus poemas indica a configuração gradual do cânon pessoal dum poeta firmemente decidido a colocar seu nome numa tradição de poesia lógica radicalmente oposta à tradição sentimental dominante na poesia brasileira. Nesse sentido, o diálogo de João Cabral com sua tradição é a clássica luta de qualquer poeta com o passado e com o presente, a adoção e a emulação consciente de certos modelos poéticos, assim como a negação de outros. Este artigo analisa, de um lado, a configuração do cânon cabralino desde as relações mais intensas do poeta com as poesias francesa, americana e espanhola (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry, Moore, Berceo), e com a portuguesa (Cesário Verde), e de outro a influência de tais relações em sua visão alternativa do cânon poético brasileiro.*

Most critical appraisals of João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry agree on a fundamental premise: a stark contrast exists between reason and objectivity, on the one hand, as the guiding principles for poetic creation, and feeling and subjectivity, on the other, as Romantic negative forces to be renounced. The causes for this opposition—deeply rooted in Cabral's poetic practice and theory—can easily be linked to the poet's own personality and

to his strong identification with certain architectural theories. Notwithstanding the undeniable influence of such extra-literary factors on Cabral's work, his firm adoption of rationalism and objectivity as poetic principles can be best understood through a close analysis of the impact of some of his literary readings on his poetry, from *Pedra do sono* onwards. Thus, the intertextual and meta-literary features pervading many of his poems reveal the gradual configuration, over the years, of a personal canon, as well as the endeavor of a poet trying to find his place within a well-defined, reason-based poetic tradition opposed to the mainstream core of Luso-Brazilian poetry.

### The Core of Cabral's Western Canon

In his "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," Borges points to four seminal figures in the development of modern poetry: "Poe, que engendró a Baudelaire, que engendró a Mallarmé, que engendró a Valéry . . ." (54). This same poetic lineage is underscored by T. S. Eliot as the backbone of a particular kind of modern poetry: "I think we can trace the development and descent of one particular theory of the nature of poetry through these three poets and it is a theory which takes its origin in the theory, still more than in the practice, of Edgar Poe" ("Poe to Valéry" 28).

Borges' and Eliot's quotes summarize the core of Cabral's poetic canon as well; Baudelaire is, for him, the very center and origin of the kind of poetry with which he deeply identifies: "Para mim, o maior poeta que o mundo já deu foi Baudelaire—e Mallarmé aprofundou a visão da linguagem de Baudelaire. Em Baudelaire tem tudo. O que veio depois dele já estava nele" ("Considerações" 28).<sup>1</sup> From Valéry, he stresses "a explicação teórica de Mallarmé, seu mestre" (135). Despite Baudelaire's central position, Cabral's poetry can also easily be linked to the work of Poe, for both Borges and Eliot, a seminal figure. Both Cabral's *Psicologia da composição* (1947) and Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) point to a logical, intellectual idea of poetic creation and to the conception of the poem as a formal entity of almost mathematical precision. From such a perspective, the Cabralian use of terms like *composição* and *fábula* in some of his poems<sup>2</sup> can even be related to the Aristotelian idea of "fable" (myth) as a conscious, logical ordering<sup>3</sup> carried out by a poet (a maker, according to the etymology of the word).<sup>4</sup> It was precisely in Poe's work where Baudelaire found a practical and theoretical precedent for the conjunction of feeling and formal precision characterizing his own poetry. As Valéry pointed out, such a conjunction in Baudelaire's work gave birth to the twofold nature of modern poetry: "Tandis que Verlaine et Rimbaud ont continué Baudelaire dans l'ordre du sentiment et de la sensation, Mallarmé l'a prolongé dans la domaine de la perfection et de la pureté poétique" (613).<sup>5</sup> Just as Borges and Eliot do, Cabral makes of Mallarmé's and Valéry's poetic

theory the third and fourth pillars (the other two being, as stated previously, Poe and Baudelaire) of the kind of poetry he will radically oppose to the prevailing Luso-Brazilian sentimental tradition.

Thus, Cabral's choice of Mallarmé's line ("solitude, récif, étoile")<sup>6</sup> as the epigraph of his first book, *Pedra do sono*, stands out as a conscious, emphatic declaration of his own poetic principles.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the very reference to a poet like Mallarmé points to the peculiar "rational surrealism" or "surrealismo bajo contención" (Fortuna xiii) characterizing *Pedra do sono*, the first example of what the critic Antonio Candido rightly stated as the beginning of the rational poetry Cabral was to publish from *O engenheiro* onwards. On the other hand, Mallarmé's words—solitude, reef, star—can be viewed as emblems of rhetorical silence, intellectual solidity (the hardness of the *pedra* being in this particular case not only a place name but also a recurring Cabralian symbol) and the rejection of the night as a Romantic sentimental metaphor which is replaced, as in Valéry's *Le Cimetière marin*, by the sun—the main star—and its light as the symbolic sources of poetic, intellectual lucidity.<sup>8</sup> The whole constitutes, in short, Anfon's desert: drought, rock, sun and silence.

By placing them at the very center of his own poetic canon, Cabral integrates Mallarmé's and Valéry's theories (e.g. the sense of poetic organization, the obsession with the perfection of the poem as a way of defeating chance and chaos,<sup>9</sup> the disciplined effort of the poet, architecture and mathematics as poetic patterns, the doctrine of elimination in poetry, etc.) into the heart of his own poetry. In addition, Cabral completes his essential canon of modern poetry—Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry—with a number of Western poets akin, to a greater or lesser extent, to his own convictions about the role of rationality and objectivity in the creation of poetry.

Thus, from T. S. Eliot's theoretical work<sup>10</sup> Cabral stresses the concept of the objective correlative<sup>11</sup> as a tool used by the poet to reduce the level of lyrical subjectivity in poetry while reinforcing objectivity as a way to secure the independence of the poem as a radically autonomous structure. By using the objective correlative, the poet is able to break the direct connection between subject and feeling so that the poem's emotion is not rooted in autobiography but in impersonality instead. In other words, poetic emotion makes sense because it comes from the poem itself, not from the poet's inner experiences.<sup>12</sup> The objective correlative technique, what is more, enhances the value of intellectual images as a way of resisting sentimental abstraction, leading Cabral, for instance, to a most positive assessment of John Donne's metaphysical poetry. From Donne and other metaphysical poets, whose work Cabral admires for its well-balanced mixture of inspiration and technical elaboration, he derives a metaphoric technique, which, for him, involves the presentation of a metaphor, its discussion, its association to other metaphors, its negation and, finally, its own reaffirmation ("Considerações" 20).

Only through this appreciation of intellectual images can we understand Cabral's own appreciation of a poet as distant as Dante, whose work he values from an almost exclusively visual perspective: "Ele faz você ver as coisas (. . .) Gosto da maneira como ele apresenta as coisas. A parte retórica não me interessa" (125). From that standpoint, it is not surprising at all that Cabral appreciates Dante's poetry for being "fanopéia," that is, poetry based on visual presentation, according to Ezra Pound's precise definition,<sup>13</sup> since intellectual images in his own poetry "funcionam como peças privilegiadas da composição na medida em que podem oferecer resistência mais concreta à abstração das emoções e sensações esgarçadas pela memória" (Barbosa 65).<sup>14</sup>

The opposition between feeling and reason is also crucial for most of Cabral's "elective affinities" in those Western literatures—mainly Spanish, French, and American—whose influence on his work is more easily recognizable.

Such is the case with Cabral's well-known, close relationship with Spain and its culture. Suffice it to say that the poetry and literature of Spain has a much deeper influence on Cabral's work than that of Portugal, despite the key role played by poets such as Cesário Verde, as will be shown below. However, Cabral clearly and bluntly states that "I am a Portuguese-speaking Latin American. Like most Portuguese authors, I had never had the otherwise laughable worry of overlooking the language of Quevedo because of Camões. As you know, the influence of Spanish literature weighs more heavily on me than that of Portuguese literature" (qtd. in Meyer-Clason 677). For Cabral, two particular features defining the literature of Spain are its deep-rooted realism and its popular quality, as can be deduced from the poetry of Quevedo, Góngora and Berceo, the novels of Cervantes, and, most particularly, the classical plays of Lope de Rueda, Lope de Vega, Calderón and Tirso de Molina. In contrast to the sterility of Corneille's and Racine's elitist classicist theatre, Cabral emphasizes the relevance, for present readers, of those Spanish playwrights whose works portrayed and addressed ordinary people. These playwrights combined sheer realism and popular character and became, in turn, a model for Cabral's own writing: "o espanhol, apesar de ser o povo da Inquisição, o povo católico, o espanhol tem a literatura mais realista do mundo. Isso foi outra coisa da maior importância para mim, para eu me reforçar no meu antiidealismo, no meu antiespiritualismo, no meu materialismo" (32). These three features underlie Cabral's canonical choices, not only in Spanish but in French and American literatures as well.

The poetry of Gonzalo de Berceo, one of the main figures of medieval Spanish literature, is a highly significant example of those three characteristics that Cabral ascribes to most Spanish literature. From that standpoint, *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, Berceo's greatest work, can be insightfully illuminated by the analysis carried out by the Spanish poet and critic Jorge Guillén,

himself a key figure in Cabral's canon of logical, anti-sentimental poetry.<sup>15</sup> It seems to be no coincidence at all that Guillén's appreciation of Berceo's work can easily be related to Cabral's own view on the subject when choosing a quotation from Berceo ("Quiero que compongamos tu e io una prosa") as the epigraph of his long narrative poem "O rio" (1953). This seemingly enigmatic quotation is clarified when related to one of the most salient features of Berceo's (and Cabral's) poetry: the close relationship between the language of poetry and the language of prose and the achievement in poetry of a popular rhythm close to orality. This link between poetry and prose is, in fact, the very first idea that Guillén stresses in his analysis of Berceo's poetry.

According to Guillén, the use of the *cuaderna vía*<sup>16</sup> gives Berceo's poetry a material austerity conveying a firm and secure vision of the world, so that the rhythm and appearance of the lines effectively contribute to the meaning carried by the words. In contrast to the metrical fluctuations of medieval epic poems, Guillén points to a very Cabralian trait in Berceo's work, if such an anachronism might be permitted: "la maestría novísima se edificaba bajo el signo del rigor. Y el poeta ponía su empeño en sostener esa implacable regularidad del mismo esquema estrófico" (14). It is particularly relevant that Cabral attaches a very important role to metrical discipline in the process of poetic creation. In "O rio," Berceo's *cuaderna vía* is effectively evoked not only by the repetition of -ar rhymes in all even lines of stanzas 1 and 4, but also by the general use of quatrains and the symbolism attached to the number 4 (Fortuna xxxiii), a symbolism which will be highly underscored later in the poem "O número quatro" (*Museo de tudo*).<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Berceo's poetry displays a highly powerful visual imagery which had already been linked—as Guillén recalls (20)—by Menéndez Pelayo to that of Dante, another medieval poet whose concrete visual technique was highly appreciated by Cabral, as has already been mentioned. Thus, "Catecismo de Berceo" (*Museu de tudo*), Cabral's homage poem to the Spanish medieval poet, is perfectly clarified when read in light of Guillén's insightful appraisal of Berceo's poetry, since the reader gets the feeling of hearing not only Cabral's poetic voice but that of Berceo himself as well. The poem's images of solidity, thickness and discipline associated with Berceo and the Castilian landscape (line 7: "fundi-la [a palavra] em coisa, espessa, sólida"; line 10: "obrigá-la à disciplina"; line 15: "canalizar a água"; etc.) are parallel to those appearing ten years before in poems from *Paisagens sem figuras* such as "Medinaceli" (line 4: "leão de pedra"; line 32: "a dureza de mão") and "Imagens em Castela" (line 7: "mesa sem nada"; lines 9–10: "mesa sem toalha e sem terrina"; line 17: "palco raso e sem fundo").

Cabral's appreciation of poetic concreteness leads him to configure an international canon in which a remote, medieval poet like Berceo is smoothly linked, thanks to his "concrete" poetic technique, to modern poets such as

Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge, both poets being the focus of the first movement of “O sim contra o sim.” Cabral’s high praise for Moore<sup>18</sup> is mainly due to her outright dismissal of subjectivity (“Emotion, / Cast upon the pot, / Will make it / Overflow, . . .” she says in “A Red Flower”) and to the treatment of objects and objectivity in her poetry. It might not be out of place at this point to mention that, just as Cabral found in rational architecture a fundamental source of inspiration for the kind of poetry he wanted to achieve, Moore derived from her early interest in biology and medicine a rather similar poetic method based on precision and economy of expression. This *scientific* bent led her to the unmistakable dissection of objects that characterizes her poetry. Likewise, the images used by Cabral in “O sim contra o sim” (lines 3–4: “instrumento cortante: bisturi, simples canivete”; line 10: “com lápis bisturi”; line 16: “a lâmina que opera”; etc.) are part of a “surgical” leitmotiv which runs through most of his work, at least from the 1955 poem “Uma faca só lâmina” to the 1975–1980 collection *A escola das facas*. They are all metaphors for a poetic precision which, just as other Cabralian recurring images (desert, stone, drought, fasting), aim at the barest presentation of objects in a sort of rationalist still life. As Zenith states, “Cabral’s mature poetry, like Moore’s, does not pile on images in the way of the surrealists (among others), preferring instead to plumb but a few well-chosen images to exhaustion. Dissection rather than accumulation” (635). Likewise, as in Ponge’s poetry, “a lâmina reta e cortante é substituída por um instrumento que se ramifica, multiplica suas faces cortantes . . . Trata-se de uma técnica de ponta que, sem antecipar-se necessariamente à laparoscopia, permite penetrar as coisas e os corpos sem cortá-los” (Peterson 26).

Moore’s fascination with objects can be linked not only to the larger context of Modernism but also, more particularly, to a very personal pastime: her passion for window shopping. Thus, observation works for her as a means of poetic goading (“you see more than I see but even I / see too much,” she says in “Old Tiger”). In this sense, what Bazin states of Moore is what surely attracted Cabral (and his *olhos telescópicos*) to her poetry:

For Moore, art is capable of transforming the subject’s relation to the object. To see that there is “life” in “things” is to appreciate that things exist beyond the subject’s framing consciousness. While acts of perception always shape the subject’s relation to the object world, and while things are always discursively framed, Moore suggests, in a pragmatist turn, that it is useful and productive to act as if objects exist in their own right. The result of such faith in objects is an insistence that they cannot and should not become reflections of a subjectivity intent upon mastering all that it encounters. (116)

Likewise, it is a well-known fact that Ponge’s *oeuvre* is built upon a complete identification between object and poetics. He shares with Moore and

Cabral an interest in objects in and of themselves, not for whatever they may symbolize; and therefore, his poems can be viewed as proof of a constant effort to establish a new relationship with objects through a Mallarmean search for linguistic purity. However, Cabral and Ponge differ in the way they explore the relationship between object and language: while Ponge moves from object to language in order to animate what is mute or inert, Cabral moves in the opposite direction, since he fights against the flux of language threatening his intended “mineralization” of the living world (Tavares 11–14).

Ponge’s ideas about the fruitful process of communication between object and subject, expressed by his famous coinages “objeu” (a compound of French “objet,” “je” and “jeu”) and “objoie” (“objet” and “joie”), and his conviction that this process is more important than the result itself (Hue 381), must have reinforced Cabral’s own belief, in line with Mallarmé’s and Valéry’s ideas, that what really matters is the “poem in process” and not the poem as a finished, final creation. Cabral’s tendency to produce different versions of a poem, by changing some lines or just adding a few new words, can be seen as a strategy to focus the attention on the process of poetic construction to undermine the poem as a fixed entity stemming from an ephemeral moment of inspiration (Peixoto 1983: 178).

### Cabral’s Portuguese Canon: Verde as Center

As mentioned earlier, Cabral’s radical anti-sentimentalism is deeply rooted in a conscious rejection of Romanticism as the source of the dominant tradition in Western poetry. This extreme rejection accounts for hyperbolic statements like “A maior desgraça que aconteceu para a humanidade talvez tenha sido o Romantismo” (88). Among the poetic consequences of this anti-Romantic belief is Cabral’s eccentric position within Luso-Brazilian poetry: “A poesia brasileira é uma poesia essencialmente lírica, e por isso eu me situo na linha dos poetas marginais porque sou profundamente antilírico” (55). Cabral’s conscious sense of marginality—however powerful the margins may be—vis à vis Brazilian poetry accounts for his alternative vision of canonical poetry. In this sense, the highly significant poem “O sim contra o sim” (*Serial*) is conceived as an imitation of Baudelaire’s “Les Phares,” that is, a four-movement metapoetic presentation of eight figures (four poets and four painters-sculptors) selected from an anti-Romantic lineage of “marginal” artists, like Marianne Moore and Francis Ponge, whose sensibilities resonate with Cabral’s own sense of marginality. The central movement of the poem is devoted to poets Cesário Verde and Augusto dos Anjos, whom Cabral transfers from the periphery to the center of the Luso-Brazilian canon, thus altering the ostensibly stable position of other canonical poets, such as Fernando Pessoa.<sup>19</sup>

Cabral's committed defense of the poetry of Cesário Verde is highly destabilizing, since it affects Pessoa's central position within the official Portuguese canon. Despite his appreciation of Pessoa's poetic genius, Cabral points to him as one of the pillars of the excessive sentimentalism that characterizes the Luso-Brazilian tradition; this consideration explains his disapproval of Pessoa's work.<sup>20</sup> In Cabral's view, Pessoa's negative impact on Luso-Brazilian poetry is so pervasive that it can even be detected in the poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade, one of the main figures of Cabral's anti-sentimental canon, as we shall see below.<sup>21</sup>

Cabral's shifting of Cesário Verde to the center of the Portuguese tradition shows his high esteem for an author whose poetry—innovative though it was in his time—has traditionally been misunderstood. This esteem is symbolized by the preeminent position Cabral awards him in “O sim contra o sim.” To a certain extent, Verde can be viewed as an isolated, unclassifiable poet, a *rara avis*, an eccentricity in Portuguese poetry, and Cabral seems to be attracted precisely to this eccentric nature of Verde's poetry.<sup>22</sup>

From Cabral's sparse opinions and reflections on Verde's work and personality we can deduce that he particularly values the modernity underlying Verde's break with the prevailing Romantic tendencies of his time. Verde's style—a most remarkable precursor of Portuguese Modernism<sup>23</sup>—is based on a series of poetic innovations that can easily be connected to Cabral's own interests: e.g. 1) Verde's belief in the poetic possibilities of everyday speech; 2) his tendency to rhetorical sparseness or “ausência de retórica,” in Cabral's own words (“Considerações” 29); 3) his refusal of idealized abstractions and his tendency towards a precise, objective representation of things and people;<sup>24</sup> 4) his use of an anti-subjective poetic technique, which Cabral links to Eliot's abovementioned objective correlative;<sup>25</sup> 5) his acute self-consciousness about his work as a poet, which results in his use of metapoeticity (Losada 487); and 6) his ability to fragment and recompose reality in a sort of cubist way *avant la lettre*. To a great extent, as Hélder Macedo states, Verde attains his anti-subjective distancing through lyrical splitting and the creation of dramatic characters (*personae*) who play an essential part in the poem's narration (qtd. in Losada 494). We might recall, regarding this lyrical splitting, Cabral's intention, from around 1987, to explore the possibilities of Robert Browning's technique of dramatic monologue, “colocando personagens em monólogo” (82–83).<sup>26</sup>

It can plausibly be argued that by dispossessing Pessoa of his canonical centrality, Cabral was consciously underscoring the most obvious differences between Pessoa and Verde while (also consciously?) overlooking Pessoa's well-known admiration for Verde's poetry and its remarkable influence on the former's heteronymy, particularly on Álvaro de Campos and Alberto Caeiro, two of Pessoa's most singular heteronyms (Losada 494). Despite

Cabral's distaste for the Romantic sentimentality he associates with Pessoa's poetry, he most probably agreed with Caeiro's famous portrait of Cesário Verde, in "O guardador de rebanhos," as the "camponês / que andava preso em liberdade pela cidade." Like Pessoa, Cabral feels strongly drawn to Verde's unique way of seeing reality ("o modo como olhava," "a maneira como dava pelas cousas," in Caeiro's words), a visual poetic method he himself had already adopted from the very first poems of *Pedra do sono* (lines 1–2 of "Poema": "Meus olhos têm telescópios / espiando a rua"; line 1 of "Os olhos": "Todos os olhos olharam"), compelling lines about the power of observation as a poetic tool.

### Cabral's Brazilian Canon: Drummond de Andrade as Model

Cabral's reflections on the presence of an excessively lyrical subjectivity in Portuguese poetry and his inclination towards a more rational, alternative canon are clearly visible in his perspective on his own country's poetic tradition. Thus, he distinguishes—and rejects—an official canonical line of poets as popular as Bilac, Castro Alves and, above all, Casimiro de Abreu, whose undisguised Romanticism, in poems as emblematic as "Amor e medo," becomes Cabral's excuse to strengthen his own sense of marginality against the prevailing sentimental tradition.<sup>27</sup> In Cabral's view, this marginal, alternative lineage, in which he includes himself, begins with such *poètes maudits* as Raul de Leoni, Sousândrade and his "Inferno de Wall Street,"<sup>28</sup> "uma dessas coisas milagrosas na literatura brasileira" (142), and, most particularly, Augusto dos Anjos, the last great Symbolist-Parnassian poet in Cabral's view (43), whose exclusion from the official Brazilian canon is symbolically repaired by the central position Cabral awards him in "O sim contra o sim."

Anjos, a poet who was opposed to the Parnassian tendency toward easy musicality and lexical purity (Secchin, "Literatura brasileira" 43), is the only Brazilian pre-Modernist poet to whom Cabral pays tribute. At first sight, his inclusion in Cabral's *paideuma* may seem striking if we consider the emphatic *Eu* giving title to his only book, a seeming declaration of subjectivism contrary to the basic tenets of Cabral's poetry. Interestingly enough, Anjos was also vindicated as a singular poet by Haroldo de Campos.

Just as in Verde's case within the Portuguese tradition, Anjos is another poetic "eccentricity" to whom Cabral feels attracted. His singularity lies in the fact that the ostensibly subjective "Eu" of his poems cannot really be identified with the dominant hyper-lyricism of his time. What Cabral emphasizes is Anjos' pioneering relationship to reality, which Cabral sees as an "embryo" of his own poetic goals. In fact, it can plausibly be argued, as Campos Quevedo does, that Anjos' referential universe is the concrete world, which he approaches through an attenuated subjectivism and the use of a

poetic language made of scientific terms from physics and chemistry and references to everyday objects in which abstraction is objectified. Campos Quevedo's reasoning is absolutely convincing when he stresses the similarities and differences between Anjos and Cabral by appealing to the image of the veil associated with Anjos in "O sim contra o sim" (lines 11–12: "um mundo velado / por véus de lama, véus de luto") and with the "engenheiro" who "pensa o mundo justo, / mundo que nenhum véu encobre" (lines 7–8 of "O engenheiro"):

Essas duas ocorrências já guardam relação entre si: Augusto dos Anjos aparece ainda como representante do lirismo de expressão e corresponde ao "filtro" de emoção lírica por onde a realidade passa antes de encontrar a definitiva expressão poética. O projeto do engenheiro, que é o projeto da poética cabralina, almeja a imagem desvelada do mundo que, seguindo nosso raciocínio, é o mundo apresentado sem a participação da filtragem subjetiva. (62)

Combining Verde and Anjos in the same central movement of "O sim contra o sim" is a conscious aesthetic strategy: "peguei Cesário Verde e Augusto dos Anjos, dois poetas completamente diferentes, para mostrar o que os torna comuns" (114). In bringing together two anti-sentimental but rather dissimilar poets, Cabral establishes the basic poetic principles guiding his revised canon of Brazilian poets, which includes poets akin, in varying degrees, to Cabral's poetic affinities, such as Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, but also "alien" poets like Murilo Mendes.<sup>29</sup>

Cabral recalled the discovery of Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade as a kind of epiphany in his awakening to poetry (36; 38). Notwithstanding the lack of personal empathy with Mário de Andrade,<sup>30</sup> he considered his "Noturno de Belo Horizonte" a seminal factor in his own discovery of modern poetry. Such was the case too with Bandeira's "Não sei dançar." Bandeira was not only one of Cabral's best friends but also a long-life poetic inspiration, to whom he dedicated *A educação pela pedra* and a heartfelt tribute in "O pernambucano Manuel Bandeira" (*Museu de tudo*).<sup>31</sup>

The figures of Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Murilo Mendes are good examples of how Cabral's canon achieves balance by appealing to and contrasting the works of rather dissimilar poets. In principle, Cabral's appreciation of Drummond's poetry seems almost unquestionable: "O autor brasileiro (. . .) a quem mais devo é Carlos Drummond de Andrade. Logicamente, é o meu poeta preferido" (122). Explicit evidence of this admiration are Cabral's dedication of *Pedra do sono* and *O engenheiro* to the great poet of Itabira and his choice of some of Drummond's lines as the epigraph for *Os três mal-amados*. In the context of a critical discussion about canonical issues, this emphatic proof of admiration can be interpreted as Cabral's wish to legitimate his own poetry through the reinforcement of his bonds

of friendship with one of the most influential figures of contemporary Brazilian poetry (Secchin, “Literatura brasileira” 36). In Cabral’s view, among Drummond’s greatest achievements are his controlled poetic language; his innovative poetic harmony (which he illustrates with Drummond’s famous sonnet “Oficina irritada”); the diction of his first books, such as *Alguma poesia* (1930) and *Brejo das almas* (1934) (Barbosa 65); his aptitude for linguistic concreteness, exemplified in a line like “Há um cão cheirando o futuro” (from the poem “América”), one of the best lines of Portuguese poetry in Cabral’s view;<sup>32</sup> and, in short, his perception of the poem as a “machine à émouvoir,” an idea Cabral skillfully expressed by blending Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s name and Le Corbusier’s quotation in his epigraph for *O engenheiro*.<sup>33</sup>

Notwithstanding his undeniable devoted admiration, Cabral’s enthusiasm for the poetry of Drummond de Andrade cooled over time. The turning point for making this early change of attitude seems to have been the publication of Drummond’s crucial book, *A rosa do povo*, in 1945. The poems in *A rosa do povo* illustrated Drummond’s growing tendency towards the Neruda-inspired sentimentalism abhorred by Cabral, a tendency towards a poetry based on musicality and oratory: “A minha [poesia] é o contrário disso,” Cabral emphatically states (“Considerações” 24). However, in all fairness to Cabral, it must not be forgotten that Drummond’s appreciation of Cabral’s poetry also diminished: for him, Cabral’s steadfast bent towards an intellectual, rational, anti-sentimental kind of poetry was leading him to a poetic impasse.

In contrast to Drummond’s case, Cabral’s appreciation of the work of Murilo Mendes, to whom he dedicates *Quaderna*, comes from the opposite standpoint: “Creio que nenhum poeta brasileiro foi mais diferente de mim; desde a visão da vida (e, por parte dele, de uma sobrevida), até a visão da poesia, como função e como organização” (137).<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Mendes’ adoption of surrealism led him down a poetic path that Cabral only followed in a very limited and idiosyncratic way in *Pedra do sono*. As Barbosa claims, the influence of Mendes’ poetry on Cabral’s career can be most intensely felt precisely at the time of the publication of this book (65). Notwithstanding their obvious and radical differences, Cabral acknowledges Mendes’ influence as an essential touchstone of his own poetics. From Mendes he consciously derives his firm belief in the supremacy of the concrete over the abstract, a basic tenet that helped him turn the oneiric traits of *Pedra do sono* into the particular kind of “objective surrealism” (or “surreal objectivity”) that characterizes his first book. Likewise, Mendes’ work helped him internalize the priority of the visual over the conceptual. As mentioned before, Cabral links this poetic preeminence of intellectual images to a poetic lineage comprising poets as varied as Berceo, Dante, Donne, Eliot, the imagists, Guillén and himself.

## Conclusion: João Cabral, a Chapter or a Grammar?

Cabral's dialogue with tradition can be viewed as the unavoidable struggle of any great poet with other voices, past and present, and the conscious adoption and emulation of certain poetic models, as well as the rejection of others. Just as T. S. Eliot did, Cabral is playing his part in this struggle from a privileged standpoint: that of a highly-respected poet whose critical opinions are consistently considered an active factor in any canonical reshaping. In this sense, Cabral's role exemplifies what can be stated about almost any process of canon formation: that poets and writers themselves are the most active agents, both by altering the poetic tradition and conferring authority on earlier or contemporary (marginal) poets (through a devaluation and sometimes even a radical rejection of some of the authors of the officially accepted canon); and by redefining the nature and responsibilities of language in the interest of their own poetic practice (Stange 159). As Harris rightly states, when one refers to theoretical legitimization as one of the main functions of any discussion about the canon, writers enter the canon (or are entered into it) thanks to the active acceptance of texts and standards compatible enough with their own literary goals (116). This is true of Cabral's unsentimental, anti-Romantic ideas, since most of his reflections on canonical issues and his own choices of particular poets aim to legitimate a rational poetic theory based on the ideas of Mallarmé and Valéry, among others.

As mentioned before, by consciously placing himself in the shadow of Drummond, Cabral was not only paying undisguised and sincere homage to his literary master but most likely also trying to canonically legitimate his own work. The importance of both poets in contemporary Brazilian poetry is very insightfully tackled by Secchin:

Pero, aunque sean ambos poetas excepcionales, no lo son de la misma manera. Grandes poetas añaden capítulos nuevos a la historia de la literatura, y ciertamente Drummond escribió algunos textos fundamentales para la poesía brasileña. Pero autores como João Cabral, en vez de añadir un capítulo, logran crear otra gramática. La diferencia entre capítulo y gramática es que el capítulo, por extraordinario que sea, se inserta en una secuencia de otros, precedentes y posteriores . . . En cambio, la obra de João Cabral de Melo Neto se presenta casi aislada en nuestro panorama literario, por no existir un linaje ostensivo en el cual se pueda inscribir . . . Ahora bien, el hecho de que este poeta cree una gramática implica también, en un primer momento, cierta incomodidad para el lector, que se enfrenta con ese discurso a partir de gramáticas conocidas. ("Fonema" 387–388)

It is precisely through an analysis of Cabral's ideas about the composition of his poetic canon that Secchin's suggestion of a new grammar in Brazilian poetry can be best gauged. It is true that Cabral's own feeling of marginality

within the context of an overly sentimental tradition probably accounts, at first glance, for the lack of a clear poetic lineage in Brazilian poetry to which he can be ascribed. But, as has been shown, this lineage includes, in varying degrees of importance, not only Drummond but also outstanding names like Augusto dos Anjos, Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, Murilo Mendes and Augusto de Campos, among others. However, in order to fully appreciate this poetic lineage we also need to remember Cabral's rejection of the work of such canonical poets as Pessoa and Abreu, his vindication of some Portuguese poets (Verde), and the influence of other Western poets (Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry, Eliot and Moore, Berceo and Guillén, among many others) whose poetic theory and practice nourish an international line of anti-sentimental, rational poetry accounting for Cabral's own poetic idiosyncrasy. If we accept that his poetry creates a new grammar in Brazilian poetry, we should also bear in mind that, seen in light of his deep assimilation of the work of the Western poets he admired, Cabral's poetry can be viewed first and foremost as a highly important chapter of a much broader poetic grammar lying at the very heart of modern poetry.

## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, as in this case, the numbers in brackets after Cabral's quotes refer to the compilation edited by Félix de Athayde (1998).

2. Such as the "Fábula de Anfion" accompanying "Psicologia da composição," "Fábula de um arquiteto" (*A educação pela pedra*), "Fábula de Rafael Alberti" (*Museu de tudo*) and "Fábula de Joan Brossa" (*Paisagens com figuras*).

3. Of facts, in the case of tragedy.

4. In this sense, the idea of composition in poems such as "O engenheiro" is also related to a "principle of legibility" ordering all elements in order to make them poetically meaningful (Fortuna xviii). Again, it is T. S. Eliot who clarifies the notion of composition for modern poetry and takes its origins back to the line comprising Poe, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry: "Here we have, brought to their culmination by Valéry, two notions which can be traced back to Poe. There is first the doctrine, elicited from Poe by Baudelaire (. . .): 'A poem should have nothing in view but itself'; second the notion that the composition of a poem should be as conscious and deliberate as possible, that the poet should observe himself in the act of composition—and this, in a mind as skeptical as Valéry's, leads to the conclusion (. . .) that the act of composition is more interesting than the poem which results from it" ("Poe to Valéry" 40).

5. "Whereas Verlaine and Rimbaud continued Baudelaire's tendency toward feeling and sensation, Mallarmé followed his example as a master of poetic purity and perfection" (my translation). Cabral himself acknowledges this twofold influence of

Baudelaire's work when he also states that the French poet is "um dos grandes responsáveis [pelo] exclusivismo lírico" (54).

6. Mallarmé's line itself is a paratext, an epigraph, since it comes from the sonnet "Salut" which Mallarmé delivered as a toast (in fact, the sonnet's first title) on 9 February 1893 at the 7th literary meeting held by the review *La plume*. As the epigraph chosen by Mallarmé for his first collection of poems (*Poésies*), the line became not only a salutation to the reader but also an invitation to the uncertain voyage of poetry (Mallarmé 179). A transtextual analysis of Cabral's poetry makes it possible to link Mallarmé's epigraph in *Pedra do sono* to Jorge Guillén's line "Riguroso horizonte," chosen by Cabral as the epigraph for his *Psicologia da composição*. Through such an epigraph, taken from Guillén's poem "El horizonte," Cabral expresses once again his liking for poetic rigorousness, clarity and precision by an evocation of the horizon's perfect line, already suggested in Mallarmé's "récif." The rational poetry of Jorge Guillén, a renowned translator of Valéry's *Le Cimetière marin*, is given a prominent position in Cabral's antisentimental canon. As Fortuna recalls, Guillén's mark on Cabral's poetry "prolongaría la influencia de los poetas franceses [Mallarmé and Valéry]" (xxv) and his presence can even be detected in Cabral's restrained use of eroticism in poems like "Imitação da água" (*Quaderna*).

7. For Barbosa, Mallarmé's epigraph points to the notion of failure, which "vincula-se, sem dúvida, a um dos traços mais marcantes da poética de Mallarmé e, por seu intermédio, de grande parte da chamada modernidade na poesia. Não apenas o fracasso da realização do poema: a consciência de se estar limitado, através da formalização, para represar a própria torrente de experiência com que se tem de haver o poeta" (65).

8. For Richard, Valéry's famous line "Midi le juste y compose de feux" (*Le Cimetière marin*, I, 3) places the poem under the influence of the intellectual balance created by solar fire (169).

9. However, besides this strictly poetic view, a complementary, *geopolitical* perspective on some of these issues is possible, since by the 1960s it can be argued that Cabral was precisely inviting chance and chaos, or at least questioning how discourses of order and organization might begin to break down when translated to Brazil, Spain, etc. In other words, Cabral's poems can also be viewed as highly aware of geopolitics, that is to say: discourses of order, control and civilization cannot be blindly applied to Brazil and other countries without producing a great deal of social and cultural disorder. Significantly, this would lead us to consider (far beyond the limits of this essay) that Cabral's choice of a select body of works and authors from Europe and North America cannot be fully understood without addressing the theories of Eurocentrism and decoloniality, among others.

10. Cabral's interest in poetic theory at the expense of poetry itself accounts for his ambiguous relationship with the work of some of his favorite poets, whose theoretical analyses he generally admires and shares, despite his disagreements with some particularities of their poetic practice. Thus, he highlights Mallarmé's and Valéry's poetic accuracy and logical sense of organization while rejecting the overmelodic prosody of their poems: "a poesia de Valéry sempre me pareceu secundária, uma espécie de Mallarmé passado por água" (135). However, Cabral's ambiguity allows him to recognize Valéry's genius as a poet, of whom he says "Reconheço, porém, que ele era um

grande poeta” (“Considerações” 28), while discarding some of his basic theoretical tenets—“De resto, tenho profundas discordâncias com a poética de Valéry, com seu hermetismo” (48)—a commitment to poetic clarity distancing him from Mallarmé’s and Valéry’s conscious obscurity.

11. Defined by Eliot as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked” (“Hamlet” 145).

12. As Eliot puts it, “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may not take place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality” (“Tradition” 19–20).

13. Cabral recalls Pound’s well-known classification of poetic expression into three general categories (*phanopoeia*, *melopoeia*, *logopoeia*): “Ezra Pound diz que há três tipos de poesia: a fanopéia, que apresenta uma realidade visual ou visualizável—como exemplos: Cesário Verde, Lorca e até Dante—; a melopeia, de sugestão auditiva, como a música, e de que poderemos ter exemplos em Verlaine e Eugênio de Castro; e a logopéia, poesia que transmite uma ideia e de que achamos um modelo nos sonetos de Camões . . . Ora, a poesia portuguesa e a brasileira são preponderantemente melopeia e logopéia . . . Eu sou preponderantemente de uma poesia de fanopéia” (71).

14. Fortuna seems to be pointing to the same idea when he talks about Cabral’s intellectual understanding of words, lines and stanzas “como si el poeta estuviese construyendo su poema como un conjunto visual” (xii).

15. See note 6.

16. A particular medieval stanza form which, due to its four 14-syllable line structure, resembles the solidity of prose.

17. Cabral’s clear symbolic choice of even numbers like 4 and its multiples can also be viewed as an anti-melodic reaction against Verlaine’s famous declaration in “Art poétique”: “De la musique avant tout chose, / Et pour cela préfère l’Impair” (“Music before everything else, / And for that choose the Odd”—my translation), as can be inferred from Secchin’s statement: “Cabral abomina lo impar y elige el 4 porque lo impar deja un término suelto: se conecta el 1 con el 3, y el 2 queda solo. Cuando opta por el 4, el poeta crea relaciones más cerradas, estables y sólidas. Necesita visualizar el 4 frente a él, como una estructura completa en sí misma (. . .). João Cabral apuesta por todo lo que es anguloso, con puntas y aristas. A él le repugna lo que es suavizado y atenuado, porque tales configuraciones abrigan el torpor, la sombra, el sueño, mientras que la arista o el ángulo integrarían el orden de la vigilia y del mirar encendido” (“Fonema” 392).

18. Moore is one of Cabral’s key poets, as he unequivocally expresses in “Homenagem renovada a Marianne Moore” (*Agrestes* 1985). As Brandellero sums up, “Moore features extensively in Cabral’s work. The first reference to the American poet is found in the poem ‘O sim contra o sim,’ included in *Serial*. Cabral subsequently paid homage to Moore in *A escola das facas*, in the poem ‘A imaginação do pouco.’ He

also made a point of remembering the American modernist in his speech of thanks on occasion of being awarded the Neustadt Prize for Literature, in 1992, where his admiration for Moore's unsentimental poetry is made clear, citing Francis Ponge and Elizabeth Bishop as other examples: 'Na verdade, eles foram poetas cuja visão da poesia não tem nada a ver com aquele lirismo confessional, que, hoje em dia, e desde o Romantismo, passou a ser tudo o que é considerado poesia'" (102 n. 32).

19. The alteration of the received canonical order is very well expressed by T. S. Eliot's words on the concept of tradition: "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted" ("Tradition" 15).

20. Somewhat ironically, Cabral considers his own opinion about Pessoa a blasphemy (Athayde 141).

21. The complexity of Cabral's conflicted relationship with Pessoa's work can be also viewed from an interesting postcolonial perspective, as Brandellero does through an analysis of the sharp contrast between Cabral's acute Nordestina conscience and Pessoa's exalted praise of Portugal's heroic past: "he juxtaposes his own bleak view of the heritage of the discoveries, and the 'birth' of Brazil, with what he read in Pessoa's *Mensagem's* positive images of the mythical birth of Portugal" (86). Pessoa's figure could even be interpreted as the epitome of Cabral's troubled relationship with Portuguese literature and culture (112).

22. The word "eccentricity" is here used in its very literal sense: "the condition of not being centrally situated" (Oxford English Dictionary), the center in this case being the officially accepted poetic rules from which Verde distances himself.

23. As Losada rightly states, Verde is the poet who best assimilates Baudelaire's influence in Portugal, as can be inferred from an intertextual analysis of poems like "Num bairro moderno" and Baudelaire's "Le Soleil" and "À une mendiante rousse" (492–493). Additionally, the intertextual relationship between Baudelaire, Verde and Cabral becomes apparent if we consider that Cabral's "Na cidade do Porto" (*Sevilha andando*) derives from Verde's "Num bairro moderno," both poems being, in turn, re-workings of Baudelaire's well-known sonnet "À une passante" (Brandellero 173–175).

24. "Uma visão voltada para o mundo exterior," in Cabral's own words ("Considerações" 29). This visual quality leads Cabral to describe Verde's poetry as "fanopéia," "uma exceção notável na poesia de língua portuguesa" (71).

25. "Cesário Verde descreve a alma do poeta, mas não por transcrição abstrata (. . .) Foi Eliot quem disse que a obrigação do poeta é criar um objetivo que incorpore a subjetividade, mas não a descreva, o chamado 'correlativo objetivo'. Em Cesário, são as coisas que ele mostra que exprimem o que ele sente e não a confissão lamurienta e lírica e pessoal do que ele é, do que ele sofre, etc." (54).

26. In her intertextual analysis of Verde's "Num bairro moderno" and Cabral's "Na cidade do Porto" (see also note 23 above), Brandellero underscores the fictional nature that characterizes Verde's speaker as opposed to the autobiographical traits of Cabral's (173–75).

27. See Brandellero's analysis of this issue (141–42), tackled previously by Carlos Felipe Moisés (qtd. in Brandellero 141 n. 41).

28. It was Augusto de Campos who rescued Sousândrade from oblivion. In turn, Campos, a renowned translator of Mallarmé, Joyce, Pound and e. e. cummings, is the only poet Cabral acknowledged as his literary heir. Although quite reluctantly, Cabral conceded that “de todo modo, se você insiste na questão do herdeiro, eu diria que sinto uma extensão do meu trabalho em relação a Augusto de Campos, embora acredite que ele tenha feito, como seus companheiros, uma obra original estupenda” (“Considerações” 26). Furthermore, in 1989 Cabral had already pointed to Campos as “o sujeito com maior futuro literário” (78) and in 1985 had paid him sincere tribute in the very first poem of *Agregates*. Even though Cabral's modesty made him always reject any kind of literary ascendancy over Brazilian concrete poets, it is a well-known fact that the 1958 “Plano-piloto para poesia concreta” expressly recognized his influence as a master, as did Augusto de Campos himself in his poem “joão/agrestes” (*Despoesia*). His brother, Haroldo de Campos, not only acknowledged his debt to Cabral's *obra* as a model of the kind of rational poetry he and the Concretists admired; he also shared with him the importance attributed to the formation of a poetic canon as *paideuma* and the reconstruction of a literary tradition weighed down by academic prejudices such as the consideration of a particular literature as the embodiment of a national spirit.

29. Special reference should also be made to a number of poets appreciated by Cabral for reasons other than their poetic qualities. Such is the case with Willy Lewin, whom Cabral highly values for having led him to the discovery of modern French poetry. Likewise, about Joaquim Cardozo, one of Cabral's best friends, to whom he dedicates *O cão sem plumas* and a significant number of poems, he underscores not only the high quality of his poems—however little influence they had on Cabral's poetry—but above all his role as a literary intermediary and the influence of his theoretical work as an engineer on the development of his own ideas about architectural rationality in poetry (“Considerações” 29). Vinicius de Moraes, to whom Cabral dedicates *Uma faca só lâmina*, is another singular case. Cabral's high appreciation of his poetry is tempered by Moraes' musical career. As mentioned above, Cabral's reluctance towards music is often overemphasized by the poet himself: “Como dizia Voltaire, a música é o menos desagradável dos ruídos” (63).

30. A personal antipathy he also felt for Oswald de Andrade, despite his highly positive appreciation of his poetry: “um poeta extraordinário, muito melhor que o Mário de Andrade (. . .) O Oswald de Andrade é um sujeito mais essencial” (Athyde 138).

31. As can be inferred from the cases of Mário de Andrade and Bandeira, Cabral's canon is occasionally made up not so much of poets but of particular poems. Bandeira's case can also be tackled from a different standpoint, as Secchin does: “Manuel Bandeira se mudou tempranamente a Rio de Janeiro, y habla relativamente poco de su tierra natal, lo que, para un regionalista empedernido como Cabral, debería sonar casi como una ofensa. Además de eso, la poesía de Bandeira es considerada uno de los puntos altos del lirismo brasileño, al paso que Melo Neto rechaza la presencia explícita de los sentimientos en sus versos. De ahí, por lo tanto, que no deje de ser metalingüísticamente irónica y despreciativa la dedicatoria “A Manuel Bandeira,

esta antilira para seus oitenta'anos" (. . .), en rigor, una antidedicatoria" ("Literatura brasileira" 37).

32. Cabral was probably quoting Drummond from memory in 1988 when he was interviewed by Mário César Carvalho for the Brazilian daily *Folha de São Paulo* (see Athayde 65–66). In fact, Drummond's lines go as follows: "Só o primeiro cão, / em frente do homem / cheirando o futuro."

33. In Fortuna's opinion, "Carlos Drummond de Andrade fue el maestro receptivo y el interlocutor estético que dio forma a la personalidad literaria de João Cabral de Melo Neto, e inclusive influyó en algunos aspectos de la psicología del joven poeta (. . .), bien sea con relación a la materialidad de la poesía, o a la expresión del escepticismo y de la disección analítica, o a la lucidez permanente y a la conciencia del compromiso del poeta con el tiempo presente" (14–15).

34. Secchin points to a kind of structural difference between Cabral and Mendes: "En una entrevista concedida a la revista *Veja*, Cabral observó que la tradición de la poesía en lengua portuguesa consiste en valorar la tesitura en detrimento de la estructura (. . .) El blanco de esa crítica, a mi modo de ver, podría ser Murilo Mendes, a cuya poesía João Cabral hizo al menos una restricción: la de no saber estructurarse. Poeta de imágenes transbordadas sí, pero, tal vez por eso mismo, incapaz de atarlas con un hilo organizador. Sus poemas se dan por explosión y, por lo tanto, en fragmentos refractarios a la noción de conjunto" ("Fonema" 393).

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