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JOÃO
CABRAL
DE MELO
NETO

Selected Poetry
1937–1990

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Preface

This bilingual anthology is the first comprehensive selection in English of João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry. Cabral's poetic career spans more than half a century. Literary historians generally consider Cabral the most significant poet of the post–World War II generation in Brazil. For the past twenty years, English-speaking readers' acquaintance with him has been primarily through the score of poems gathered by Elizabeth Bishop and Emanuel Brasil in the anthology and translations sponsored by the Academy of American Poets and published by the Wesleyan University Press as *An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry* (1972). The present collection takes the Cabral poems in that anthology as its core. The impetus for the expansion of that core into a full-fledged volume came from the poet's selection as laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1992, a prize previously won by Elizabeth Bishop herself and sponsored by *World Literature Today*, the oldest continuously published international literary quarterly in the United States.

João Cabral de Melo Neto was born on 9 January 1920 in Recife. His first extant verses date from the late thirties. Inspired by the minimalist theatrical settings of Pirandello and goaded by the formal preoccupations of the fledgling poet, particularly upon his initial encounter with the surrealism of Apollinaire, these poems were not published until 1990 and are presented here in translation for the first time. These are auspicious exercises that already evince the poet's career-long devotion to the rigors of his craft. They intimate as well his suspicion of inspired states and of poetic lyricism. "Poetry seems to me something much broader," he would declare in a speech to Brazil's Academy of Letters (of which he has been a member since 1968) on the occasion of his acceptance of the Neustadt Prize in 1992. "It is the exploration of the materiality of words and of the possibilities of organization of verbal structures, things that have nothing to do with what is romantically called inspiration, or even intuition."

Cabral is often referred to as "a difficult poet." No one can appreciate that difficulty in the same way as those who have been chastened by the trials of translating his works. Fortunately for this present collection, a good many of the translators are distinguished poets themselves, with their own chastening difficulties as poets. Certainly this is the magnetic relationship Cabral has always had with Elizabeth Bishop. And it is also the challenge that has attracted other first-rank poets and veteran translators, such as W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, James Wright, Louis Simpson, and, more recently, for the purposes of this expansion, Alastair Reid and younger poets such as Richard Zenith and Ricardo Sternberg. Finding oneself in such company is indeed humbling. Were it not for the opportunity to check my own translations with the poet himself (his English is graceful), it is quite unlikely that I would have dared join my efforts to those of such an awesome assembly.

Cabral views his poetic calling in humble terms, in those of an unending rehearsal, an exploration, an apprenticeship, an "education." His popularity in Brazil notwithstanding, he is a poet's poet who does not flinch before the obstinate vicissitudes of the wordsmith. And yet, whatever constant may inform Cabral's poetry, it certainly is not a dehumanized formalism or a mechanical abacus of arithmetic prosody. Were this the case, he certainly would no longer be a "difficult" poet. Cabral himself provides the most telling insight into the nature of his difficulty when he characterizes the exercise of poetry "as emotive exploration of the world of things and as rigorous construction of lucid

formal structures, lucid objects of language.” Fortunately, the present collection offers numerous occasions from Cabral’s long career in which such rigorous exercises are at once the subject of his poems, a demonstration of such constructive procedures, and, invariably, unmistakable examples of “lucid objects of language.” Cabral’s declared associations are also telling. He has translated works by, written poems to, or, very often, invoked and associated himself with such poets as Gonzalo de Berceo, George Herbert, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop, and Richard Wilbur. This is clearly the compelling genealogy of a special kind of “emotive exploration” and poetic lucidity.

Rather than dilate further on the way stations of this genealogy through Cabral’s itinerary, I offer instead a synoptic chronology and a bibliography of his poetic production.

The last time I communicated with Cabral was shortly after his seventy-fourth birthday, in January 1994. I called Rio de Janeiro to inquire after his ailing health and to wish him well for the new year. Our telephonic encounter was a scene worthy of Machado de Assis, a scene in which Marianne Moore, one of Cabral’s oft-invoked precursors, in all her apocryphal ruses, would have delighted. The strained voice of the weary “housemaid” who answered after numerous rings echoed with Cabral’s unmistakable voice and his own unique lilt of northeastern Brazilian Portuguese. The plaintive persona spoke to me of “Cabral’s” precarious health, betraying a great deal about solitude and the extremes of reclusion (“Cabral no longer lives with us, he no longer lives in Brazil”). I trust “she” has passed along my best wishes to “him.”

The completion of this volume owes much to the assistance and encouragement of numerous colleagues and friends. Silviano Santiago, who advocated Cabral’s candidacy as a jury member for the 1992 Neustadt Prize, has worked miracles in bridging many frontiers, geographical and otherwise. Sebastião Lacerda, editor of *Nova Fronteira*, which publishes Cabral’s works in Brazil, has been gracious in granting us publication rights of the original poems that face the translations in this volume. Terry Cochran, then director of the Wesleyan University Press, and the Press staff have been enthusiastic about this endeavor from the beginning. My own staff at *World Literature Today* has been most helpful and encouraging. After the poet, the translators themselves, of course, are the ones who have made this volume possible. Finally, the support of Allece Garrard, whose generosity underwrote the new translations, is gratefully acknowledged.

Norman, Oklahoma

Dj.K

7 February 1994

Chronology

- 1920 Born 9 January in Recife to Luis Cabral de Melo and Carmen Carneiro Leão.
- 1942 Moves to Rio de Janeiro. Publication of his first verse collection, *Pedra do sono* (Stone of sleep).
- 1945 Joins the diplomatic service. Publication of his second book of verse, *O engenheiro* (The engineer).
- 1947 Publishes a trilogy on poetry and poetics, *Psicologia da composição* (Psychology of composition). Assigned to first diplomatic post: Barcelona, Spain.
- 1950 Publication of verse collection *O cão sem plumas* (The dog without feathers) and a monograph on the painter Joan Miró. Posted to the Brazilian mission in London.
- 1954 His collection *O rio* (The river) is awarded the Premio José Anchieta in an open poetry competition commemorating the fourth centenary of the city of São Paulo.
- 1956 Publication of previous work in collective form as *Dois águas* (Two waters), with the addition of *Paisagens com figuras* (Landscapes with figures), *Uma faca só lâmina* (*A Knife All Blade*), and his most widely read and most translated work, *Morte e vida severina* ("Death and Life of a Severino").
- 1960 Publication of verse collection *Quaderna* (Four-spot).
- 1961 Appointed to cabinet position as head of Brazil's Ministry of Agriculture.
- 1964 Returns to diplomatic service and is posted to Geneva, Switzerland.
- 1966 Publication of *Educação pela pedra* (Education by stone). A theatrical production of *Morte e vida severina* is awarded a prize at the theater festival of Nancy, France. Appointed consul general to Barcelona.
- 1968 Elected to the Brazilian Academy of Letters.
- 1970 Posted to the Brazilian embassy in Asunción, Paraguay.
- 1972 Appointed ambassador to Senegal, where he serves until 1978.
- 1980 Publication of verse collection *A escola das facas* (The school of knives).
- 1982 Appointed ambassador to Honduras. Publication of *Poesia crítica*, a collection of his poetry dealing with the poetic process.
- 1984 Publication of *Auto do frade* (The friar's way).
- 1985 Publication of *Agrestes* (the name of a barren region in northeastern Brazil).
- 1987 Publication of *Crime na Calle Relator* (Crime on Relator Street). Retires from

diplomatic service.

- 1988 Takes up residence in Rio de Janeiro. Publication of two verse collections, *Museu de tudo e depois* (Museum of everything and afterward) and *Poemas pernambucanos* (Poems of Pernambuco).
- 1989 Publication of *Sevilha andando* (Seville walking).
- 1991 Awarded the Camões Prize.
- 1992 Selected by an international jury of writers as the twelfth laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature (March); awarded the prize in ceremonies at the Brazilian Academy of Letters in Rio de Janeiro (August). Receives the State of São Paulo Literary Prize (August).

Pirandello I

A paisagem parece um cenário de teatro.
É uma paisagem arrumada.
Os homens passam tranqüilamente
com a consciência de que estão representando.
Todos passam indiferentes
como se fosse a vida ela mesma.
O cachorro que atravessa a rua
e que deveria ser faminto
tem um ar calmo de sesta.
A vida ela própria não parece representada:
as nuvens correm no céu
mas eu estou certo de que a paisagem é artificial
eu que conheço a ordem do diretor:
—Não olhem para a objetiva!
e sei que os homens são grandes artistas
o cachorro é um grande artista.

Pirandello I

The landscape is like a stage set.
It is a designed landscape.
Men go by calmly
conscious that they act.
All go by with indifference
as if life was playing itself.
The dog that crosses the street
and should have been hungry
has a tranquil, sleepy look.
Life itself does not seem enacted:
clouds are running in the sky
but I am sure the landscape is artificial
since I know the director's command:
—Do not look at the camera!
and I know that men are great actors,
the dog is a great actor.

Translated by Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg

Pirandello II

Sei que há milhares de homens
se confundindo neste momento.
O diretor apoderou-se de todas as consciências
num saco de víspora.
Fez depois uma multiplicação
que não era bem uma multiplicação de pães
de um por dez por quarenta mil.
Tinha um gesto de quem distribui flores.
A mim me coube um frade
um pianista e um carroceiro.
Eu era um artista fracassado
que corra todos os bastidores
vivia cansado como os cavalos dos que não são heróis
serei um frade
um carroceiro e um pianista
e terei de me enforcar três vezes.

Pirandello II

I know there are millions of men
mixing themselves up this moment.
The director took hold of all consciousnesses
and keeps them in this bag of hornets.
Then he multiplied them
not quite as bread was multiplied
by ten, by forty thousand.
His gesture was as if distributing flowers.
A monk, a pianist, a wagon driver was my lot.
I was a failed artist
who had exhausted all the backstages
I felt as tired as the horses
of those who are not heroes
I will be a monk
a wagon driver and a pianist
and I shall have to hang myself three times.

Translated by Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg

Poesia

Deixa falar todas as coisas visíveis
deixa falar a aparência das coisas que vivem no tempo
deixa, suas vozes serão abafadas.
A voz imensa que dorme no mistério sufocará a todas.
Deixa, que tudo só frutificará
na atmosfera sobrenatural da poesia.

Poetry

Allow all visible things to speak
allow the surface of all that lives in time to speak
allow this: their voices shall be muffled.
The enormous voice asleep in the mystery
will choke off all other voices.
Allow this, for everything will bear fruit
only in the supernatural atmosphere of poetry.

Translated by Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg

Poema

Deixa que no teu pensamento viajem apenas
os pensamentos que estiveram presentes
na cabeça do primeiro homem
quando ele foi ao teatro.

As estradas em *long-shot* todas
se reuniram numa só estrada
que corria entre representações ideais
e que ele descobriu estarem presentes
na retina do primeiro homem
quando ele foi ao teatro.

Poem

Let only the thoughts present
in the head of the first man
when he went to the theater
travel in your own thoughts.
The roads, all filmed in *longshots*
came together in a single road
that ran between ideal performances
and that he discovered to be present
in the retina of the first man
when he went to the theater.

*Translated by
Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg*

Homem falando no escuro

Dentro da noite ao meu lado
grandes contemplações silenciosas;
dentro da noite, dentro do sonho
onde os espaços e o silêncio se confundem.

Um gesto corria do princípio
batendo asas que feriam de morte.
Eu me sentia simultaneamente adormecer
e despertar para as paisagens mais quotidianas.

Não era inconfessável que eu fizesse versos
mas juntos nos libertávamos a cada novo poema.
Apenas transcritos eles nunca foram meus,
e de ti nada restava para as cidades estrepitosas.

Só os sonhos nos ocupam esta noite,
nós dois juntos despertamos o silêncio.
Dizia-se que era preciso uma inundação,
mas nem mesmo assim uma estrela subiu.

A Man Speaking in the Dark

Within the night at my side
great silent contemplation;
within the night, within the dream
where space and silence are one.

A movement started up from the beginning,
with a beating of wings that were the wings of death.
I felt myself asleep and simultaneously
awake to all the scenes of every day.

I did not mind admitting that I wrote verses
but together we freed ourselves from each new poem.
No sooner written than they were not mine
and nothing of you remained for the clamoring cities.

Only our dreams matter to us this night.
We two together waken the silence.
It was said that what was needed was a flood,
but not even a single star rose up.

Translated by Alastair Reid

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