

## IRONY IN *MORTE E VIDA SEVERINA* (1956), BY JOÃO CABRAL DE MELO NETO<sup>1</sup>

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The Brazilian writer and diplomat João Cabral de Melo Neto, while working at the Consulate General in London, was accused of subversion for alleged involvement with communism. When he was sent back to Brazil, he worked in the press, took part in conferences and published unpublished texts, including the dramatic poem *Morte e vida Severina* (*Death and life Severina*), as part of the volume *Duas Águas* (*Two-Waters*) (1956). Over time, this novelesque poem has been the writer's most notable work to the general public, whether due to its communicative aspect – questionable, but recognized by the poet; because of the *mise-en-scène* at the theater of the Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, the TUCA, in the 1960s, with music by Chico Buarque de Holanda; or because of the countless adaptations for various media, television, comic books, animation, etc. This work has not been the best known, however, for the humor and irony it presents. Even in the article in which she analyzes the parodistic inversion present in the Cabralian poem, Nancy Mendes (1979, p.49) did not discuss humor, although she pointed out the irony in the speech of the people who bring gifts to the newborn and in the speech by the poem's nomadic characters, following the concept of parody as being “at the same time, a respectful homage and a sort of scornful (*‘pied de nez’*) tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

The main thread that unites the scenes in the poem is the journey of Severino, a *retirante* (migrant) from the *sertão* (backlands), remote areas in relation to the capital of Pernambuco, Recife, following the course of the Capibaribe River, in search of work and, therefore, better living conditions. He passes through towns, simple villages, and even deserted areas, facing

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<sup>4</sup> “a um só tempo, homenagem respeitosa e um gesto de vaia (*‘pied de nez’*) à tradição”.

drought, violence due to land disputes, the decay of the mills, the lack of work for rural men and, finally, the lack of expectations for these same men in urban centers. Over this journey, death as a consequence of such evils is frequent. The text ends with the news of a child's birth. The last line is the answer of the father, Seu José Mestre Carpina, to Severino's question:

que diferença faria  
se em vez de continuar  
tomasse a melhor saída:  
a de saltar, numa noite,  
fora da ponte da vida?  
(MELO NETO, 2003, p.195).

What difference would it make  
If, instead of proceeding,  
I took the best way out:  
jumping, one night,  
off the bridge of life?

This question is asked after Severino has finally arrived in Recife. Seu José Mestre Carpina is a resident of one of the *mocambos* that exist between the wharf and the river banks. In Recife, Severino comes across a reality that does not correspond to what he expected. He learns about the terrible living conditions of the poor in the city, living in *mocambos*, unhealthy dwellings that attest to social inequality and the lack of urban planning in the city that appears to be his final destination. In contrast to the developmental euphoria of the 1950s, the theater play presented the precariousness of life, whether in the archaic *sertão* (backlands) or in the degraded periphery of the modern city, and the phenomena are shown with an ironic and sarcastic standpoint. The first irony we would highlight is what Muecke (1982, p.22-3) called "Observable Irony", including "whether ironies of events, of characters (self-ignorance, self-betrayal), of situations, or of ideas (for example, the unseen inner contradictions of a philosophical system as Marxism) – could be seen as local or universal". Noting that the concept embraces the development of Welt-Ironie, Cosmic Irony, or General Irony, he adds, "the irony of the universe with man or the individual as victim". Among other examples of observable irony, he cites: "the way in which the event reverses our hope or fears; Clytemnestra rejoicing in her safety when, as the audience knows, her doom is already sealed" (p.28).

Severino is not an exultant character. He leaves the *sertão* (backlands) with the hope of a better life in Recife, coming to know, through the conversation between two gravediggers, that



in the city, migrants like him find death and misery. The gravediggers complain about burying these poor people who arrive on the coast.

– É a gente dos enterros gratuitos  
e dos defuntos ininterruptos.  
– É a gente retirante  
que vem do sertão de longe  
– Desenrolam todo o barbante  
e chegam aqui na jante.  
– E que então, ao chegar,  
não têm mais o que esperar.  
– Não podem continuar  
pois têm pela frente o mar.  
– Não têm onde trabalhar  
e muito menos onde morar.  
– E da maneira que está  
não vão ter onde se enterrar.  
(MELO NETO, 2003, p.190-1).

- It's the people of free burials  
and uninterrupted deaths.  
- It's the migrants  
who come from far away in the backlands  
- They unwind all the string  
and arrive here on the rim.  
- And then, when they arrive  
they have nothing more to expect.  
- They can't go on  
because they have the sea ahead of them.  
- They have nowhere to work  
and much less where to live.  
- And the way it is  
they will have nowhere to bury themselves.

Severino faces a condition of life and death worse than that of the *sertão* (backlands) because, according to the gravediggers, a great number of *retirantes* (migrants) die in the city, “E da maneira que está/ não vai ter onde se enterrar” (“And the way it is, there will be nowhere to bury themselves”). Severino is greeted by gravediggers who ignore his presence and, in their dialogue, reveal his own deception:

– Não é viagem o que fazem,



vindo por essas caatingas, vargens;  
aí está o erro:  
vêm é seguindo seu próprio enterro  
(MELO NETO, 2003, p.191).

-It's not a journey they take.  
passing by these *caatingas*, *vargens*<sup>5</sup>;  
That's the mistake:  
They came following their own burial.

The text is composed of 18 passages introduced by rubrics, which can be divided into two parts: from 1 to 9, the trip to Recife; and from 10 to 18, in Recife. The rubrics introduce places, characters, and events that Severino encounters along the way. Life and death, stripped of mystical trappings, take on the aspect of something purely material, in this sense, concrete. Religious references are desecrated by association with mundane life, as it occurs in relation to the names of saints and prophets: Severino is the son of Maria of the late Zacarias, but, just like him, there are many other Severinos “com mães chamadas Maria” (“with mothers named Maria”). And as there was in the parish a colonel named Zacarias, the oldest lord of this property-sesmaria, he became “Severino da Maria do Zacarias, lá da serra da Costela, limites da Paraíba” (“Severino of Maria of Zacarias, from Serra da Costela, on the border of Paraíba”). Severino, like so many in this region, “of”, or belonging to, few Zacarias landowners.

Severino's journey in search of a better life is an observable irony, especially for the audience, who at least suspect beforehand what awaits the migrant in the big city. Being informed of his failure by gravediggers who say they are tired of burying migrants, with somewhat humorous phrases like “Fique-se por aí um momento/ e não tardarão a aparecer/ os defuntos que ainda hoje/ vão chegar (ou partir, não sei)” (“Stay around for a little bit/ and it won't be long before the dead show up/ the dead who still today/ will arrive (or leave, I don't know)”), which distances us from pity for Severino, inviting the reader/audience to reflect upon his condition from the understanding of these ironic layers of the text. Perceiving how Severino's journey is presented allows us to observe that ironic laughter has the function of cooling down sentimentality in favor of reflection. Such laughter would be close to the notion of tragic laughter discussed by Verena Alberti (2002, p.22) based on texts by Georges Bataille, when she points out, quoting him, that tragic laughter “has less to do with the object of laughter

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<sup>5</sup> "Caatinga" refers to a specific part of Brazil's ecosystem, especially in the Northeast. The land is characterized by being semi-arid and tropical. The term "vargens" refers to Brazil's alluvial soil, or fertile deltas formed alongside river banks.

itself (the tragic one laughs at) than with the attitude of the one who laughs"<sup>6</sup>. When you laugh, "you see yourself as an accomplice to a destruction of what you are, you get mixed up with this wind of destructive life that drives everything without compassion to its end"<sup>7</sup>. In this sense, what we have when we laugh is (an agreement (...) between our joy and a movement that destroys us', ultimately with death itself. In this case, it is not by laughing at death, but by being confused with death, that laughter becomes inseparable from a tragic feeling"<sup>8</sup>.

Along Severino's path, the characters' voices reveal something inherent to the modernization process called "wasted lives", or surplus population, in the words of Zygmunt Bauman (2004, p.15), when he pointed out that "since the beginning of modern times, each successive generation has had its shipwrecks marooned in the social void: the 'collateral casualties' of progress", that "trade mark of the modern era" that was trumpeted "under the slogan of more happiness for *more* people," when, "perhaps the need for fewer (and ever fewer) people to keep on the move, to accelerate and to climb those heights that once would have required a much larger crowd to negotiate, invade and conquer". In this sense, Severino is the victim of irony, the *alazon*, a naive braggart who believed that the progress in the big city would bring him some sort of solace or compensation.

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<sup>6</sup> "tem menos a ver com o objeto do riso (o trágico de que se ri) do que com a atitude daquele que ri".

<sup>7</sup> "você se percebe cúmplice de uma destruição daquilo que você é, você se confunde com esse vento de vida destruidora que conduz tudo sem compaixão até seu fim".

<sup>8</sup> "o acordo (...) de nossa alegria com um movimento que nos destrói", em última instância, com a própria morte. Nesse caso, não é por rir da morte, e sim por se confundir com a morte, que esse riso se torna inseparável de um sentimento trágico".