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DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *DEATH AND LIFE OF A SEVERINO*: THE ARGUMENTATION WITH THINGS BY JOÃO CABRAL DE MELO NETO, THE POET OF REASON?

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Abstract: The aim of this work is to analyse the argumentation in the play *Death and Life of a Severino*, in order to verify if there are elements in this process that justify the discourse that *João Cabral de Melo Neto is the poet of reason*, sustained by critics, scholars and by the writer himself in several interviews. As method of investigation, it is used some key concepts of French Discourse Analysis, such as discourse, interdiscourse, discursive formation, ideological formation and imaginary formations, which we discuss and apply to three parts of *Death and Life of a Severino*. Notwithstanding the differences concerning the meaning of *reason* among several rationalist philosophers, it was taken as a platonic idea, position antidiscursive at first. The interpretation of the *corpus* reveals the interpellation of irrationalist discursive formations, for *logos* (reason, word) shows itself inefficient both to describe and to argue in the most famous *opus* of the Pernambucan poet. The solution for such impotence is using concrete things as proof.

Keywords: Discouse Analysis; argumentation; João Cabral de Melo Neto; Death and Life of a Severino.

INTRODUCTION

The poet João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920-1999) is in the history of Brazilian literature as one of its greatest poets, due to the quality of his production and the success of his works. *Death and Life of a Severino (1955)*. His first work, *Stone of Sleep (1942)*, is surrealist; *The Engineer (1945)*, however, it is the work from which he would have left surrealism to, according to literary criticism, engender a poetry with strong rationalist characteristics, which would be permanent in his later works.

The French Discourse Analysis will be used to examine the argumentation in ''*Morte e Vida Severina*'', an auto or drama elaborated with a poetic text, in which the trajectory of Severino is seen, a migrant who has been following the Capibaribe River from its source to the center of Recife. Starting from the position of literary criticism in relation to João Cabral de Melo Neto and his poetry, the concepts of Discourse Analysis will serve to verify whether the imaginary formations of the poet of reason resist a discursive analysis of the arguments present in his masterpiece.

The literary text is not the usual target of French Discourse Analysis. Although Pêcheux initially gave priority to the analysis of political discourse, this discipline of interpretation has expanded the types of discourse he intends to analyze. Our analysis starts from the conception of criticism in relation to João Cabral de Melo Neto and his work. The view that his production was rationalist was also shared by the author himself. However, we assume that reason, logos in Greek, is being used in a vague and generic way and we compare the discourses present in the argumentation in *Death and Life of a Severino* with discourses of recognized rationalist philosophers and also with irrationalist ones.

For those who may pose obstacles to a literary discourse analysis of João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry, especially in the ways we are proposing, we present the positions of literary critics about the relationship between João Cabral de Melo Neto's poetry and philosophy.

JOÃO CABRAL DE MELO NETO, THE POET OF REASON

João Cabral de Melo Neto (João Cabral) is known as the poet of reason [1], and by the nickname the *Engineer of the Word*, due to *sui generis* characteristics of his poetry, which make him carve his place in the history of

1 The relationship between João Cabral and *reason* is recurrent and generalized. Not only is this term used with reference to the poet, but his semantic field, that is, economy, consciousness, clarity.

Brazilian literature[2]:

> Although he had awakened to the vocation of the poetic craft through Bandeira's influence, João Cabral, elusive to lyricism, and who will be an anti-Bandeira in the best sense — will have [in] Joaquim Cardozo, a school of initiation, of the richest and most competent, at the poetry art. Like him, he will put into practice the principle that "poetic formation is only perfect when it passes through the sieve of rationality..." (NUNES, 2007, p. 21).

Despite the common relationship between *reason* and João Cabral, are there elements to associate the discourses present in Cabral's poetry with the worldview of Habermas or Kant, recognizedly rationalist philosophers? Another important question is that, even if Cabral's discourses were predominantly rationalist, would this occur in all of his works? Bringing the issue to the *corpus* and focus of this work, this would also be verified in the argumentation in *Death and Life of a Severino[3]*? It is also important to highlight an important issue. *Logos*, the Greek word, translates as *reason* or *word*. So, is the Cabral's discourse about the word rational or he uses the *logos[4]* to prove that it is, in fact, *illogos[5]*?

Reason is not a homogeneous concept in philosophy. And for those who may be averse to an approximation between literature and philosophy, we warn that, even if the objection were valid, it would not apply when it comes to João Cabral:

> The relations between poetry and philosophy are never direct, but transversal. But if the poet is eminently critical like João Cabral, if poetry, for him, is born in opposition to all ecstasy, to all inspiration, and therefore against the time for the irrational, the vague and the mystical [...], if this same critical poet or critical poet writes Psychology of Composition — in fact a philosophy of composition, if not a phenomenology of the poem, thematizing, as a permanent accompaniment to his work, the asceticism that patiently purifies language until it neutralizes the subject as I, in order to to assure the same language communicability through the constructed form — then the transversal relations between poetry and philosophy thrive more." (NUNES, 2007, p. 129).

In this passage, it is noted, again, the discourse that João Cabral is the poet of reason. Furthermore, it is argued that, instead of maintaining or distancing poetry and philosophy, he makes their transversal relations prosper; in numerical terms, you would have an angle of 67.5 degrees. In other words, João Cabral would create a line between the transversal and the perpendicular, making the relations between poetry and philosophy semi-perpendicular. Benedito Nunes' position is in line with what Moisés (1988, p. 489, emphasis added) says: "[...] the fact that attention is focused exclusively on the object outside the poet (the stone, the egg), must not be confused: it is still the poet's point of view [...] strengthened by **a rigorous process of 'scientific', architectural, engineering, simile of the philosophical thought"**. In turn, Campos (2006, p. 88, emphasis added) is more precise and points out which philosophy the author would be linked to: "[...] among poets, [...] the poetry of [...] [João Cabral] has a privileged place: **the Cartesian place of the most extreme lucidity"**.

THE CONCEPT OF REASON IN PHILOSOPHY

In the analysis of the argument in: *Death

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2 Every translation of quotation was made by the editor.

3 The full title is: *Death and Life of a Severino: a Pernambuco Christmas play*", avoided because it is less usual.

4 The interchangeable use of *reason* and *logos*, *word* and *logos*, apparently confused, actually has the purpose of reinforcing in the reader's mind the inseparable relationship between them.

5 We chose to form this word with the Latin negation prefix i-, and not with the Greek a-, because there is already illogical in English.

and Life of a Severino, it will be necessary to set aside a heterogeneous conception of *reason* (or *logos*), with its particularities, to adopt a discursive formation (DF) of this faculty as a unity, a Platonic universal[6], for that is how literary critics do it when they claim that Cabral's poetry is rational. Thus, it is not appropriate to emphasize the differences between rationalist thinkers, but to ignore them. In fact, this procedure, in principle, anti-discursive is the most honest, so that we can analyze the discourse *João Cabral is the Poet of Reason*, instead of questioning, is *reason* a universal? For us, this means participating in the game without wanting to change its rules, being open to dialogue. This clarification by Mora (1978, p. 236, emphasis added) is important to define what we are considering a rationalist philosopher, to situate in which ideological formation (IF) the argumentation present in *Death and Life of a Severino* is inserted:

> The differences between rationalism and voluntarism or empiricism or intuitionism are not sharp. To a large extent, [...] the [...] English empiricists: Locke, Hume and others — although they tend to fight the so-called continental rationalism of Descartes, Leibniz, etc. least under the aspect of the method used in their respective philosophies. **That is why it was preferred to define rationalism not as a mere and simple use of reason, but as the abuse of it.**

Our procedure makes sense, notably when one takes into account the revelation made by anarchist epistemologist Paul Feyerabend (1924-1994) about his methods of persuasion: "Always keep in mind that the demonstrations and the rhetoric used do not express 'deep convictions' of mine. They just show how easy it is, through rational appeal, to deceive

people [...]". (FEYERABEND, 1977, p. 43, author's emphasis).

Therefore, Plato (428-347 BC), both for his conception of the world of ideas where the universal of reason would reside, and for his discourse that true knowledge is obtained through *logos* is one of the philosophers[7] which can provide us elements of rationality in the argumentation in: *Death of Life of a Severino*; Sócrates (470-399), in turn, conceives the *logos* as able to mirror reality. Maieutics is the method of giving birth to truth through *logos* (word, reason).

René Descartes (1596-1650) is yet another philosopher for whom rational knowledge is the only way that can make man reach the truth, while the senses lead us to deception. His IF closely resembles Socratic-Platonic IF.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), in: "*Fundamentação da Metafísica dos Costumes*", presents a rational method for human actions, regardless of the context in which an individual is inserted: "The present Foundation is nothing more, however, than the search and fixation of the supreme principle of morality" (KANT, 2007, p. 19, author's emphasis). The difference between right and wrong will be established on the basis of actions that obey this imperative: "Act only on such a maxim that you can at the same time will that it become a universal law." (KANT, 2007, p. 59, author's emphasis). In *Death and Life of a Severino*, there is a moral matter in the question that the protagonist asks Mr. José, master carpenter, paraphrased here by *isn't suicide preferable to a miserable life?*

Jürgen Habermas (1929-present) conceives *logos* in a pragmatic and democratic way, due, respectively, to the fundamental role that the word and the speakers have in his philosophy:

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6 "The 'idea' of justice is not identical with anything that is just: it is something different from the particular things in which particular things participate. Not being particular, it cannot itself exist in the world of sense. Furthermore, it is not ephemeral or changeable like the objects of the senses: it is eternally itself, immutable and indestructible. (RUSSELL, 2005, p. 73, author's emphasis).

7 Philosophical discourses of an irrationalist IF also serve for the analysis of argumentation in *corpus*.

"The rationality of a person is measured by the fact that he expresses himself rationally and be able to account for their utterances by adopting a reflective attitude" (HABERMAS, 2004, p. 102). He conceives the notion of communicative rationality, which is the result of the consensus between individuals, who are guided in the debate by validity claims and position themselves according to their conscience and leaving aside the hierarchy. The *logos* needs to communicate and lead to its *telos*, mutual understanding.

THE OPUS *DEATH AND LIFE OF A SEVERINO*

Death and Life of a Severino is João Cabral's most important work. The poet from Pernambuco has other texts in which his verses were more refined; the quality of *Death and Life of a Severino*, resides, however, in its ability to arouse general interest in the story of Severino, a migrant who has been following the Capibaribe (river) to Recife in search of a better life. The subtitle of the work *a Pernambuco Christmas play* indicates that this is text to be staged. Secchin (2020) believes "this is the most esteemed work in the entire history of Brazilian poetry". From the text, we will analyze the argument in three parts, namely: *The migrant explains to the reader who he is and what he is going to; The resident of one of the mocambos that exist between the pier and the river water approaches the migrant; The carpina speaks with the migrant who was outside, without taking part in anything.*

THE FRENCH ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE AND ITS CONCEPTS

The French Discourse Analysis (DA) emerged around the 60s and had as one of its main founders the philosopher Michel Pêcheux (1938-1983). It is a semantic theory that proposes to interpret the discourse or meaning effect between interlocutors. Therefore, it is not content waiting for the reader, but it is related to other preexisting discourses (interdiscourses), in a paraphrastic relationship, often going beyond the explicit. DA is a discipline of interpretation that competes with philology, hermeneutics, pragmatics and critical discourse analysis, and which has its own concepts, method and theoretical assumptions.

The main focus of DA has been the political discourse, however, Pêcheux (1977, p. 77) makes it clear that "[it] serves [...] only as an exemplary representative of various types of discursive processes". Our job is to analyze the literary discourse[8] to compare it with the interpretation of literary criticism. Other DA concepts that will be applied in our analysis are imaginary formations, an image that is projected from someone based on their discourses and can be represented as such.: I_B (A). The way a person sees himself are also imaginary formations: I_A (A). They can be changed with new discourse analysis; and IF, which constitutes

> a complex set of attitudes and representations that are neither 'individual' nor 'universal', but relate more or less directly to class positions in conflict with one another. [...] [IF] [...] "necessarily comprise [...] one or several interconnected discursive formations that determine what can and must be said [...] from a given position in a given conjuncture", [...] inscribed in a relation of classes. (PÊCHEUX; FUCHS, 1997, p. 166-167, emphasis by the author).

8 For the analysis of literary discourse, it is necessary to assume that it exists, to ask Pêcheux for a certain concession, as he states this: "From our perspective, there is no 'deviation' — and therefore, there is no 'poetic' language. There is only one general language process, functioning both in children's verbal learning and in the everyday use of language by all speakers, as well as in its political and literary uses. (PÊCHEUX; GADET, 2014, p. 104, emphasis by the authors).

ARGUMENTATION IN A RATIONALIST DF AND IN *DEATH AND LIFE OF A SEVERINO*

Etymologically [9], the term *reason*, of Latin origin, as we have already stated, can be translated by *logos* in Greek, which, in turn, also means word in English. Argument has at its root a relation to clarity, arg-, Indo-European root root, is present in the silver root, argentum, i. This way, it is possible to establish a relationship between reason and argument, because the rational is universal, it applies to everyone, just as clarity in a text would allow a general understanding. To argue is to make it clear, verifiable by everyone, not just by the self. For this DF, to argue is to clarify, it would not be associated with convincing, since, with the argument, the clarity, the adhesion of the interlocutor would be spontaneous. In Western history, there is a period when *reason* was equated with *light*, the 18th century, otherwise called the Century of Enlightenment. Keller and Bastos (2009, p. 43), when defining argument, also relate it to reason:

> [...] intellectual construction, which [...] [uses] conceptual materials [from] diverse human experiences. [...] The structuring of these materials [...] makes it possible to differentiate a logically correct argument [...] from a fallacy or sophistry [...], [which] uses [...] materials [...] of an emotional, linguistic or psychic basis, while the logically valid argument intends to be founded on rational data.

In the first monologue of *Death and Life of a Severino*, the migrant explains the reader who he is and what he is going to (NETO, 1984, p. 70-71), there is an interdiscourse of irrationalist IF, represented here by Schopenhauer and Gorgias: "Firstly, nothing exists: secondly, even if there is something man cannot grasp; third, even if it can be apprehended, it cannot be formulated or explained to others.. (*Les présocratiques*, [19--?], 1022 *apud* REBOUL, 2004, p. 6).

To prove his identity, the migrant solves the problem with something like 'I am this one you see': "I become Severino / who emigrates in your presence". All the copulations performed by the verb ser between a subject and a predicate fail, even with additions of other terms of the sentence: "My name is Severino"; "I am Severino de Maria"; "I am Severino da Maria of the late Zacarias"; "I'm Severino da Maria do Zacarias, from the Serra da Costela, on the edge of Paraíba".

All the descriptions you make also apply to other people, to other references. The word does not define Severino, it does not define Maria or Zacarias. It is through vision that Severino will be proved, however, "reason is a universal instrument, which serves in all occasions" (DESCARTES, 2001, p. 64). When Severino is in Recife, but has lost hope of improving his living conditions, the resident of one of the mocambos that exist between the pier and the river approaches the migrant (NETO, 1984, p. 100-103), to which Severino poses an existentialist questioning: "Mr. José, master carpenter/ what difference would it make/ if instead of continuing/ he took the best way out:/ that of jumping, one night,/ off the bridge and out of life?"

In the third part of our analysis, the carpenter speaks with the migrant who was outside, without taking part in anything (NETO, 1984, p. 112), after the birth of his son, Mr. José will resume the same discourse in disfavor of the *logos*: "[...] It is difficult to defend life,/ only with words, life,/ even more so when it is/ the one sees, Severina;/ but if I could not answer/ the question you asked,/ the life, answered it / with its living presence

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9 When dealing with etymology, there is a departure from DA, as there is no certainty about which meaning of a word comes first. This is because our objective is to discursively analyze whether the argumentation in *Death and Life of a Severino* is rational without contesting the Platonic DF of rationalism.

[...]". Severino's justification for opting for life is irrational: the birth of a little Severino. This child, despite the constant work of death, represents the "persistent and stubborn will to live" (SCHOPENHAUER, [19--?], p.13) or "to see the factory that it itself,/ stubbornly, makes itself" (SCHOPENHAUER, [19--?], p.13) (NETO, 1984, p. 112). Life's insistence on continuing has no explanation, notably the miserable life. However, if the birth does not stop taking place, we must continue. The argument is the concrete fact. The real is presented as if it were possible to know it through the sensory organs only. Habermas (2004, p. 45, author's emphasis), however, disagrees with this position:

> Reality [...] is not a "naked" reality, but [...] impregnated by language. The experience by which we control our assumptions is linguistically structured and embedded in the contexts of action. As soon as we reflect on a loss of our naive certainties, we no longer find any kind of basic statements that are "by themselves", that is, unequivocal "beginnings" beyond language, self-evident experiences beyond reason.

CLOSING REMARKS

The traditional imaginary formations of João Cabral, ^I B ^(A), and that he himself tried to reinforce in conversations and interviews, ^I A ^(A), are not established with the analysis of the discourse of his most famous work. There are, in this, two aggravating factors: I) When considering the entire production of an artist to idealize an image of him, this is not done by despising his most important composition; II) contradiction is a problem for rationalists themselves. Surprisingly, the one who best translates the birth of Mr. José's son is Schopenhauer (2005, p. 230), an irrationalist philosopher:

> Consequently, each man always has ends and motives according to which he conducts his actions, and he knows at all times to provide justifications for his isolated acts; however, if asked why he generally wants to, or why he generally wants to exist, he would not give an answer, but rather the question would seem to him absurd. It is precisely here that the awareness that he himself is nothing but Will is properly expressed [...].

Therefore, the *word* is inefficient to translate reality. The *logos* does not describe, it does not argue; dialogue proves to be useless to reach a consensus, an anti-Habermasian discourse. More efficient than reason is the vision of concrete things, an anti-Cartesian posture; antiplatonic too, because individual concrete things, not the universal. João Cabral's imaginary formations, in fact, are aligned with the thought of Gorgias and Schopenhauer, irrationalist philosophers. Thus, although the discourse that associates João Cabral and *reason* is common, there is not much critical care in the use of these terms or there is no question of a consensus that was formed about the poet's imaginary formations.

The poet does not completely deny *reason*, since a Severino has the ability to question existence. However, the relationship between this faculty and suicide, reason as something harmful, which weakens life by stimulating reflection, is João Cabral's final blow to *logos*. It is instinct, something unconscious, that gives us the strength to live.

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