



**COLLIDING DISCOURSES:
a reading of Drummond's
*Brejo das Almas*¹**

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Brejo das almas reflete a destilação de um complexo de diferentes atitudes, uma variedade de posições aparentemente absurdas ou irônicas, uma divisão (entre o ser humano e o poeta) que deixa um sentido de ambigüidade total. Examinando a divisão, percebe-se que uma crise é enfrentada por Drummond – esta crise é *Brejo das almas*.

An important feature of Drummond de Andrade's verse in *Brejo das Almas*² is the complex and ambiguous nature of the world which is being described, a world of irreconcilable elements all held together in an intertwined network of insoluble confusion. A frequent response to the contradictions of the world is resignation in the face of the ironic realisation that he is unable to reach any understanding or expression of this. Thus John Gledson makes the following apposite observation with regard to the collection: "Grande parte do humor e da ironia deste livro provém do poeta assumir posições absurdas com uma confiança total, afirmando e criticando ao mesmo tempo".³ Gilberto Mendonça Teles speaks of the "corrente humorística que domina toda a composição".⁴ On the other hand, Ricardo da Silveira Lobo Sternberg invites a more existentialist perspective: "Two basic, contrary impulses structure the theme: withdrawal and participation."⁵ For Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna, the various points of view, the "visão segmentada da poética drummoniana"⁶ stems from the poet's disguise in a series of heteronyms. He explains that "O poeta se diversificou em egos auxiliares dentro da própria cena para conhecer os múltiplos aspectos em vários atores, não deixa nunca de ser espectador e crítico de seu próprio drama existencial".⁷ An examination of the collection reveals an equivocal arena full of strange and disparate juxtapositions and divided points of view in which the poet attempts to elucidate the antithetical nature of his experience.

The first poem of the collection, "Aurora",⁸ clearly illustrates the way in which the poet engages in plays of opposites, bringing together refined and banal, elevated and ordinary experience with abrupt shifts of perspective and hidden changes of tone:

O poeta ia bêbedo no bonde.
O dia nascia atrás dos quintais.
As pensões alegres dormiam tristíssimas.
As casas também iam bêbedas.

Tudo era irreparável.
Ninguém sabia que o mundo ia acabar
(apenas uma criança percebeu mas ficou calada),
que o mundo ia acabar às 7 e 45.
Últimos pensamentos! últimos telegramas!
José, que colocava pronomes,
Helena, que amava os homens,
Sebastião, que se arruinava,
Artur, que não dizia nada,
embarcam para a eternidade.

O poeta está bêbedo, mas
escuta um apelo na aurora:
Vamos todos dançar
entre o bonde e a árvore?

Entre o bonde e a árvore
dançai, meus irmãos!
Embora sem música
dançai, meus irmãos!
Os filhos estão nascendo
com tamanha espontaneidade.
Como é maravilhoso o amor
(o amor e outros produtos).
Dançai, meus irmãos!
A morte virá depois
como um sacramento.

(R, 30-31)

In the opening stanza there is a contrast between joy and sadness, torpor and immobility as opposed to movement and activity. The vision is erratic and disconnected rather than progressive, an integrated feel which derives from the fact that the poet is drunk and travelling on the tram. The world is not entirely stable in this initial stage of dawn and awakening. To

characterize this experience of dawn and drunkenness, I can only appeal to Georges Poulet's comments on Rimbaud's "Les Etrennes des orphelins". He speaks of it as an experience which is "not all of a piece, for it consists not in the discovery of a stable world, settled into existence for once and for all, but rather in acquisitions of consciousness, abruptly interrupted and abruptly repeated".⁹ He continues: "happiness is linked to the new day, to the birds starting to sing again, to eyes reopening. And happiness is not a lasting way of feeling one's existence. In Rimbaud, one does not live in a *state* of happiness. Hence the 'stirring' of joy, the 'drunkenness', which, in the poem we have just considered, equally affect the external world and the orphans who find themselves in it".¹⁰ If in Rimbaud such dawns are separated from the darkness of the night, in Drummond we witness a world which is both on the verge of daybreak as well as on the edge of ultimate transition, an intoxication which is itself only a temporary delusion in the face of more apocalyptic events. The imprecision of the second line ("ninguém sabia") contrasts very sharply with the precision of time in the fourth line ("7 e 45"); this very ordinary sort of hour, a start to the working day, seems a wholly inappropriate hour for the end of the world.

There is a change of tone in the third stanza when the poet abandons the descriptive third person in favour of the first person plural. Up until now, moreover, the time sequence has been present or imperfect and then the future is suddenly triggered off by the idea of eternity. There is also a shift from solitude and isolation to a wish for solidarity and brotherhood in the dance since in the previous stanzas everyone was defined as an individual with his or her own peculiarities and the emphasis was placed on the diversity and the divisions between people who had only their fate ("a eternidade") in common. Yet even the dance itself, the very consummation of the poem, is an uncertain activity since it is not clear whether its function is creative or futile. This is a vital point which is made clear by Sternberg when he speaks of the poetic self: "Gnawed by self-conscious doubts, attempting and failing to break out of its insularity, the self which these poems document grows increasingly aware of the futility of any human impulse, be it toward anger, disappointment, prayer or love. The notion of uselessness which informs several poems in the book eventually touches the viability of living itself".¹¹ It

could thus be a reference to dance as an exercise which will blank the eyes to death or possibly even as a joyous celebration of vitality, an intoxication with life which is on the verge of dispossession through death. However, since death is also associated with the sacramental then the dance may itself be linked with ritual activity, a liturgical event of sharing and of love.

The poet also makes an absolute statement about love which is immediately followed by a partiality which undoes this (11.24-25) -- an exalted idea suddenly made commercial and cheap in the parentheses. The suggestion that love is not unique but is one among many things makes the absolute statement relative and totally detracts from the idealistic note. In addition to this, the association of death with the sacramental, perhaps a form of spiritual resurrection of recovery, should serve to counteract the idea of the irreparable mentioned earlier. However, the indefinite "um" appears to undermine this and suggests that it will be one sacrament amongst others, thus injecting a certain doubt into a last line which would otherwise be poised on promise.

The implied irony that love is not always wonderful, the unawareness of the adults with regard to the end of the world, the poet's recognition of the unfathomable contradictions of the world, all lead us to further question whether the espousal of the dance (particularly without the music which would give it form, rhythm, and meaning) is meant seriously or as a sarcastic injunction in the face of the absurdity of life. Indeed, the manner in which the poet adopts a position and then immediately undermines it reinforces John Gledson's observation on irony since nothing really has the meaning it appears to have. The sum total is one of total fragmentation and leads us to question the stability of the poetic *persona* itself. Furthermore, it embraces Sternberg's idea of withdrawal as an engaging position insofar as the dance is viewed as being both creative and futile.

A more cynical advocacy of false solutions to the problems of life is suggested in "Convite triste" where the poet takes up the standpoint of an ironic observer reducing disparate phenomena to the same level of valuelessness:

Meu amigo, vamos sofrer,
vamos beber, vamos ler jornal,

vamos dizer que a vida é ruim,
meu amigo, vamos sofrer.

Vamos fazer um poema
ou qualquer outra besteira.
Fitar por exemplo uma estrela
por muito tempo, muito tempo
e dar um suspiro fundo
ou qualquer outra besteira.

Vamos beber uísque, vamos
beber cerveja preta e barata,
beber, gritar e morrer,
ou, quem sabe? beber apenas.

Vamos xingar a mulher,
que está envenenando a vida
com seus olhos e suas mãos
e o corpo que tem dois seios
e tem um embigo também.

Meu amigo, vamos xingar
o corpo e tudo que é dele
e que nunca será alma.

Meu amigo, vamos cantar,
vamos chorar de mansinho
e ouvir muita vitrola,
depois embriagados vamos
beber mais outros seqüestros
(o olhar obscuro e a mão idiota)
depois vomitar e cair
e dormir.

(R, 39-30)

There is an extraordinary mixture of the elevated and the inane, the important and the trivial, particularly in the first stanza where the idea of suffering is linked with that of drinking or reading the newspaper. The tone is mocking as if the poet were concerned to question and undermine the kind of values that men seriously

impose upon the facts of life which at the level of everyday phenomena are equal. The poetic activity is referred to ironically in the cliché of looking at the star, wondering at nature, and is dismissed as yet another inconsequential task. In his commentary on this poem Sternberg emphasizes that the poet is not making a call for a social drink but is rather engaged in a form of compulsive drinking: "This is not a call for a social drink. Rather, in the mixing of different drinks the stanza suggests a compulsive drinking that will deliberately short-circuit consciousness and relieve the speaker from his despair, in part by allowing him to express it, to vent it: 'beber, gritar e morrer'."¹² This is further underpinned by the mimetic qualities of the poem, in the frantic pace of the verse which corresponds to the frantic processes of the mind before the final collapse of consciousness.

The clue to the poet's dismissive and mocking attitude is to be found in the last three lines of the fourth stanza. The lack of any more spiritual or transcendental sphere of existence is what has given rise to his current mood of cynicism and his adherence to such false solutions as drink and sex in an attempt to escape from the problems of living. As John Gledson remarks: "O poema exprime uma mensagem cínica semelhante à do *enivre-vous* de Baudelaire: como a vida é inútil, não importa entregarmo-nos à bebida, ao vício ou à virtude, na condição de estarmos bêbedos de alguma maneira ou outra".¹³

Another poem with a similar structure is "Poema patético" where again he links a series of individual perceptions which add up to nothing:

Que barulho é esse na escada?
É o amor que está acabando,
é o homem que fechou a porta
e se enforcou na cortina.

Que barulho é esse na escada?
É Guiomar que tapou os olhos
e se assoou com estrondo.
É a lua imóvel sobre os pratos
e os metais que brilham na copa.

Que barulho é esse na escada?
É a torneira pingando água,

é o lamento imperceptível
de alguém que perdeu no jogo
enquanto a banda de música
vai baixando, baixando de tom.

Que barulho é esse na escada?
É a virgem com um trombone,
a criança com um tambor,
o bispo com uma campainha
e alguém abafando o rumor
que salta de meu coração.

(R, 34)

The mood is one of ironic detachment as the poet attempts to answer the banal question "Que barulho é esse na escada?" and answers with a series of incidents of undifferentiated life, albeit many of them invested with tremendous meaning. However, the poet himself refuses to privilege any particular kind of experience as he responds with references to a man committing suicide, a leaking tap, or the cry of someone who lost a game. The overall impression is one of impotence and of the meaninglessness of life itself to which men attribute such importance. In the final stanza everybody has a musical instrument except the poet himself whose sound is muffled, a reference to the poet's difficulty in saying anything meaningful about reality: it is as if everybody has something to say except the poet himself.

This is a plangent, emotional poem and the content runs counter to the title in that the tendency to pathos is congealed in those everyday details which resist the inner, emotional pathos. The irony perhaps lies in the discrepancy between the expectation already implicit in the title and the events described. The theme of death and other references to the human condition do not lead to tragification but rather the banal details dehumanize the events. Furthermore, the image of the eyes behind the drape suggest that the inner drama is being screened off. Thus the inner cry of "Poema patético" is never heard since the external cacophony drowns it out and the plaintiff cry never comes through.

Similarly, in many other poems of the collection such as "Necrológio dos desiludidos do amor", "Sombra das moças em flor" and "Segredo", there are constant mentions of suicide and

the impotence of poetry. In "Necrológio" incongruous feelings of brutal, physical reality are played off against more sublime and spiritual concerns:

Os médicos estão fazendo a autópsia
dos desiludidos que se mataram.
Que grandes corações eles possufam.
Vísceras imensas, tripas sentimentais
e um estômago cheio de poesia. . .

(R, 41)

The rather callous allusion to the "vísceras imensas" undermines the pretensions of the disillusioned in love with their "estômago cheio de poesia" and his general attitude to them is quite heartless and detached:

Desiludidos mas fotografados
escreveram cartas explicativas,
tomaram todas as providências
para o remorso das amadas.

The poet thus displays a feeling of amused contempt, mocking the disillusioned (and presumably himself) for taking things far too seriously. As the last two lines indicate, life will simply carry on and render meaningless the final despairing act of suicide:

. . .as amadas dançarão um samba
bravo, violento, sobre a tumba deles.

As in "Poema patético", there is an inner tension and distress, an emptiness which comes out as the great stories of the press ("matéria para os jornais") but which run counter to the sense of human interiority. In the same way the photographs of the disillusioned themselves are merely external representations of inner emotion. The irony here lies in the reversal of perspectives whereby fundamental human values are given short shrift and are not entitled to much of a place in the overall theme of things. There is an ironic disproportion between the external and audible, the rat-a-tat noise of the guns, and the internal

feelings. The very title, furthermore, increases the irony since the term "necrológio" suggests a clinical study or autopsy of a subject worthy of more sentimental treatment and provides an external feeling and impersonal dehumanisation of effect.

The tone is somewhat more good-humoured in "Não se mate" as he coaxes Carlos along, recommending against suicide but with a deliberately low-key and relaxed attitude. In this poem, Carlos represents "Um personagem (o poeta gauche) disfarçado em heterônimos."¹⁴

Carlos, sossegue, o amor
é isso que você está vendo:
hoje beija, amanhã não beija,
depois de amanhã é domingo
e segunda-feira ninguém sabe
o que será.

Inútil você resistir
ou mesmo suicidar-se.
Não se mate, oh não se mate,
reserve-se todo para
as bodas que ninguém sabe
quando virão,
se é que virão.

O amor, Carlos, você telúrico,
a noite passou em você,
e os recalques se sublimando,
lá dentro um barulho inefável,
rezas,
vitrolas,
santos que se persignam,
anúncios do melhor sabão,
barulho que ninguém sabe
de quê, praquê.

Entretanto você caminha
melancólico e vertical.
Você é a palmeira, você é o grito
que ninguém ouviu no teatro
e as luzes todas se apagam.

O amor no escuro, não, no claro,
é sempre triste, meu filho, Carlos,
mas não diga nada a ninguém,
ninguém sabe nem saberá.

(R, 40)

In the opening stanza the poet is attempting to console Carlos about the unpredictability of love and, by extension, of life itself. The speaker carries on to advocate a solution to the conflict of existence ("Inútil protestar/inútil suicidar-se") by explaining to Carlos that he ought not abandon his hopes of a lasting love ("as bodas") provided that he recognizes that they may never be fulfilled. It is the same middle path which he recommends in "Sombra"¹⁵ where he stresses the uselessness both of suicide and of resisting in the face of the impossibility of any love relationship with the young girls. The poetic voice here is that of conscience, God, stability, and yet also that of impotence and stagnation. What must be emphasized here is the fact that the division of the *persona*, the poet's sense of dislocation and division, is fundamental to his use of irony – to the point where he finds it best to represent himself as two separate beings. This awareness of division is visible throughout his work and reflects the situation described in Laing's *The Divided Self*, that of "an individual the totality of whose experience is split. . . there is a disruption of his relation with himself. . . he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as split in various ways".¹⁶

In the third stanza there is a conscious shift from the more rhetorical opening line to the more self-deflating and mundane level of "vitrolas" and "anúncios do melhor sabão". What is suggested is the sense of tension arising from the poet's aspiration to a perfect or ideal love consecrated in marriage ("as bodas") and the more physical and transient experience of love which has caused the "barulho inefável" in his insides. He may also be poking fun at a more sublime, romantic type of poetry in which the human spirit is discussed in elevated terms and thus becomes hopelessly remote from more pedestrian, ordinary ways of talking. There is thus an attempt to bridge the gap between more refined and more banal states of experience, a mixing of registers that do not normally mix in a way that tends to question and subvert such divisions of experience.

Sadness and solitude are underlined in the final stanza with specific references to melancholy, the sadness of love, and the image of "palmeira", the image of a tall, branchless and isolated tree. This image is also linked with the idea of an unheard voice in the theatre which introduces the poet as some sort of prophet, a voice crying out in the wilderness. As the images of the "Últimos telegramas" and the child's silence ("ficou calada") in "Aurora", this is once again a voice on the verge before its extinction. Yet the poet insists that the information concerning the sadness of love should not be divulged, thus injecting more ambivalence into an already ambiguous situation. In addition to this, there exists the formal paradox that the poet calls for the suppression of Carlos' insight into the nature of love in a poem that will be communicated to a reader. In other words, there exists an inevitable contradiction in the poem in that what he upholds on a thematic level is undermined by the fact that he is communicating the insight in the poem itself.

This constraint recalls the muffled sound of poetic uncommunicativeness in "Poema patético" and the more specific injunctions concerning poetry in "Segredo":

A poesia é incomunicável.
Fique torto no seu canto.
Não ame.

Ouçó dizer que há tiroteio
ao alcance do nosso corpo.
É a revolução? o amor?
Não diga nada.

Tudo é possível, só eu impossível.
O mar transborda de peixes.
Há homens que andam no mar
como se andassem na rua.
Não conte.

Suponha que um anjo de fogo
varresse a face da terra
e os homens sacrificados
pedissem perdão.
Não peça.

(R, 41)

He draws up a list of all sorts of portentous things, matters of social importance, love, men walking on water, references to an apocalypse which might sweep the earth, all of which might be considered fit subjects for poetry. Yet once more as in "Não se mate" he repeats the injunction not to divulge such matters of consequence since poetry is "incomunicável". He appears to be adopting a form of acceptance in the face of the ironic realisation that poetry is indeed incommunicable. As the second stanza implies it is not worth his while dissipating himself in adherence to popular causes in order to gain immediate popularity or recognition since poetry has no effect whatsoever on the outside world. The "homens sacrificados" in the final stanza could be poets themselves and the advice suggested is that the poet should not seek apologies or explanations for the world nor become too personally involved. All the poet can do is to preserve his own sense of integrity. It is here suggested that love would lead to an exposure of the self and thus a means of becoming vulnerable whilst he will be protected if he stays crammed in the corner of his own private world. This incommunicable aspect recalls the "barulho inefável" of "Não se mate", the image of a muffled sound in "Poema patético", and the reference to the child's reticence in "Aurora", all images of the silencing of the unspeakable, of privileged perceptions which the poet feels either unable or unwilling to disclose.

Throughout this collection there is a sense of irony in the face of a world that appears meaningless and additional irony of the poetic subject in the face of his own feelings of impotence or, perhaps more accurately, in the face of the absurd. For his efforts to distance the self through wit become in themselves a form of involvement and the meaning becomes negotiated through meaninglessness. There is a tendency for him to distance himself from his own perception of life and, as in "Não se mate" where he addresses himself as Carlos, he seems to be talking to himself rather than to a posited reader. There is a general impression, therefore, of dislocation and disengagement from the self, together with varying degrees of resignation, humour, counsels of wisdom and despair. This tension of apparent irreconcilables so prevalent in the collection, the radical reversal of perspectives or shifting points of view, leads to a complex mode of irony provided by his own tortured self-analysis. Sternberg goes to the

psychological roots of deconstruction and the insights of Paul de Man to underpin the fact that the crisis subsists in this very tension, with the implication that the poems are not *about* the crisis but *are* crisis, that the writing is a world of its own, a series of aporias. What lies before us is "a text that pretends to designate a crisis when it is, in fact, itself the crisis to which it refers".¹⁷ Yet the stance which the poet takes is ultimately a coherent one which finds its resolution in acceptance of the divisions within the self and of the intense paradoxes which he perceives at the core of life.

NOTES

¹ A version of this paper was first given at the Hispanists Association of Great Britain and Ireland, Belfast, March 28, 1990.

² ANDRADE, Carlos Drummond de. *Brejo das Abas*, Belo Horizonte: Os amigos da poesia, 1934.

³ GLEDSON, John. *Poesia e Poética de Carlos Drummond de Andrade*. São Paulo: 1981, p. 92.

⁴ TELES, Gilberto Mendonça. *Drummond: A Estilística da Repetição*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1970, p. 97.

⁵ STERNBERG, Ricardo da Silveira Lobo. *The Unquiet Self: Self and Society in the Poetry of Carlos Drummond de Andrade*. p. 13.

⁶ SANT'ANNA, Affonso Romano de. *Drummond, O Gauche no Tempo*. Rio de Janeiro: Lia, 1972, p. 17.

⁷ SANT'ANNA, Affonso Romano de. Id. *ibid.*

⁸ All references are to *Reunião*, fifth edition (Rio de Janeiro) and will be referred to by means of the abbreviation R.

⁹ POULET, Georges. *Exploding Poetry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 80.

¹⁰ POULET, Georges, *ibid.*, p. 80.

¹¹ STERNBERG, Ricardo da Silveira Lobo, p. 44.

¹² STERNBERG, Ricardo da Silveira Lobo, p. 52.

¹³ GLEDSON, John, p. 93.

¹⁴ SANT'ANNA, Affonso Romano de. p. 17.

¹⁵ For a full discussion of this poem, consult my article in *Portuguese Studies*, London, 1987, p. 99-105.

¹⁶ LAING, R. D. *The Divided Self*, Reading: Penguin Books, 1959, p. 17.

¹⁷ STERNBERG, Ricardo da Silveira Lobo, p. 48.