

Severino in English

John Milton

Translating João Cabral de Melo Neto's long dramatic poem, *Morte e Vida Severina (Death and Life of Severino)* (1955) was an enormous challenge. The long dramatic poem is so fixed in a well-defined Brazilian cultural situation, the problems of poverty, drought and migration in the Northeast, with many regional terms and specific vocabulary from sugar cane, religion and even crabs. In this essay I intend to look at some of the most difficult problems I had. Let's begin with the term *retirante*. Migrant was too formal and technical, though I did use it in Cabral's directions, and I chose *traveller*. Gypsies in Britain often call themselves travellers, and the term new-age travellers, though this perhaps gives the wrong impression of Severino, has entered common usage.

I was lucky with the name *Severino*, which I of course kept. In Portuguese *severo* belongs to the same semantic field. In English, as well as *severe*, we also have *to sever*, (to cut), which I took advantage of in the following lines:

And all of us Severinos
With the same lives
Will die of the same
Severe Severino death,
The death died of
Old age before thirty
Of an ambush before twenty
And of hunger day by day,

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I mixed original and translated place names in the following section in order to keep the comic effect. I literally translated *Aurora*, *Espinheiro* and *Aflitos*, *Avenida Sul* and *Avenida Norte*, adjusted *Tamarineira* to *Tamarindeira*, *Cajueira* to *Casheweira*, used *Birdtown* and *Fishtown* as comic equivalents of *Passarinho* and *Peixinhos*.

– Here's pineapple from Goiana
And sugar cane to suck from all over.

– Take these fresh oysters
Just gathered in the Bay of the Dawn.

– Here are tamarinds from Jaqueira
And jackfruit from Tamarindeira.

– Mangaba fruit from Casheweira
And cashews from Mangabeira.

– Fish caught in Birdtown,
Beef from Fishtown.

– Little crabs caught in the mud
At the back of Imperial Street.

– Mangoes bought in the wealthy suburbs
Of Thornbush and Affliction.

– Big crabs given by poor people
From North and South Avenues.

The most difficult section of the poem was by far the famous graveside lament, set to music by Chico Buarque. This had to rhyme. The amount of time spent on this section was enormous, coming back and back to it. I was quite please with the result. Also note the use of *latifundio*, which I remember clearly from my Junior School days, when being told

that there were a lot of minifundios and latifundios in Latin America. I preferred this to *ranch* (shades of Texas), *estate* (the Lord of the estate) and *farm* (too neutral)

He sees the burial of a farm worker and listens to what his friends who take him to the cemetery say.

– The grave you're in
Is measured by hand,
The best bargain you got
In all the land.

– You fit it well,
Not too long or deep,
The part of the latifundio
Which you will keep.

– The grave's not too big,
Nor is it too wide,
It's the land you wanted
To see them divide.

– It's a big grave
For a body so spare,
But you'll be more at ease
Than you ever were.

– You're a skinny corpse
For such a big tomb,
But at least down there
You'll have plenty of room.

– The grave is big
For your skin and bone,
But when land is given,
You can hardly moan.

I also tried to maintain the rhymes, with varying success in the following section:

– You'll live here for ever
In the land you have got,
And you'll have your own plot.

– Growing your own ants,
Free from the sun and rain,
Here you'll always remain.

– Now you'll work for yourself,
You won't give up your right arm
Working on the boss's farm.

Lord, labourer and tractor,
You'll work the soil
And get all the spoils.

– Working this land,
You'll get no rest,
You'll be seed, fertilizer and harvest.

– You'll work on a land
That will clothe you and give you peace
In the cloth of the Northeast.

– You'll dress as never before.
And your last shirt
Will be made of dirt.

– It'll be of dirt
And your last shirt.
It'll clothe you and no one will envy you.

– For the first time in your life
You'll have a suit
Of soil and a pair of boots.

– And as you're a man,
You'll get a hat for a male.
If you were a woman, a shawl or veil.

– Your best clothes
Will be of earth and not of cloth.
They won't tear and will never rot.

– In your best clothes
You'll look a man of leisure
With clothes made to measure.

I was pleased with *shirt* and *dirt*, so much so that I repeated it in the next stanza. On other occasions I could only get half-rhymes, *cloth/rot, peace/Northeast*, and some lines which obtained the rhymes seemed excessively heavy, *fertilizer and harvest*, and *give you peace*.

The following lament, which includes *maçaroca banguela*, tested all my resources in the semantic fields of corn and corn seeds, with terms like *mainva* (*shoot*), *rebolo de cana* (*sugar cane sprout*), *espiga debulhada* (*threshed husk*), *espiga no sabugo* (*chewed up shuck*), *soca* (*second harvest*), *semente maninha* (*barren seed*). The most difficult expression to translate in all the poem was *maçaroca banguela*. *Banguela*, "with no front teeth", was reactively straightforward, but *maçaroca* was tougher. After questioning some of top experts on Brazilian literature and the Portuguese language, I discovered *maçaroca* was a very poor kind of soup, into which all the leftovers of corn were put. Thus *banguela* as all the teeth of corn have already been eaten, and there are just the bare shucks left. My first attempt was *toothless stew*, but a stew normally contains meat, and can be very tasty. So *stew* was downgraded to *swill*; pigs normally eat swill, a mixture a just about anything, any left overs, and so *toothless stew* became *toothless swill*.

– This land you know well,
It drank the sweat you sold.

– This land you know well,
It sapped up your spirit of youth.

– This land you know well,
It shrank your manliness.

– This land knows you well,
Through friends and relations.

– This land knows you well,
You'll live with your wife and children.

– This land knows you well,
It's been waiting since you were born.

– You have no force left,
Let yourself be sown lengthways.

– You have no live seed,
Your body is its own shoot.

– You have no sugar cane sprout.
You are the sprout but not of cane.

– You have no seed in your hand;
You are the grain.

– You have no strength in your leg;
Let yourself be sown in the grave.

– You have no strength in your hand;
Let yourself be sown in the furrows.

– In the hammock nothing coming,
Only your threshed husk.

– In the hammock a lot coming,
Only your chewed up shuck.

– In the hammock something scarce,
Toothless swill.

– In the hammock very little,
Your life with no second harvest.

– In your right hand a rosary,
Black dried corn.

– In your right hand only
The rosary, dry seed.

– In the right hand, the rosary
Of ash, barren seed.

– In the right hand the rosary,
Inert and lifeless seed.

– Naked you came in the coffin,
Naked also the grain is buried.

– Poverty unclothed you so much,
That the wind left your chest.

– You took off so many things in life,
That the cool breeze left your chest.

– And now the ground opens to shelter you,
The sheet you never had in your life.

– The ground opens and covers you,
It gives you blanket and bed.

– The ground opens and wraps you
Like a woman to sleep with.

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And finally, João Cabral's very beautiful ending, in which I kept the Portuguese topographical terms. As the English edition is aimed at a public who would have little knowledge of Brazil, I'm planning to include an Introduction and footnotes.

The neighbours, friends and visitors speak.

– Of his beauty
I can say something.
He's thin
And light,
But he's the weight of a man
From the womb of a woman.

– Of his beauty
Let me say something.
He's pale and puny
But has the mark of a man
From the human workshop

– Of his beauty
Let me sing to you.
He's a skinny kid
Like all from these mudflats,
But the machine of mankind
Already beats non-stop.

– His beauty has already been described.
He's small,
Weak and premature,
But you can already see
The hands that build things
In his.

– Of his beauty
Let me tell you.

He's as lovely as a coconut tree
That conquers the sea sand.

– Of his beauty
Let me tell you.
He's as lovely as the avelos plant
On the grey Agreste.

– Of his beauty
Let me tell you.
He's as lovely as the prickly pear tree
On the dry Caatinga.

– Of his beauty
Let me tell you.
He's as lovely as a yes
In a room of noes.

– He's as lovely as a second
Harvest of sugar cane.

– Lovely because he's a door
To open more exits.

– Lovely as the last wave
The end of the sea never brings.

As lovely as the waves
– In their infinity.

– Lovely because he has the surprise
And joy of the new.

– Lovely as something new
On an empty shelf.

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– Like anything new
Beginning its day.

– Like a new notebook
When we open it.

– Lovely, as the new
Decays the old.

– Lovely, as the new blood
Destroys anemia.

– It infects misery
With life and health.

– An oasis in the desert,
The calm after the storm.

The carpenter speaks to the migrant, who has been outside, not taking part.

– Traveller Severino,
Let me tell you now
I don't know the answer
To your question.
Whether you should
Throw your life
From the bridge.
But I don't know this answer.
If you want me to tell you,
You can't defend
Life with just words,
More so when it's what
You can see, so hard.

But if I told you
I didn't know the answer,
Life itself told you
(With it's own presence).

And there's no better answer
Than to see life
Unravel its thread,
Which is also called life,
See the factory
Life itself stubbornly makes.
See it sprout and grow, like now,
Explode into a new life,
Even when the explosion,
Like that which too place,
Is so small.
Even when it's so puny,
Even when it's that of
A severe, Severino life.