

# JOAO CABRAL DE MELO NETO

João Cabral de Melo Neto (1920-1999) defined himself as an anti-lyrical poet. A diplomat, Cabral lived in many countries and absorbed many cultures (Spain, England, Equador, Senegal, among others) and heir literatures without ever losing dimension of a fundamental reference to the world of Pernambuco with its sugar plantations and sugar mills, its Sertão (backlands, usually affected by drought) its poor and their traditions. His language is unanimously recognised as being mineral, cold, concrete, material and concise. In a letter he wrote that "it was the rough diction of Drummond that showed me poetry without all that slippery oratory that irritated me".

A complexity of Cabral's poem "The Psychoanalysis of Sugar", that may escape a foreign reader is the play between the darkness of the unconscious against the fragility of the thin whiteness of consciousness and the tangible reality of miscegenation in the country where so many also have a "surface" of whiteness, due to the "whitening" process of mixed marriages that were always encouraged and practiced in Brazil's history. This practice has also the correlative of hiding the black ancestry as the persons surfaces up in the social scale. Sugar, in the poem, then, is not only the substance well known to all but a whole paradigm that ties together meanings and associations in all levels of complexity.

—ELIDE VALARINI OLIVER

## *Psychoanalysis of Sugar*

Sugar of crystal, or sugar from the mill,  
shows the most unstable of all whitenesses;  
who from Recife knows so well how much,  
or little it takes, for this amount of white, to last,  
knows a minimum of the little it takes for crystal  
to stabilise in crystal on top of sugar,  
above the old bottom, brown,  
muddy brown in incubation;  
and knows that anything can rupture the minimum  
of which crystal is capable, censorship:  
for that such brown bottom soon surfaces  
either in winter or in summer when sugar melts

Only the boiling-pans still purge  
 the sugar, still coarse with clay, from the mesh;  
 the mill doesn't purge it anymore: in childhood,  
 not after adulthood, it educates it;  
 in infirmaries, with vacuum and turbines,  
 in metal hands of industry people,  
 the mill brings it to sublimate into crystal  
 the dark syrup: it doesn't purge it, it cures it.  
 But as sugarcane is still raised today,  
 by clayish hands of agriculture people,  
 the muddy stuff of pre-childhood soon surfaces  
 either in winter or in summer when sugar melts.

*(Translated by Elide Valarini Oliver)*

## *Education by the Stone*

One education by the stone: with lessons;  
 to learn from the stone, to attend to it;  
 to capture its unemphatic impersonal voice  
 (in diction, it starts its lessons).  
 A moral lesson, its cold resistance  
 to what flows, and flowing, to be drummed;  
 one of Poetics, its concrete fleshiness;  
 one of Economics, its compact denseness:  
 stone lessons (from the outside to the inside,  
 a dumb speller) for those to spell it.

Another education by the stone: in the Sertão  
 (from the inside to the outside, and pre-didactic).  
 In the Sertão the stone does not know how to teach,  
 and if it taught, it would teach nothing;  
 There, one does not learn the stone: there, the stone,  
 a stone by birth, sinks into the soul.

*(Translated by Elide Valarini Oliver and Mac Oliver)*