

study of mythopoetic primitivism in a brief poem by mário de andrade

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The weapon of poetry turns against natural things and wounds or murders them... to construct something that is not a copy of "nature" and yet possesses substance of its own is a feat which presupposes nothing less than genius.

José Ortega y Gasset¹

The literary ballad, an increasingly popular genre this century, consciously attempts to emulate the mythic and primitive aspects of the orally transmitted folk ballad. "A Serra do Rola-Môça" by Mário de Andrade masterfully exemplifies the consummate depth and brilliance that the modern folk ballad is capable of attaining.

Upon superficial analysis this work appears to be nothing more than a simple folk narrative, but in essence it encompasses a contemporary mytho-poetic vision of reality rooted in deep psychic and primal elements. This primal vision is subliminally accessible and interpretable only in terms of a psychological analysis of the subject matter. In the work at hand, Andrade creates a personal mythology, one which remains poignantly faithful to the common font of animistic primitivism common to all mythologies.

Ernst Cassier, utilizing the writings of Frazer, Malinowski, and Levy-Brull as a point of departure, strives to explain the close relationship between human and cosmic reality in primitive people. He concludes that cosmic elements like the sun, moon, and stars all preside over and participate in man's destiny. Through their works, contemporary poets succeed in reviving the

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¹ José Ortega y Gasset, The Dehumanization of Art and Other Writings of Art and Culture, (Garden City, 1956), p. 30 and p. 32.

the magical relationship between man and his surrounding universe. This primal anthropomorphic conception of life is at the basis of their art. Andrade, like many other writers of this century, employs mythic elements in his poetry to indicate the continuity of the human experience. One has only to consider the writings of Eliot, Cabral de Melo Neto, Lorca, Neruda and Paz to attain a full awareness of the monumental extent that myth has influenced the poetics of the twentieth century. Richard Ellmann explains this pervasive influence thusly: "The modern return to mythical forms is in part an attempt to reconstitute the value-laden natural environment that physical science has tended to discredit. Myths are public and communicable, but they express mental patterns that come close to the compulsive drives of the unconscious."² Carl Gustav Jung echoes this same thought. "In the final count, every individual life is at the same time also the life of the consciousness of the species."³ Andrade's ballad is complexly multi-faceted in its conception, existing on two levels concomitantly. On the anecdotal level it seemingly presents the tragic story of the death of two lovers on their wedding day. However, on the second level of meaning, the deeper psychic level, one perceives the envisagement of an animistic clash between dark cosmic forces and the sexual instincts of the young couple. Coincidentally, Andrade also structures the poem on two polarities; a sound-silence polarity and a light-dark or night-day Manichaeian polarity, both of which parallel the more universal duality of the life-death polarity. Andrade seeks to obliterate the modern conception of death, submerging it in his anthropomorphic universe that is the narrative locus of the work.

The poem, like most ballads, contains a recurrent refrain, in this case "A Serra do Rola-Môça / Não tinha êsse

²Richard Ellman, The Modern Tradition, (New York, 1965), p. 617.

³Carl Gustav Jung, Psychological Reflections, (New York, 1961), p. 41.

nome não." Andrade's narrator employs this refrain on the anecdotal level to create a type of verbal encantation that secures the reader's attention through the inherent internal rhyme of the vowels "o" and "a" which add to the asymmetrical rhythm of the two lines.

From the onset of the work the omniscient focus of the narrator continually stresses verbally the physical separation of the couple. "O noivo com a noiva dêle... Ele na frente, ela atrás." He then subjoins the phrase "Cada qual no seu cavalo," employing it twice to terminate the second and third stanzas. It is learned in the second stanza that the lovers have come to the village to marry "Vieram na vila casar" but the physical union that they both seek is to be delayed until they are able to cross the mountains again.

Antes que chegasse a noite
Se lembraram de voltar
E se puseram de novo
Pelos atalhos da serra.

I find the choice of the noun "atalho" significant for it simultaneously entails two conceptions: that of a cut-off or short cut and that of an obstacle or hinderance. There is a mythic analogy drawn between the primitive conception of the "locus amoenus" and the couple's entrance into the mountains. The poet utilizes the primal image of the passage into the mountains to symbolically portray a "descent-into-the-unknown" motif.

The exuberant joy and the sexual excitement of the couple is presented by the artifice of focusing solely on their laughter.

E riam, como êles riam!
Riam até sem razão.

Their laughter is depicted by Andrade as an uncontrollable internal force that functions almost magically causing a type of malific incantation. The young couple is totally involved in the series, sensual, ominous spell of their desires. They

have lost contact with the cosmic reality that surrounds and menaces them.

In the forth stanza Andrade presents a cosmos that harmonizes and reflects the happiness and joy of the young couple. "Os dois estavam felizes, / Na altura tudo era paz," but in the sixth stanza he foreshadows and portents tragedy by metaphorically personifying the terror of the scarlet sunset as it attempts to flee the darkness of the night. Here the Manichaeen polarity is brought into play. It is at this point that the dark nocturnal cosmic forces begin to attain dominance.

As tribos rubras da tarde
Rapidamente fugiam
E apressadas se escondiam
Lã em baixo nos socavões
Temendo a noite que vinha.

In this work, Andrade offers a mythic explanation for the accident that causes the death of the lovers just as primitives once attempted to decipher the inexplicable by means of stories which evolved into myths.

The accident is mythologized as being brought about by a commpenetration of the couple's laughter and the cosmic laughter of the pebbles. This, ironically, is the second marriage named in the ballad.

E riam. Como êles riam!
E os risos também casavam
Com as risadas dos cascalhos.

To convey the idea of death the poet focuses not upon the physical death of the girl but rather opts to bring to the fore the concept of silence which far more effectively conveys the tragedy of the loss of life. The sound-silence polarity is masterfully employed here.

Nem o baque se escutou.
Faz um silêncio de morte.

Again after the cosmic upheaval there is a return to the prior harmonious state "Na altura tudo era paz..."

On the first level of meaning the young man unhesitatingly spurs his horse to join his lover if only in death.

Chicoteando o seu cavalo,
No vão do despenhadeiro
O noivo se despenhou.

To truly penetrate the deeper psychic level of the work one must utilize a psychological approach as a key for unlocking the archetypal essence of the work, an essence replete with Freudian symbology.

The aesthetic theories of Sigmund Freud, especially his work with dream analysis, will be my point of departure. The poem's abundance of archetypal symbology, which is closely related to Freudian symbology, offers a possible solution to this seemingly tragic drama.

The application of Sigmund Freud's tenth lecture, "Symbolism in Dreams," from his twenty-eight lectures delivered at the University of Vienna, 1913-17, brings to bear a totally new perspective to Mario de Andrade's folk ballad. Freud held that the poet was essentially a day dreamer who becomes socially validated. He explains that the creative processes, as expressed in literature, reveal a subliminal inner state and that an analysis of literature yields as faithfully as does psychoanalysis the readily accessible deeper secondary meaning.

In "A Serra do Rola-Môça," the dominant motif emerges as the dynamism of the two lovers travel separately on horseback to reach a distant destination. Freud maintained that "...an overwhelming majority of symbols in dreams are sexual symbols." More specifically he enunciated that "Wild animals denote human beings whose senses are excited." In this ballad the vibrantly sexual symbol of the horses moving toward the mountain pass are interpreted by Freud thusly. "Special representations of sexual intercourse... are related to... rhythmical activities such as dancing, riding and climbing... steep places or stairs is indubitably symbolic of sexual intercourse. On closer

reflection we shall notice that the rhythmic character of this climbing is the point in common... the accompanying increase in excitation..."⁴ Andrade's utilization of the cumulative laughter of the cumulative laughter of the lovers, "Riam até sem razão" and the descent into the void of silence all lend credence to a possible description on the psychological level of the climatic point of sexual union. It is interesting to note that which was denied the lovers in life is accomplished through death. Therefore only through death is there a union of the lovers, a union brought about by a fusion with an animistic cosmos. This union is only accessible through the envisagement of the ballad from the standpoint of Freudian dream symbology.

The artistry of this ballad is powerful, for it masterfully coalesces various elements of psychology, mythic primitivism, and poetic genius. For Susanne K. Langer, "myth... is a recognition of natural conflicts, of human desire frustrated by non human powers...it is the story of the birth, passion and defeat by death which is man's common fate."⁵ Andrade's exclamation "Ah, Fortuna inviolavel!" synthesizes Miss Langer's observations. In this poem the narrator supplies his own mythic explanation of fate and death.

Much like his primitive counterpart, the modern day mythmaker struggles to make experience intelligible. Here death is made tangible; it is equated with the primal fear of the unknown, the night and with the physical barrier of the mountains. In this work the unknown, the inexplicable, "death" is made comprehensible and explained through the anthropomorphic drama that Andrade, as poet and "shaman," creates.

Mário de Andrade, the mimetic poet, through his narrator

⁴Sigmund Freud, Psychoanalysis, (New York, 1968), pp. 157-77.

⁵Juan Lopez-Morella, "Lyrical Primitivism: García Lorca's Romancero Gitano," from Lorca, ed. Manuel Duran, (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), o. 133.

adopts a primitivistic vision of reality in the fusion of cosmic and human elements. His treatment of the theme of death is aesthetically metaphysical. This lyrical interpretation of the terror and finality of death yields through myth and Freudian analysis a non-tragic vision of this all too real earthly occurrence.

It was Richard Chase who so accurately observed that "...myth performs the cathartic function dramatizing the clashes and harmonies of life in a social and natural environment... myth can be understood as the aesthetic leaven which heals or makes tolerable...deep neurotic disturbances... Certain terms in which this 'cathartic function' of myth be restated will doubtless occur to any student of Freud."⁶

⁶Richard Chase, "Notes of the Study of Myth," from Myth and Literature, ed. John B. Vickery, (Lincoln, 1966), p. 72.