

"I know of places where there are stones that talk to me": A. M. Pires Cabral's *Arado* through the lens of Ecocriticism

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If Robert MacFarlane were to write on the relation between Portuguese literature and Portuguese landscape, he would certainly mention A. M. Pires Cabral's literary production. For the last four decades, Pires Cabral has written about Portuguese landscape, namely the Northeastern region of Portugal, and the way it enlivens his spirit. MacFarlane's reflections on the relationship between writing and landscape apply in more than one way to the Portuguese writer: one may say that since the publication of Pires Cabral's first poetry book *Algures a Nordeste* [*Somewhere in the Northeast*] (1974), he has been writing about his native landscape with an "intensity of commitment," showing "modest, exact and attentive writing" as well.¹ In depicting his province, that is, mapping his territory and naming its inhabitants, human and non-human, Pires Cabral traces not only its unique physical and social features, but also invites his readers to redirect their attention toward nature. He coaxes them to notice, to look at details, and in so doing he primes a space from which that landscape can be realized in its own right. In this sense, his poetry is ethically alert; his literary landscapes a linguistic force which helps to restructure human attitude toward nature, for, and as MacFarlane states, "it is harder to dispose of anything, or to act selfishly towards it, once one has paid attention to details."²

My analysis builds on ecocriticism, a literary school founded in the US, with the objective of studying the relationship of "the human and the non-human" (Garrard 5), a critical approach that will contribute to highlight A. M. Pires Cabral's use of nature imagery. Moreover, as argued by Flys-Junquera, "regardless the trend, ecocritics have a clear ideological commitment to contribute to increasing awareness of environmental crisis and to exert a degree of political activism through the study and teaching of literary and cultural texts" (59-60³). Consequently, and sharing the idea that "literary works can certainly contribute to raising awareness of the impact of the environmental crisis," in paying attention to Pires Cabral's *Arado*, I am underscoring the need for a change in the way the Portuguese society relates to the non-human world on

¹ *Algures a Nordeste* was translated into German: *Irgendwo im Nordosten*, Bremen: edition com, 1983; recently, a selection of his poems was translated into Italian: *Le illeggibili dell'acqua*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2011. Also his novel *O Cónego* was translated into Italian: *Il Canonico*, Roma: La Nuova Frontiera, 2009, and *Portugal Terra Fria*, a novella, was translated into French, Paris: Marval, 1997.

² See Robert MacFarlane texts on the relation between writers and landscape presented in *The Guardian*, between March and July 2005.

³ For an overview of this literary school, see the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, edited by Cheryll Gtofelty; see also *Ecocriticism* by Greg Garrard.

aesthetically and politically. By focusing on an individual poet – his inner and outer landscape – I also aim to prove that Pires Cabral's circumscribed place. Trás-os-Montes becomes a region through which the wider world may be observed and interpreted. In addition, I believe that his celebration of the local and his attentiveness to details of nature will persuade Portuguese readers to hear not only the stones, as one of his poems mentions, but the larger physical world beyond human beings. In this sense, to interpret Pires Cabral's poetry through the lens of ecocriticism will not only ask for the improvement of Portuguese ethical attitudes towards the natural world, but, above all, it will serve as an example of how poetry enlarges human understanding, and how, in our technological societies, it still has the power to surprise us "into imagining the earth" (Elder 215).

To study the way Pires Cabral's poetry depicts his native landscape, I also build on the concept of the pastoral as Glen Love has defined it. According to the US critic, "pastoral is rooted in the local, the specific, the regional, at the same time that it speaks to the larger world" (Love 198). Love also argues that "the age of environmental anxiety has projected nature into the forefront of social and intellectual concerns, and pastoralism [...] is destined to engage us increasingly in the time ahead" (200). He takes his statement further and concludes: "looking at, listening to, the natural world seems an act of sanity, of deference to natural systems and communities that work and survive – in a world context of momentous human mismanagement" (Love 203). This statement underscores the idea that at the core of pastoralism exists more than just a desire to escape from civilization. Instead, and implicit in Love's idea, is the belief that the pastoral mode is a form of active dialogue with the world. That is why Love calls for a "contemporary redefinition," of the concept (Love 204). Similarly, Terry Gifford sees pastoral as a mode that "far from being a dead form" exists in "so many varieties that it has to be regarded as a 'contested term'" (Gifford 4). Drawing from the work of Lawrence Buell, Gifford summarizes the present relevance of pastoralism: "avoiding the traps of idealization, this new movement seeks to find a discourse that can both celebrate *and* take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness" (Gifford 148). He proposes the term 'post-pastoral' (Gifford 150) to define a literature that underscores the human relationship with nature, suggesting that it will help us to understand the ambiguities of our own times, "Against the necessary notions of roots, neighborhood and community there is another necessary impulse towards retreat, renewal and return" (Gifford 174). Scott Hess also contends that in our technological societies we need "a sustainable pastoral," an ideal of harmony with nature that remains socially and ecologically sensitive to its own fragility, which stresses complexities, and which makes us active shapers of our happiness (Hess 72).⁴

⁴ Hess sustains that while pastoral in its traditional forms has become marginal in our technological society, "our current insulation in the massive proliferations of our own media –our pastoral masque of technology – threatens to block our awareness of the deteriorating environmental conditions that support our current prosperity." In this sense, he argues, we need "a sustainable pastoral" (72), the pastoral "of Virgil's first eclogue, balancing happiness against the possibility of exile, not abdicating responsibility but

My aim is to illustrate how in *Arado* [Plow], a poetry book published in 2009, Pires Cabral, pursuing his poetic work on rural experiences and on the landscapes of his native land, also emphasizes "the unresolved dialogue about the tensions in [our] society" (Gifford 11). In addition, his return to his origins in nature is not merely escapist, but a way to counter "human alienation from the earth upon which we depend" (Gifford 8). In this sense, I see that his poetry on the relationship between man and nature provides Portuguese readers with a new perspective, one which highlights an "awareness of otherness," and recognizes the fragility of our planet (Hess 95). Pires Cabral's retreat to the Northeastern natural world intensifies his views on the essentials of life. Accordingly, his poetry is one not devoid of present anxieties, but one which delivers "insights into the culture from which it originates" (Gifford 82). Thus *Arado* exposes not the poet's insulation in ideal Arcadias, but his views on human anxieties and limitations. It shows a poetic voice that does not cast aside social and environmental tensions, but, instead, "highlights tensions and provides a staging ground from which balances are readjusted, from which harmonies can be continuously and contingently restored" (Hess 95).

Pires Cabral's most recent poetry books have been granted significant attention from critics who nowadays consider him both "a classicist in the Northeast" (Moura, 78) and a poet whose singularity is the depiction of "the human presence in a rural setting, or in any place where humans try to resist death and decay, conveying a larger and more universal dimension of human's resistance to the world's degradation (Magalhães 160).⁵ As I have pointed out, my analysis, framed with an ecocritical lens, aims to demonstrate how this critical trend highlights Pires Cabral's poetic strength and originality within Portuguese literature. Moreover, I focus on *Arado* because it is by far the work which best illustrates the poet's poetic attentiveness toward the natural world and the ability to obliterate his 'self' in order to become 'another.' This is particularly visible whenever the speaker of the poem speaks for a bird, a month, an ant, or insistently calls the reader's attention to the way words tie human and non-human worlds, promoting a closer proximity between man and nature. Furthermore, in a country so little devoted to the aesthetic and ethical value of natural landscapes, I think it is relevant to distinguish the singularity of his poetic voice.⁶

recognizing that our fortunate state, insofar as it is fortunate, needs to be maintained by awareness and diligent action" (95).

⁵ "a classicist in the Northeast": this is the definition used by Vasco Graça Moura, poet and critic, when the D. Dinis Poetry Prize, one of the most important in the country, was awarded to A. M. Pires Cabral by the Casa de Mateus Foundation (2005). Pires Cabral has also received the *Círculo de Leitores Fiction Prize* (1983), the *Poetry Prize Luis Miguel Nava* and the *Poetry Prize Pen Club for Arado* (2009). More recently, he was awarded the *Short Story Prize for O Porco de Erimanto* (2010).

⁶ Due to the authoritarian regime which ruled Portugal for half a century (1928-1974), a significant part of the Portuguese population remained rural and illiterate till the Carnation Revolution in 1974. Therefore, aspects related to civic intervention and aesthetics concerns became secondary in the Portuguese society. In the Portuguese academic world, however, there is an awakening concerning the relationship between literary studies and environment. So, in Lisbon, the Faculty of Philosophy holds a *Masters in Culture and Environment*, and in 2008, at the Faculty of Letters in Oporto the first meeting devoted to the topic of Ecocriticism took place. In June 2011 the conference: "Falas da Terra no Século XXI:

Born in 1941 in a small village in the Northeast region of Portugal, A. M. Pires Cabral is a great admirer of local history, popular language and traditions, which he has studied extensively. His literary works evince great knowledge of both the physical and cultural landscape of the Northeast, denoting the particularities of the region, but also connoting the ways men and place relate. In a text meant as a geographical guide, published in a Portuguese newspaper in 1995, Pires Cabral emphasized that to write about the people of his native region, Trás-os-Montes, is also to describe the region itself, for in this part of Portugal man and place are "intimately and prodigiously related" (Alves and Agarez, *Antologia* 13). In this setting, Pires Cabral pictures "the complex, impetuous, tormented and excessive identity"⁷ of its people, claiming that the great silence of the fields molds people's discretion (Alves and Agarez, *Antologia* 13). In addition, Trás-os-Montes, "a landscape with a soul", is both at the center of his poetic creativity, and of his sense of justice, for if his poems reflect a land ethic, acknowledging the necessity of solidarity and respect between humans and all other living and non-living organisms. They also illuminate the need for social balance and responsibility towards the most vulnerable: "The elders of Grijó / shake me inside as an earthquake", or "a crippled old woman / laid out in a bed of straw / that does not delay – but foster instead – rottenness" (Pires Cabral, "Hoje já não é tempo" 34; Pires Cabral, *Arado* 48, 49). Consequently, if his poetic vision is environmentally engaged, his poems denote preoccupations towards social equity, ultimately becoming testimonies for men to live by. Besides, Trás-os-Montes is a region where people and animals have always experienced a close relationship: oxen to work the land, donkeys for carrying people and goods, goats, sheep and pigs to eat – animals which have been faithful companions of the human struggle for survival. Therefore, and parallel to the depiction of landscape and people, Pires Cabral's poetry is also characterized by a significant bestiary, for the poet believes animals may give lessons to men, if only they listen attentively.

Though A. M. Pires Cabral has written novels, short stories, chronicles, and plays, he is best known as a poet. For almost thirty years after the publication of his first book in 1974, and though he had published poetry since then, Pires Cabral has focused his creative energy mainly on fiction. He published novels and short stories whose style alternates between the colloquial and the classical, integrating the everyday discourse of small farmers and traders, priests and bourgeois ladies in a more universal language, one which tries to articulate the anxieties of the rural world, exploring its rhythms, mythology, and common knowledge. In 1999, however, A.M. Pires Cabral published *O livro dos Lugares e Outros Poemas* [*The Book of Places and Other Poems*] which, as the name indicates, is a poetic work whose creative center is related to some places in Trás-os-Montes. Since then, and with a few exceptions, the writer has dedicated himself mainly to poetry. His most recent poetry books – *Como se Bosh tivesse enlouquecido* (2003), *Douro: Pizzicato e Chula* (2004), *Que Comboio é Este* (2005), *Têmporas da Cinza*

What do we see green?" at Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon was held. As a result, a book was published: *Falas da Terra : What do we see green ?* by Ana Isabel Queiroz and Inês de Ornellas e Castro. See book review: *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*. Vol 2, No 2, 281-283.

⁷ My translation. I have to acknowledge though that the supervision of Paul Driver was all-important.

(2008), *Arado* (2009)⁸ – enact a long voyage towards the heart of darkness, into the unexpected territory of the human soul. This voyage is accomplished through his revisiting of places, people, flowers and birds that he knows best, as if these instances made the troubled journey more familiar and therefore less solitary and less painful. As he mentions in one of his poems about the Douro river: "though traveling upward along this river / if you pay close attention / it is downward, I'm traveling, deep into myself" (Pires Cabral, *Antes que o rio seque* 350), illustrating how intimately "the inner is also the workings of the outer" (Gifford 156).

Fundamental to our argument is that *Arado* is a homecoming book. In the poet's own words: "I want to reconnect my poetry to the place of origin, to the place of all beginnings" (Pires Cabral, "*Arado*" np). Despite being a 'territorial book' like *Somewhere in the Northeast*, his first poetic work, *Arado* reflects the passage of time more poignantly and, as the author puts it, "his flirtation with death." In this sense, the book is not only a testimony to what Gifford calls "a poetry that returns to speak to contemporary concerns," but also a way to explore the anxieties of our own time (Gifford 98). As in previous works, Pires Cabral uses images of nature as a means to investigate the way time deposits rust over objects and human beings alike. Pires Cabral's return to his native landscape functions not merely as an escape from civilization, but as a therapeutic retreat (Gifford 80). This return will allow the poet to rehabilitating the idea of harmony, and then, through the language of persuasion, to highlight our necessity of it (Gifford 8).

Though the book is not divided into sections or chapters, the seventy-six poems seem to have been divided into two main lines, one in which titles related to the natural world prevail – "Plow," "Terra Mater," "The Sparrow," "Wagtail in the City," "Wisteria," "Sister Skylark," "The Grass Parable," "Some of the Months," "Wind" – and the other in which death, degradation, and anxiety take a relevant role – "Anxiety," "Squatting God," "Insomnia," "Non sum dignus," "Questions," and "Cough in the Night." Throughout *Arado* death is omnipresent both in the natural world – trees and vines die, the blackbird is caged, the gracious swallow eats the insect – and in the human world, as in the poems in which Pires Cabral dialogues with Shakespeare's Yorick, whose talents are forever lost, dispersed, entertaining no one. However, just as nature is perpetually reborn, so the poet survives through his words, as he explains in the poem "Arado" ["Plow"]: "I like to think of these verses as if they were / a plow with which I rip other lands / more volatile and less arable, / sowing into it some seed" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 13).

As I have been pointing out, *Arado* is a book about things gone, expressing the anxiety of decay and abandonment, a perspective conveyed early in the poem "Arado" ["Plow"]. In it, the plow is an object getting rusty in a corner and that nobody notices, except the chickens. In fact, the plow functions as a "luminous sign of an irrecoverable time," a time when agriculture was a reality and the gestures of men and women performed rituals of fecundity (Guerreiro 34). The poem, divided into three parts, deals

⁸ As if Bosh had Gone Mad; Douro: Pizzicato and Chula; What Kind of Train is This; Temples of Ashes; Plow, respectively.

with personal and collective bygone times, the reader reaching the conclusion that there is no hope of a return to the primordial tasks of agriculture, and therefore its future is to end in a fire. In part three the revelation comes: the poet transmutes the instrument into a symbol of his role as a writer. Observing the plow, the poet also senses his own mortality; his words and artistry the only way to resist time and physical disappearance. The last three stanzas – "improvised roost, // pasture to rust and rot, // firewood shortly" (*Ibid*) – made more intense because of their brief structure and rhythmic energy, reinforcing the idea of death approaching, and, moreover, of life's brevity. This poem is an example of Pires Cabral's rejection of sentimental pastoralism. It denotes the poet's concern with the complexities of modern life. In Pires Cabral's poetry the figurative death has "emerged as a more universal and implacable corrective to human evasion" (Love 201).

But not only "Arado" speaks nostalgically about the vanishing objects, tasks or landscapes. In the poem "Algures a Nordeste Parte Dois" ["Somewhere in the Northeast Part Two"], the passage of time and the recognition of change are particularly poignant: "all is changed from what it was" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 15). The poet takes the reader back to his first book, "a green book" (*Arado* 15) to acknowledge that now only "ruined fields, infested by weeds" survive (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 16). In part three, however, the poetic voice states his loyalty to the Northeast: "Oh, but I keep faithful," an assertion denoting resistance and persistence, assuming once more his bond to the region, to the Northeast (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 17).

If, as Antonio Cortez accentuates, nature is not the exclusive theme of Pires Cabral's poetry, it is, however, a relevant one, for as Pires Cabral's verses state, he is a poet for whom the earth is "the only answer to the eternal hunger / the one which is not satisfied / with any bread" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 18).⁹ In the poem which opens his first published book, "Terra Mater," it says, "I go down to earth. I conceive resistance / and the bright song" (Pires Cabral, *Antes que o rio seque* 9). After thirty five years, Pires Cabral wrote another poem also titled "Terra Mater," denouncing, on one hand, the passage of time and, on the other hand, asserting the poet's feelings towards the old landscape, "It is now only a waste of clamor / but, boy, it still hurt, / it still moves me" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 14). The poet stands in front of his homeland landscape – Terra Mater, "a place shredded by winds" – acknowledging the changes that have taken place. Though claiming that now it is only "a waste of clamor," ultimately, this is the landscape in which he recognizes the evolution of his own artistry, "Today I know, after hollow din, / Of all these lost decades / That only with the key of silence may I / Still open a door into your olive body // and enter you as into a temple" (*Arado* 14). While the external landscape has been evolving and changing, the poet's escape nurtures silence and wisdom. "Sabedoria" ["Wisdom"] is also the title of a poem in which the speaker announces his fidelity towards his native landscape, "To recognize in this landscape /...the active principle and be content /. [...] and to proclaim that earth is / the only true

⁹ For some illustrative poems like "Terra Mater", "Wisdom", "Sister Skylark", and "December", see Appendix.

answer to the eternal hunger" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 18). In this sense, Pires Cabral practices "restorationism," because his texts call "places into being" dramatizing their relevance and conveying new visions of it (Buell 267). Though the experience depicted in the poems is attached to a particular region and specific landscapes, the poet aspires to transform and transfigure it into a common ground of human life. His poems present landscapes, objects, people and animals long known; however, according to the critic Joaquim Magalhães, the linguistic representation of that human and non-human world demands a *revision*, a "revitalization of poetic language by confronting it with that world" (Magalhães 161). Moreover, the way he sees the natural world is affected by his belief that all life is related to a mysterious and less visible dimension; though he notices the stone, the plant, the bird, he aims "to acknowledge the physical dimension of the invisible" (Guerreiro 34).

In "Parábola da Erva" ["The Grass Parable"], the poet's eco-sensibility towards the natural world is evinced, signaling that "nothing in the world should be underestimated" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 43).¹⁰ Assuming that he is speaking on behalf of 'we,' the poet continues, "This grass, though so humble / teaches us something.// Perseverance, for instance. It wisely falls under our weight / but it stands up as soon as we retrieve the feet" (*Arado* 43). In part two, the poet presents the acts man would perform to eliminate the grass: easily, for man possesses all the means and tools. As a conqueror, man may eliminate it chemically, or take off the leaves in order to impede it from breathing or, "more efficiently, / to pull it out of the soil" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 44). In part three, the poet completes the lesson and plays out a climactic scene: "We can kill it but never to suppress / its wish to perpetuate. / Though fragile, it resembles a female lion / when it comes to compete for a territory, / or for water, or sun / life's coordinates" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 45). Like Thoreau, the poet acknowledges the power of a seed, and so the poem goes on underlining the strength which constitutes the grass's small seeds, which despite their tiny weight, bear inside the shoots of survival. Finally, the poet reminds us that even dead, and as compost, the grass nourishes future generations, therefore feeding its own survival and continuity. The last lines remind the reader that he had been talking by way of a parable and thereby the lesson on the grass is intended to teach the reader both to relate to an ecological wholeness and "to step towards eternity (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 46)". The grass imagery is repeating the plow's symbolic resonance: that the poet is taking the condition of another instance to claim the relevance and essentiality of the poet's voice. As is the case, the other existence Pires Cabral chooses to present relies on images and beings of the natural world.

One of the reasons why Pires Cabral's poetry may be defined as bearing an environmental consciousness is the proliferation of animals in his poems. *Arado* regales

¹⁰ Though Pires Cabral's poetry has been associated to names such as Seamus Heaney, D. H. Lawrence, and Robert Lowell, I think of Walt Whitman, not only because of the obvious attention given to grass, something fragile and seemingly unimportant, but because Pires Cabral's poetry shares with Whitman's poetic vision, the belief that "the common ground is itself a poetic source" (Williams 903). Moreover, both poets believe in experience as the source of poetic vision, and share a great faith in suggestion and a belief in poetry as an invitation to change.

a significant bestiary, particularly birds: blackbirds, skylarks, sparrows, wagtails, doves, swallows, all of them figuring as part of Pires Cabral's fascination with nature's rhythms, as if the poet's mission was "to apprehend nature's own prosody" (Guerreiro 34). The Portuguese literary tradition, following both the biblical and the classical texts by Aesop and La Fontaine, has been producing many bestiaries.¹¹ A. M. Pires Cabral's close observation of animal behavior illustrates his ongoing search for fresh perspectives on nature, assuming that human life is organically unified with the natural world, animals included. Under closer inspection, animals can touch human lives with vitality, beauty, and truth, and as in the classical parables they actually represent people. In "Mantis Religiosa," for instance, we see the poet observing the insect, knowing that patiently it awaits its victim, praying for food. The first three lines describe the mantis "puts his hands together, raises them on high," and then the insect murmurs a prayer "our daily insects give us today / [...] for my belly / was conceived by you so that / it can easily dilate / and contain five or six insects / [...] Lord - give me that I can fill up" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 37). Then, in Part III, the moment when the mantis eats its victim still alive, and the poet's meditation on it, "there it is / mother nature / pitying myself / shows me at last its less photogenic most edifying angle" are described. Nature is enacting in front of him (the 'I' of the poem places himself looking through the window) the play between life and death "the wise indifference of life towards death and vice-versa." The poet is there not only to observe and describe the instinct of the mantis, but also to show how nature incorporates "that promiscuity between life and death" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 39), therefore illustrating "a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth" (Gifford 153).

In "Irmã Cotovia" ["Sister Skylark"], Pires Cabral uses the opposing images of soil and flight to indicate his own conflict as a poet, and moreover, the opposition between body and spirit. It is not a coincidence that echoes of Francis of Assisi's thinking, namely his love for animals, hangs over this poem. Divided into two parts, it starts by delineating the bird's behavior, "it lives close to the soil, / the place where it nests and feeds. / [...] There it lives in silence." And then goes on "But when it needs to sing, / the skylark changes element: flies high, / too high, where / no other bird dares to go." And the bird sings "look how high I am though sustained / by too fragile wings" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 33). Afterward, it returns to the soil, disguising itself in the dust-colored earth, as if it had never taken flight. In the second part, the correspondence between poet and bird becomes clear; both are seen as creatures of the earth and of the heights. However, the poet notes that his is a less clear voice, for it is full of metaphors and tropes, and his wings are not as strong. The last stanza, in brackets, as if the poet were murmuring a confession says "I've noticed that I always lose if I compare myself to an animal" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 34). Repeatedly, the poet opens his own spirit in order to incorporate the perspective of an animal or insect as is the case of "Formiga de asa ou O Ícaro da Mirmecolândia" ["Winged ant or the Icarus of Mirmecolândia"], in which the speaker of

¹¹ An illustrative example is Miguel Torga's *Bichos [Animals]* (1940) a short story book in which Torga, also from the Trás-os-Montes region, confers human qualities to animals.

the poem is the ant, content because wings have been offered to her: "And I tasted air. / And saw that it was good" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 35).¹² The insect prays for its legs to dry and disappear so it may never go back to the ground again; its element, the ant acknowledges, is the air, the flight, the desire to transgress and fly towards the sun. Again, and through the insect's voice, we hear the poet claiming a territory outside earth's gravity, aspiring to reach the territory of poetic freedom – but also spiritual fulfillment – as in the poem about the skylark.

Frequently, Pires Cabral directs the readers' attention to details about birds: the gracious swallows that, nevertheless, opens a terrifying mouth to the mosquito, the wagtail's skill as a hunter, the intense vitality of the sparrow, and the fact that the dove, and contrary to what some think, is not an "incomplete bird," it is also a sister of the wind "when she is free to release / all the flight she has inside her" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 32). As previously stated, these poems, though illustrating a meticulous observation of the birds, habitats, and habits included, also express wider lessons: the brevity of human life, and the similarities of the poet's gifts to those of the birds. Fragility, force, vitality, intensity, and the search for interior freedom are just some of the characteristics shared both by birds and poet alike, a comparison the poem "Melro em Gaiola" ["The Jailed Blackbird"] highlights. In it the poet uses irony to talk about the poet's place within society, a place that, like that of the bird's, has diminished, but one that he has to protect. Put in a jail, the blackbird reconsiders its limited territory, but does not give up and continues to laugh. He does not sing, but he laughs. He laughs at those who have put him in a jail, and the jail on the balcony "for greater scorn" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 24). The poem is divided into six parts, and it is a parable on the capacity for adaptation and survival. It also testifies that, sometimes, the best way to fight the lack of liberty is sarcastically. Moreover, in part five, one can read, "Lesson to retain: expectations are only apparently a degradable place. / They may shrink, but never die" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 27). In the last part of the poem, the poet recognizes what the reader sensed throughout: "I am like it: somebody has limited my backyard / [...] and me, defending it with laughing slashes. // As the blackbird, just like it" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 28). At the core of this poem remains the figure of the poet and his intention of using the blackbird to speak about freedom of (poetic) life and the restrictions imposed either by social structures or mortality. Therefore, in this poem as in so many others in which animals are present, the poet's intention is to reinforce the dialogue between animals and humans, conveying that this relationship may also contribute "to the understanding of life's mystery and transcendence" (Cortez 23). The fact that in *Arado* a significant majority of the poems are divided into sections serves to point out the necessity of contextualizing in detail the bird, the plant, the object and then to establish a wider and spiritual association. The poet is writing as if he were painting a series of panels, each

¹² It is relevant to refer that in 2011, A. M. Pires Cabral published *Water snake [Cobra d'água]*, a book in which snakes, dogs, frogs, and mice are relevantly placed in their habitat, offering their own perspective on death.

giving the viewer/the reader the idea of figures and objects suspended outside (concrete) time.

To my analysis of *Arado* as a book of poems conveying an ecocritical reading, the cycle of poems under the title "Alguns meses" ["Some months"] are also relevant, for they convey a parallelism between human life cycle and the ceaseless succession of the four seasons. Following a tradition which traces back to the Bible and to the Classics which consistently paid attention to weather elements, Pires Cabral's lyric considerations on the passing of seasons are a combination of cultivator's accuracy and writer's eloquence. Through the enumeration of some of the months, the poet goes on telling the specificities of the Northeast – the agricultural tasks, the extreme cold in January and in April, "the supposed month of flowers / and ecstasies of blood" , the plants which bloom in May, the dream of a November morning (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 56). Adding to that, the months are also a stage for the poet's confrontation with his inner disorder and eccentricity. In some of the poems the reader finds this personified, as in "Fevereiro" ["February"], the only month capable of adding a day every four years, "there it is my greatest capacity: / to be excessive, to be different, / to build leap years." The poet is defining his own role as artistic creator and language manipulator, he can add or subtract words and, accordingly, is able to create or destroy worlds. The poet's celebration of the passage of months conveys that he recognizes natural and elemental rhythms, inherently accepting coldness and despair, warmth and fulfillment, death and rebirth: "Sculpted in the acacias, January laughs vilely," "In May expect lilacs / to flourish excessively / and the glorious disorder / of all that carries / germs of life" (Pires Cabral, *Arado*, 53, 57).

The last poem of that group, "O que sei de Dezembro" ["What I know about December"], enacts once more the specific geography of the Northeast and what the poet knows about it. "I know of the olive labor, / the long nights, the unreadable water, and snow," and he adds, "I know of places where there are stones / that talk to me" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 61). This poem attests to the idea that Pires Cabral is dwelling in his native landscape not only physically, but also nurturing a spiritual communion with it, respecting it, and listening to it. In this poem one can see the poet's aspiration to establish a conversation with his readers, as a continuation of his own dialogue with plants, animals, and minerals, the world he knows so intensely. The enumeration of the hard facts which characterize life in the region—labor, solitude, coldness, poverty—but also the predominance of the vowel "o," and of the consonants "n," "d," and "p" accentuate the harshness of the landscape. However, the last two lines, "But I know of places where there are stones that talk to me," and particularly the relevance of the conjunction "but" together with the colloquial vocabulary and the irregular and short lines and free verse, operate as a strategy to seduce and invite the reader to share an atmosphere of complicity and intimacy. So my choice of emphasizing Pires Cabral's poetics intends to highlight not only the reward individual readers will obtain by reading and paying attention to his poems, but the fact that Portuguese environmental

literacy would improve if Portuguese readers followed the poet's words and if they would listened to him.

As I have mentioned at the beginning of this reflection, I see that Pires Cabral's poems relate to the general overview of Ecocriticism – how art in general and poetry in particular may redirect human consciousness towards nature's offerings. How is it that looking meticulously at a praying mantis one comes to better understand the cycle of life and death? How is it that talking to familiar stones one can build intimacy with nature? Literature can, as Flys-Junquera contends, "give voice to earth others" but also to invite us "to listen to nature" (73). Indeed, Pires Cabral is telling his readers that if they see and listen to nature's stories, they may achieve a better education on life's and nature's diversity and, therefore, be better prepared to build a positive engagement with our planet. This perspective meets the questions raised by John Felstiner: "Can poems help, when the times demand environmental science and history, government leadership, corporate and consumer moderation, nonprofit activism and local initiatives? Why call on the pleasures of poetry, when the time has come for an all-out response?" (Felstiner xiii). According to the critic, poems make us stop, look, and listen, and therefore they help to connect and commit ourselves to world. An example of this is Pires Cabral's "Butterfly," which translates the way something fragile and apparently irrelevant – a butterfly, a poem – may change suddenly the way one notices daily life: "A simple butterfly, who would say? / [...] what we need, after all, / to totally understand and wholly view, / is only a good butterfly / every day" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 82). Here, Pires Cabral's poems and Felstiner's words merge in a single interpretation, "the saving grace of attentiveness, and the way poems hold things still for a moment, make us mindful of fragile resilient life" (Felstiner 357).

To conclude, and according to what has been exposed, *Arado* illustrates positively Felstiner's questions, also responding to some of the issues raised by Gifford and Flys-Junquera. Although the tone of the poems is, in general, nostalgic, they convey "the urgent need for responsibility" (Gifford 149), also suggesting "alternative attitudes that might make us more sensitive to the non-human others" (Flys-Junquera 73). If the initial impulse begins in the experience of the particular and ordinary, asking us to listen to what surrounds us—wind, birds, plants, and stones—Pires Cabral's poems also allow for creative reinvention and spiritual rehabilitation by making it possible to acknowledge the existence of places where there are stones that may talk to us.

Appendix

Poems

Terra Mater

One still sees from here
A place shredded by winds
Terra mater.

It is now only a waste of clamor
But boy, does it still hurt,
It still moves me.

And it still calls
With its remaining voice –
An almost mute, dying appeal,

As if it were an answer to the frequent
Sentimental rhetoric
With which I would once salute it.

Well then: terra mater, forget everything
I said in immature times.
Those were all bad verses.

Today I know, after hollow din,
Of all these lost decades
That only with the key of silence may I
Still open a door into your olive body

And enter you as into a temple.¹³

Wisdom

¹³ "Terra Mater Ainda se vê, olhando daqui,/ Deste lugar reatlhado de ventos,/ A terra mater.// Já é só um resíduo de alvoroço,/ Mas, caramba, ainda dói,/ Ainda emociona.// E ainda chama/ Com a voz que lhe ficou –/ Apelo quase mudo, moribundo.// Como que responde às frequentes/ Retóricas a puxar ao sentimento/ Com que a saudei outrora.// Pois bem: terra mater, esquece tudo/ Quanto te disse em tempos imaturos./ Eram tudo versos de má qualidade.// Sei hoje, ao cabo da balbúrdia oca/ De todas estas décadas perdidas,/ Que só com a chave do silêncio posso/ Abrir ainda uma porta no teu corpo de azeite// E penetrar em ti como num templo" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 14).

To recognize in this earthy landscape
Of wheat fields on hills
The active principle
(the rest are just excesses)
Of the ultimate journey
And be satisfied.

And then to sit in the shade
Of any elm to observe
Here and there
Poignant groups of dun-colored houses
Of shale and memories:
Places where one believed it to be
Possible to live and, the circle closed,
To lie peacefully.
And truly to proclaim that earth is,

With its impassive accidents
Its dramas and trances of which we barely know,
The only answer to the eternal hunger
That which will not be satiated
By any bread

And that is why I die
Of hunger.¹⁴

Sister Skylark

Lives close to the soil and on the soil
It nests and feeds
Silently on earthen things.

But when it needs to sing
It changes element: it leaves the earth
Soars high, to where

¹⁴ "Sabedoria Reconhecer nesta paisagem/terrosa de searas sobre outeiros/O princípio activo/(o resto são meros excipientes.)/Da jornada extrema -/E dar-me por satisfeito.//Depois sentar-me à sombra/De algum freixo, a ver/Aqui e além/Conglomerados comoventes de casas/Pardas de xisto e de memórias:/Lugares onde se acreditou/Ser possível viver e, fechada a roda,/Jazer com tranquilidade.//E proclamar que em verdade a terra é/Com os seus acidentes impassíveis,/Seus dramas e transes que tão mal sabemos,/A única resposta idónea para a fome/Eterna, aquela que não se deixa iludir/Por nenhum pão//- e por isso me traz /Morto de fome" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 18).

No other bird dares to go.

One would say
It needs a stage.

Then, from on high, almost motionless
It sings short and repeated
Gushes of joy, as if saying:
See how high I am, suspended
By such fragile wings.

After venting its chest
Of the urgency of its voice
It comes down, to the soil,
Disguised in the dun-colored earth,

As if it had never flown.¹⁵

II

Sometimes I feel like calling the skylark
My sister because of its bond to the land
And because of
Its draw to the heights.

However- poor me – the skylark
Has more wing than I.

And of its song one dare not speak:
Much more bright and simple,
Without metaphors and tropes,
That is, much less artful

(What's more, I have noticed I lose
Whenever I measure myself
Against any animal.)¹⁶

¹⁵ "Irmã Cotovia Vive rente ao solo e é no solo/Que faz ninho e sacia a fome/Com as coisas do chão e em silêncio.//Porém, quando precisa de cantar,/Muda de elemento. Deixa a terra,/Sobe altíssimo, até onde/Nenhum outro pássaro se arrisca.//Dir-se-ia /Que precisa de um palco.//Então, dos limites do voo, quase imóvel,/Vai derramando breves, repetidos/Jorros de júbilo, assim como quem diz:/Vejam como/estou alto, sustentada /Por tão frágeis asas.//Depois que desafogou o peito/Das inadiáveis premências da voz,// Apeia-se, torna ao solo,/Dissimula-se na cor parda da terra,//Como se nunca tivesse voado" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 33).

December

In the Northeast

I know not of the plain, of the beach,
Or the drift of the great rivers.

Of December I know but little,
Situated here in the north:
I know of the toil of the olive,
I know of the absence
Of the wild pomegranate juice,
I know of the shortened and extended night,
Of the illegible pages of water,
Sometimes snow.

But I know of places where there are stones
That speak to me.¹⁷

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¹⁶ II "Já me tem apeteçido chamar à cotovia/Minha irmã pelo vínculo à terra/E minha irmã também/Pelo apelo das alturas.//Porém – ai de mim – a cotovia/Tem mais asas do que eu.//E da voz nem se fala:/Muito mais nítida e chã,/Expurgada de metáforas e tropos/Isto é, muito menos ardilosa.// (De resto, tenho notado que perco/Sempre que me meço/Seja com que animal for.)" (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 34).

¹⁷ "Dezembro No Nordeste,/Desconheço o plaino, a praia,/O vagar dos grandes rios.//De dezembro pouco sei,/Situado aqui a norte:/Sei da faina da azeitona,/Sei a ausência/Do agreste suco das romãs,/Sei a noite prematura e alongada,/As ilegíveis páginas da água, /Às vezes neve.//Mas sei de lugares onde há pedras/Que conversam comigo." (Pires Cabral, *Arado* 61)

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