

# Portuguese Literature and the Symbolic Value of Art: Vergílio Ferreira's *Cântico Final* and the Cry for Eternity

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**Abstract**—Three novels written by Vergílio Ferreira were adapted to the cinema. The first, *Cântico Final*, is an example of the dilemmas of adaptation and the problematic of filmmaking, without forgetting the complexity of the Vergilian novel, its philosophical and introspective essence, which almost precludes a visual reading for the film. In order to understand the heart of the novel and the main problem in its filmic transposition, we must devote ourselves to Mário and the representation in this character of the (meta) physical status of Art. Mário, like other Vergilian heroes, is in constant demand, sees himself as a historical agent, but with a unique dimension in relation to religion. The novel does not show an image of the desecrated man, but a return to an atmosphere of discovery and amazement at this space of the sacred, an attitude that results from the mediation of Art, the counterpoint of an existence and a world apart from a spirit of unity. primordial. Between myth, religious and symbolic, Art attempts to unveil the deepest and most intrinsic essence of religiosity.

**Keywords**— Portuguese Literature, Vergílio Ferreira, *Cântico Final*, Art and Ideology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2018, Fingerhut and Prinz, discussing the value of Art, wrote about the importance of the emotion, wonder and aesthetics and highlighted the following:

There has been much work on what people appreciate in art, but comparatively little on what feelings of appreciation consist in. What do people feel when they encounter artworks that they value? We propose that the value of art is registered by the emotion of wonder. Departing from some standard approaches in empirical aesthetics, we focus on the appreciation of art as art rather than mere aesthetic preference. Aesthetic preferences can have many different correlates outside the domain of art (as when we select graphically appealing consumer items or judge the attractiveness of people), and

preference judgments with respect to art can reflect nonaesthetic considerations and tell us rather little about art appreciation. We argue that when it comes to the appreciation of art as such, wonder plays a special role. We introduce wonder and compare it to other candidates that are discussed in the recent empirical literature, such as beauty, interest, and being moved. (2018, p. 107)

It is this perception of Art and the World that can be translated into multiple ways of internalizing these values. What happens with Vergílio Ferreira is the association of Art with the irreducible end of our life, but also with its capacity to transcend Death. This theme is in the genesis of the novel *Cântico Final* that was adapted to the cinema with the same title.

One of the most pertinent connections between literature and cinema that we can find in Vergílio Ferreira is the set of adaptations of his books to the screen.

In the case of *Cântico Final*, the first Vergilian novel to be transposed to the screen, we find that Manuel Guimarães (Matos-Cruz, 1999) deliberately opted for an adaptation that followed the 'letter' of the text. This is our view that the director used Vergílio Ferreira's text in such a literal way that it illustrates the absence of virtues in extreme loyalty. The director tried to feed his script with excerpts of the novel, forgetting that a movie is not an illustration of the text. Thus many situations were created in the film of a strange and almost caricatural "theatricality" in the performance of the characters, "cut out" of the Vergilian novel without proper semiotic transfiguration. This is an excellent example of a loyalty that failed by its exacerbated nature, showing the validity of Gimferrer's following judgment: "... the story of the cinematic adaptations of famous novels offers an eloquent master of sterile allegiances..." (Gimferrer, 1970, p. 67).

Manuel Guimarães intended ab initio to be close to Vergílio Ferreira. The writer, enthusiastic about the project, did not curb his interest and actively participated throughout the process (in fact, a similar link between director and writer would later take place in *Manhã Submersa*). According to the writer, the only condition he placed on Manuel Guimarães was the maintenance of the "spirit" of the work (Ferreira, 1975, p. 243). The final product turns out to be far from the novel if we equate aesthetic merits of the two works. Although Vergílio

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Ferreira was clearly benevolent in his appreciation of the Guimarães film (he still felt the flattery of a novel of his being chosen for a film adaptation), he nevertheless pointed to less happy marks of this transposition, from the choice of actors to narrative architecture (spatial options, construction of dialogues - in which the writer still operated some transformations - temporal options). Regarding these divergences, Gonçalves recalls that the proposal that was made about the adaptation of his novel focused on the circumscription of the film in the painter's immediate life and its difficulties of realization, locating a utilitarian society and perspective the social dimension of the book. In fact, the revolution of 1974 had not left the director indifferent, as can be seen in the inflection that he introduces at the end of the film, in the aforementioned shooting scene (Gonçalves, 1993, p. 95).

*Cântico Final* would reveal, once again, that an adaptation is always a reading. Notwithstanding the wishes of Guimarães and Vergílio Ferreira to create a film faithful to the novel, the procedures of Dórdio Guimarães' filming and subsequent editing gave rise to a "vision" of the original text. An adaptation, even if marked by an explicit fidelity to the semantic essence of the original text, always implies a transfiguration, perpetrated in an exercise of aesthetic recreation, from which we cannot separate the respective epochal implications, that is, a cross between lines of the matrix text of social and historical movements, psychological and cultural contexts, and formal procedures (Sousa, 2003, p. 26). This influence of the historical context clearly conditions the director's options, especially the outcome of the film, which is absolutely different from the novel.

In the case of Vergílio Ferreira's novels that were transposed to the screen, it is important to choose the situations of divergence that the filmic texts illustrate, in order to find a distinctive ideological reading.

The dialogue begins with the title of the works. Guimarães maintains the same title of the novel and deliberately establishes a connection that translates into the narrative matrix of the film, with various similarities with the Vergilian text. In the movie we find a final journey of a painter returning to his home village to find the physical end, already close due to his terminal illness. But this ending will coincide with one last effort of aesthetic creation, the painting of a chapel, which truly constitutes a "religious" statement, a *Cântico Final*. This diegetic thread reproduces the main narrative vector of the novel and perspective the director's options in the adaptation process.

The choice of the same title intensifies the semiotic ties between the romance and film. In Vergílio Ferreira, the title of the novel is not just a choice but a symbol of the book's essence, a reflection of its deeper meaningful axis. A title is a reading orientation with semantic and pragmatic consequences, directing the decoding path. In certain novels, the title may have a symbolic, metaphorical, or mythological record; In other titles we can glimpse the request for a path of interpretation that is rooted in the same title and intertwined with the diegesis (Reis & Lopes, 1997, p. 396), as it happens in *Cântico Final* and *Manhã Submersa*. The writer himself

confesses that the choice of a title is the result of a thorough work of selection and semantic relevance: «A title should already be as much of itself as possible, a work of art. I make an effort for it. Hence I pursue a title much longer than Flaubert is said to pursue an adjective. Hence, in my titles there is a "history" or evolution, from the phrase-titles to the Giono (or the way of the Brazilian Érico Veríssimo) to the variety they have had and I will not story. But it is good to consider that titles in general have a history in literary history... » (Perfecto-E. Cuadrado, 1989, p. 11).

Fifteen years separate the novel and the movie. It is a separation that also contemplates different historical and sociological coordinates. Guimarães chooses to devalue the aesthetic orientations of the novel that cross the thought of Mário and his circle of friendships, raising the political and ideological context. The film precisely reflects the atmosphere of the 1974 revolution, the most obvious allusions being the scenes in which Mário and his friends debate ideological guidelines, and the outcome of the film, with the introduction of the scene of the shooting of prisoners by PIDE agents, about which Guimarães did not inform Vergílio Ferreira, giving rise to a negative criticism from the writer.

Despite the similarity between book and film reflected in the choice of the title by the Portuguese director, the differences are many. On the one hand, we are evaluating a book and a movie, two works, two realities, with the same title but with different identities. In the dissimilarity, we find that they are artistic products of different art forms, as well as projects that reflect two personalities and two authors (António, 1975, p. 227).

Throughout the book-film comparison exercise, it is not enough to look for signs of fidelity or filmic equivalents for the text. These two criteria, in addition to working instruments that are difficult to characterize, slip into an analysis that establishes a dependency between the two texts. And as Lauro António suggests, comparative analysis without imposition is the one that is most faithful to the creative process itself, as we view the film as re-creation through a new language and a new context of production. In short: «Because the film is a work that begins and ends in itself, ending it completely» (António, 1975, p. 230).

Combining their interest in neo-realist social themes, the influences of filmmakers who took to the screen social problems or who used a realistic record, and the relief of literary inspiration in many of their films, we uncovered three major vectors that drive Guimarães until Vergílio Ferreira. In the writer's work, the director would find social themes (mainly in the neorealist phase), a literary support for the film and a recognition for working a text by a well-known author. These facets, which we mentioned in the previous chapter, also reflect the value of the past in the construction of neorealistic characters, the combination of ideas and the intersection of times and spaces of the Nouveau Roman. Like Lauro António, we think that Vergílio Ferreira translates into *Cântico Final* an intersection of literary and cinematic influences.

In order to understand the heart of the novel and the main problem in its filmic transposition, we must devote ourselves

to Mário and the representation in this character of the (meta) physical status of Art.

We will highlight the character Mário because the other characters and all categories of the narrative gravitate towards this one, which is yet another archetypal Vergilian main character. In fact, understanding Mário or Antonio, or any other hero of the writer, simultaneously results in an understanding of Vergilian "archipersona", as it is usually the one that runs through the narrative, highlighting the maturation or evolution of a path, translating and exemplifying the writer's thinking (Godinho, 1989).

Basically, when we analyze Mário or Antonio, we discover the web of relationships between all the elements of the novel, internal and external, from the narrative categories to the thoughts that gave rise to the book, in a creative symbiosis that crystallizes. To use Eduardo Lourenço's words, "The ideas of a novelist are his characters..." (Godinho, 1989, p. 97), so they translate his inner universe, the pillars of his conscience and the tumults of his intimate maze. At the same time, although we point out that in the creation of a novel the secondary characters cannot reflect this intimate universe because of its heterogeneous nature, nor can they be understood without linking to an empirical and historical world, we recall that the heroes of the novel can represent facets. its author and reflections of his conscience (Silva, 1988, p. 601).

Interestingly, having Guimarães a clear neo-realistic dimension in his previous productions, we would expect him to explore this theme. On the contrary, it makes the character distinctly more existential and less social. It is not integrated into a social context, having as its guidelines of thought the fight against its disease and the impossible love it dedicates to Elsa. With regard to these options, the filmmaker's objective seems clear: to focus attention on Mário, highlighting his existentialist artistic aspect and relegating his social aspect to the background.

However, perhaps this was precisely the desire of the director: to abandon themes close to the context of the time and explore the timelessness of art. Moreover, forgetting this neo-realist guideline took his film away from the censorship limitations he had suffered on previous occasions and won in philosophical debate. The past is Lisbon, coincides with Elsa and her loss; The present is in her village, coinciding with Elsa's memory and her metamorphosis in the chapel painting. The novel is also far from its deeply intimate and introspective dimension, conveyed by the heterodiegetic voice - which the filmmaker tried to translate by the voice off - the central dimension of the novel that can only be shown in the film, that is, becomes more descriptive. because if in the book we felt Mário inside, in the movie we see Mário from the outside. In fact, in the book, the writer describes Mário's view of his dead body, seeming to be written by the protagonist himself, although it is actually in the third person.

Goulart clarifies this issue and notes a submission of all that is narrated to the main Vergilian questions: the existential problematic and the artistic dimension of Man (1990, 227). As for the Vergilian text, with a strong inheritance from Malraux (Laso, 1989, p. 196), we do not forget that the writer had read *Psychologie de l'Art* before 1952 and its refounding in Les

voix du silence - Vergílio Ferreira himself confirms it. In *A Writer Introduces himself* - and, in this line, Mário has a final project, an ideal of existentialist clipping, of someone who lived on a pilgrimage journey without identity and is now found in this ultimate goal that is the Chapel. Mário is torn between the metaphysics of art, the physical dimension of the ruined chapel, the transcendent project of painting it, in an absolute limit situation that is his return to his native village to die. This physical space allows the confluence of past and present, of characters and spaces, memories and desires, building a metaphysical dimension of being and creating. In the novel, Vergílio Ferreira describes Mário's (meta) physical mission, in a segment marked by the consubstantiation in the visible matter of the distinct invisible and even unspeakable inner forces:

And it was here, between the forms of time and transfiguration, that Mário discovered, most visibly, what was radiant, legendary and nocturnal in his chapel. (...) An obscure force thus arose before Mário, the anointed painter of threat, ancient, elemental force, where the permanence of mystery, spaces and silence converged, the tenacious memory of innocence and confidence, the deaf voice of the impossible and of perfection, the peace that inhabited the dream, the desolation of the abandoned hours, the illumination of grace in the moments of the miracle, the vertigo, the serenity, the taste of the end and eternal... From the two stained glass windows would radiate to the inner recollection. , moons and stars blue, yellow, red, oblique stars of irregular rays, beaded in desperate angles, iris the space of the immemorial chant of prayer, reinventing the oscillation of an unreality of time. » (1975, p. 209-210)

The protagonist proves to be a Vergilian instrument for demonstrating the (meta) physical nature of Art, translated into the transcendence / immanence embodied in the Chapel. In this image of Heideggerian project space, leaving the village, living in the city and purifying return to the same village, Mário does not intend to rebuild a Chapel, but to build a contemplation of the mystery that is life, in a crystallization of the Absolute that is Art. , an artistic redemption, like other painters such as Matisse, Goya, Braque, Chagal, Léger or Lurçat. This is not a religious conversion. On the contrary, it seems a challenge to the divine when Elsa slowly emerges from the brush of Mário, a substitution of the divine for the human - a central line of the Vergilian novel - as the painter celebrates Art itself, the true Absolute and the divine by human choice. derived from the existentialist concept of "death" of God and which results in an identification of Art with the Sacred (seen in *Carta ao Futuro, Espaço do Invisível I and Evocação ao Meu Corpo*).

Mário, like other Vergilian heroes, is in constant demand, sees himself as a historical agent, but with a unique dimension in relation to religion. The novel does not show an image of

the desecrated man, but a return to an atmosphere of discovery and amazement at this space of the sacred, an attitude that results from the mediation of Art, the counterpoint of an existence and a world apart from a spirit of unity. primordial. Between myth, the religious and the symbolic, Art attempts to unveil the deepest and most intrinsic essence of religiosity (Laso, 1989. p. 193).

The Chapel allows a reunion with the sacred, which in the Village is confused with a conversion - an interpretation that is also mentioned in the film -, a return and a liberation, a triumph over the lurking death of the painter, a victorious "Cântico Final" of the man over the inexorable, in which Art is the agent of redemption. Man is also proudly contemplated, as is the picture of the rooster, painted by Mário, a symbol of resistance, rebellion against all limitations of life, and attachment to the continuation of that same life, for example, by Mário's desire. to have a child, an ideal denied by an Elsa who is a passing body, of a "miracle", of an instant, of an "apparition". After Elsa's disappearance, Mário decides to eternalize her. The novel becomes the scene of this dilemma between the physical and the metaphysical.

To overcome and resolve this dichotomy, Art is in Mário, the pure overcoming of (meta) physical antagonisms, because it allows, by creation, an attitude of emancipation of Man (Laso, 1989. p. 205). In this sense, the narrator is a fundamental piece for understanding the narrative web. In this novel, he establishes an almost metaphysical proximity to the protagonist, letting him spread the author's ideals, namely the value of the work of art. That is why, when Vergílio Ferreira states: "It is in the work of art that the invisible is particularly visible" (1993, p. 16), we also foresee Manuel Guimarães' desire to film this novel in order to translate the (meta) physical dimension. also because he, being a painter, had these same concerns within him.

In the novel, the pair Mário - Elsa is the matrix of many of Mário's reflections on Art, the main theme of the Vergilian text. In the film, the complex relationship boils down to a loving connection, in a clear decharacterization of the ideological relief of the characters. But the director's decision merely highlights the central consequence of adaptation: aesthetic reconfiguration.

Elsa is a woman's ideal. Beloved woman, woman who gives herself totally to her art, woman who brings life in intensity, but above all an ideal woman. The relationship between Mário and Elsa goes beyond the flashes of sensuality and reaches an erotic dimension that the author had already worked on in his essayistic texts and which performs a metamorphosis from the physical to the metaphysical, from the body to transcendence. Eroticism is a way of sharing with the Absolute, just as the relationship between Mário and Elsa is a contact between two expressions of that Absolute, translated into Art. The text reflects a reading of the erotic, elevated by a mystical and symbolic vein that transcends the superficial level of Eros and resizes it in a sublime way (Paiva, p. 155).

In fact, Elsa is becoming a volatile presence. Whenever she was physically present in the sequences of the film, the physical translation of Beauty, Art, the timeless lightness of gesture and love of Art, a millenary movement of praise for

Life and the miracle of be alive. In the movie, his physical presence slowly disappears, leaving only a deep image recorded in Mário, in memory and feeling. This process is triggered by the dancer herself

In the novel, Art assumes itself as an ideological axis. In Vergílio Ferreira, this problem feeds countless texts of his, because for the writer, it has a dimension of eternity and mystery. In the end, it is life itself and its mystery that are revealed in art, in a space of understanding and reading (s), of invisible borders, in which man is finally drawn (Sousa, 2003). Art for Vergílio Ferreira is a genuine way of being alive, a connection with metaphysics through physics, or in the words of Sousa (2003, p. 323): "Art is itself an appeal of Transcendence, a transcendence that Vergílio includes, however, in the absolute of immanence, since it is his appearance... ».

Painting to be alive, as Mário states in the novel. Paint to be aware. In fact, the *Cântico Final* awakens, in ultimate despair, in anguish of a questioning cry at death, the problematic of the end. The Chapel becomes a metaphysical symbol that condenses everything that man has in him in turmoil, an empty exercise of a godless liturgy, but in the awareness of the immanent experience of life - which eliminates any absolute need for transcendence - and Elsa exemplifies "a kind of ideal and imaginary transmutation of the lacerating set of problems for which, thus, in transcendent reason would be found a calming transparency, a totalizing purpose". (2003, p. 155).

Thus, in *Cântico Final*, Art is synonymous with overcoming. As we have seen, Mário paints the Chapel to overcome the inexorability of his physical death, his material condition and Elsa dances to celebrate the moment, the only certainty of the ephemerality of life. When dancing, the dancer awakens in Mário eternity, shaped by his winged figure gesture, and which the painter intends to capture on the canvas, materializing this miraculous moment of (meta) physical, vibrating and (in) corporeal glow. Elsa is the translation of the volatility and precarious feature of the dance. It is exhausted in the intense moment of body, and it passes with nothing of it being left. Mário makes Elsa eternal through Art. In the Chapel, she creates the Lady of the Night and keeps remembering the dancer, projecting her to immortality, in a mental combination of past, present and future.

That is the reason why in *Cântico Final*, Art truly is a cry for Eternity..

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