

## AUGUSTO DOS ANJOS: POETRY, PAIN AND A HEIGHTENED AWARENESS OF BEING

Roberto Pinheiro Machado\*

**RESUMO:** *este artigo propõe uma leitura intertextual entre a obra do poeta brasileiro Augusto dos Anjos e alguns textos selecionados da filosofia existencialista do século XX. O tema da dor como instância ontológica de manifestação do indivíduo e sua repercussão na praxis vital decorrente da perspectiva fenomenológica-existencialista aproxima o poeta brasileiro da obra de Jean-Paul Sartre. A noção do absurdo em Dos Anjos consubstancia a ideia da miséria da condição humano frente ao outro e corrobora com a percepção sartreana do nada como auto-reflexividade da consciência.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *poesia brasileira moderna – existencialismo – augusto dos anjos*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article attempts at an intertextual reading of Brazilian poet Augusto dos Anjos together with selected texts of twentieth-century existential philosophy. The theme of pain as an ontological ground of individual manifestation and its conformity with the vital praxis described in existential phenomenology corroborates the possibilities of intertextuality among the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and dos Anjos. The notion of the misery of human condition face to face with the other brings both writers together under the concept of nothingness as the self-reflexivity of consciousness.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Brazilian modern poetry – existencialismo – augusto dos anjos*

Brazilian poet Augusto dos Anjos lived a very short life. He published only one book, and by the end of his days his frail health had won him the nickname of “tísico.” The word refers to a sick person on the verge of dying. It is usually applied to patients of tuberculosis. But dos Anjos never really showed any of the actual symptoms of the various forms of TB available to him in Brazil’s early twentieth century, or at least not until the very end of his life, when he died of pneumonia. One could say it was his poetry, more than anything, more even than his frail body, which brought him the epithet of a moribund.

This is not so much because his poetry talked directly about death, however; but because it portrayed life as a form of death. In this sense, dos Anjos could very well be compared to Hölderlin, although while the latter would spell out the otherwise implicit coincidence of life and death in so many words as “Leben ist Tod, und Tod ist auch ein Leben” [life is death, and death is also a form of life] (Hölderlin, 1923, p. 27), dos Anjos would remain on the suggestive side, and bring this idea down to more veiled and indirect expression of contingency.

My goal in this essay is to talk of that contingency. I will attempt to demonstrate how dos Anjos’ *Weltanphaung* implies a flight from the common conception of life as opposed to death. In order to do that, I will point to how his poetry verges on a perception

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\* Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Professor Adjunto, robertopinheiromachado@live.com

of reality that inverts the usual perspective where consciousness is taken for granted as existing somewhat separately from the world and regarding it from an alleged vantage point. Instead of relying on the usual subjective approach to poetic expression, I will argue, dos Anjos brings poetic experience towards the viewpoint of pure being, leaning towards a perspective that instantiates the possibility of seeing life from the perspective of death, and from that of insinuating the poetic accessibility to a mind-independent reality.

The vantage point of Being taken by dos Anjos has caused a whole deal of confusion among his critics. Alexei Bueno, for instance, perceives the poet's insistence on the concrete aspects of existence as a form of unrestricted materialism. He writes that dos Anjos is

materialista, acreditando racionalmente em um evolucionismo panteísta onde só a generalidade das formas universais progredia e sobrevivia, o poeta era obrigado a conscientemente se tomar por um efêmero, aleatório e ínfimo acidente genético na grande cadeia das espécies, condenado sem apelação à desapareição total enquanto especificidade individual (BUENO, 1994, p. 25).

The adjective “materialist” could hardly do any justice to dos Anjos and his poetry, for in his worldview no materialism or spiritualism can be identified as concrete instances. A more rigorous approach to his work will reveal the expression of a total identity of life with Being that takes poetic experience to a realm that is beyond materialism or spiritualism and which comes forth as pure contingency. Bueno is right when he mentions that dos Anjos took himself for an arbitrary genetic accident that was doomed to disappear as an individual specificity. Nevertheless, such disappearance itself holds deeper philosophical implications of which Bueno seems not to be aware.

Let's begin with dos Anjos' approach to pain. As Elbio Spencer suggests,

A dor, no entender de Augusto, era a máxima motivação à fraternidade universal, porquanto ela exercendo seu império sobre a natureza, todos por ela eram tocados e por ela deviam se irmanar. Disso se tinha prova na própria mecânica natural do transformismo molecular, onde os seres integram o todo e pelo todo são integrados. A dor é eterna, e como tal, integra a própria vida. Eis a idéia angular do poeta (SPENCER, 1967, p. 183).

As the whole integrates beings in a molecular transformation from which pain ensues, pain appears as ontologically grounded in a totality that is for the most part nature itself. And as no organic beings really escape nature, dos Anjos writes:

Há uma força vencida nesse mundo!  
 Todo o organismo florestal profundo

É dor viva, trancada num disfarce... (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 201)

The notion that pain is inherent to the world and as such comprises an unavoidable element deeply entrenched in Being is here taken up by a poetic expression that perceives nature as the source and material of reality's undeniable absurdity. The ontological characteristic of pain, then, points to a realm prior to human life, where nature appears as a vanquished force that in all its vitality will never overcome the contradiction of being the very source of its own distress. From a broader perspective, we are face here with a cosmological vision that recognizes the contingency of Being as its inescapability from an outrageous misfortune that is not separable from itself.

Dos Anjos' recognition of the fundamental character of pain as inherent to all Being has a parallel in another Latin American poet. In *Cosmogonia*, Jorge Luis Borges takes the ontological grounds of pain to the foremost moment of the appearance of Being in a poetic rendering of the birth of the universe:

Ni tiniebla ni caos. La tiniebla  
 requiere ojos que ven, como el sonido  
 y el silencio requieren el oído,  
 y el espejo, la forma que lo puebla.  
 Ni el espacio ni el tiempo. Ni siquiera  
 una divinidad que premedita  
 el silencio anterior a la primera  
 noche del tiempo, que será infinita.  
 El gran río de Heráclito el Oscuro  
 su irrevocable curso no ha emprendido,  
 que del pasado fluye hacia el futuro,  
 que del olvido fluye hacia el olvido.  
 Algo que ya padece. Algo que implora.  
 Después la historia universal. Ahora. (BORGES, 1998, p. 14)

While Borges proceeds to an archeological account of pain as something that is prior to history, and that as such lies beneath the vital movement of all and every being, dos Anjos will take an existential view on this same element, and look at human life as an expression of this universal pain that Borgers renders as an indeterminate substratum that already suffers and implores before even time has dawn. Here we are required to point to Schopenhauer's influence in both dos Anjos and Borges. The fact that pain can never be completely expunged from Being points to something very similar to the irrationality of Schopenhauer's will to live. But instead of relying on Schopenhauer, I will look for a philosophical parallel to the expressions of dos Anjos and Borges in another instance where Being is perceive as inexorably linked to contingency.

In Sartre we find an instance where the same irrationality of Schopenhauer's will to

live appears embedded in a discussion of the original moment of human life that can serve us well in our attempt to elucidate the identity of life and death as the major underlying theme of the poetry we have at hand. In section II of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre talks of the upsurge of consciousness, and of how that upsurge cannot be rationally accounted for. In his own words,

it is as the nihilation of the In-itself that the For-itself arises in the world, and it is by this absolute event that the Past as such is constituted by this original, nihilating relation between the For-itself and the In-itself. What originally constitutes the being of the For-itself in this relation to a being which *is not* consciousness, which exists in the total night of identity, and which the For-itself is nevertheless obliged to be, outside and behind itself (SARTRE, 1972, p. 138).

As the for-itself is obliged to be, outside and behind itself, this very being which it attempts to negate, and which exists in the “total night of identity,” we are forced to conclude that the for-itself carries in itself this obscure, irrational, and for the most part unreliable sort of self-referential nucleus that is never other than itself. Sartre here, however, seems to miss the question of what exactly comprises what he perceives as the self-identity of the in-itself. If we agree with the aforementioned interpretation of Borge’s poetic suggestion of the inseparability of Being and pain, then we must qualify Sartre’s assertions to a view that accommodates distress as ontologically formative of the in-itself.

We are in need of a further phenomenological reduction to Sartre’s perception of the self-identity of the in-itself. If such obscure dimension of Being is identical with itself, and pain comprises its very ontological substratum, than the identity of such being must reside in its identity with pain itself. Our question here is how can the in-itself be identical with itself if pain is to be considered as part of it.

A thorough self-identity, understood as the concrete and unchanging state of that which is as it is, would have to imply a coherent and reliable form of stability. While instability necessarily implies potentiality, self-identity cannot be the characteristic of a being that is capable of changing. As such, the notion of in-itself’s self-identity must be rejected to accommodate its very possibility of becoming the for-itself. Such possibility, while entrenched in the in-itself’s ontological constitution as pain, must issue from pain itself. In other words, while pain implies separation, for in order to be experienced such pain must be an entity existing outside of that which experiences it, the pain that is ontologically grounded in the in-itself points to a movement that precludes the in-itself’s very self-identity. For pain comes not from stability: on the contrary, pain is movement and instability.

Sartre’s avowal of the flight of the for-itself towards the self-identity of the in-itself must then be reversed to that of the flight of the in-itself towards its own contradiction.

From such flight, the for-itself ensues. And, more importantly, such flight must be a flight from pain. As a flight from pain, the transformation of the in-itself in for-itself must be understood as a flight from instability, movement and contingency.

This initial contingency of Being must then be perceived as the very motive of the upsurge of consciousness and of human-life in general. What I will attempt to demonstrate in the next few pages, is that instead of a blunt materialism, the poetic rendering of this very contingency of Being and of its flight towards its own contradiction is what lies at heart of Augusto dos Anjos' poetry.

The absurdity of being's ontological groundedness in pain is suggested by dos Anjos through the expression of the most basic aspects of organic matter in its movement and contradiction. In "A um germen" the author proceeds to a poetic rendering of Being that brings forth contradiction as the core of all experience:

Começaste a existir, geléia crua,  
E hás de crescer, no teu silêncio, tanto  
Que, é de natural, ainda algum dia, o pranto  
Das tuas concreções plásmicas flua!

A água em conjugação com a terra nua,  
Vence o granito, deprimido-o... O espanto  
Convulsiona os espíritos, e, entanto,  
Teu desenvolvimento continua! (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 201)

Growth and tears ("crescer" and "pranto") appear as the inherent condition of this plasmic matter's movement that can be equated with life itself. The absurd resides in the fact that pain never leaves this continual development that goes on indefinitely. Convulsion and bewilderment appear as the natural result of spirit as it is confronted with the contingency in which it is grounded. Dos Anjos continues:

Antes, geléia humana, não progridas  
E em retrogradações indefinidas,  
Volvas à antiga inexistência calma!...

Antes o Nada, oh! Gérmen, que ainda haveres  
De atingir, como germen de outros seres,  
Ao supreme infortúnio de ser alma! (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 202)

Here nothingness appears as the final aim and desired condition of organic matter in its absurd and random development. Dos Anjos openly demands of Being the stop of its movement in order to arrive at a total rest that he understands cannot be other than nothingness itself. If non-existence can be the only solution to pain, nothingness, as

negation, appears both as the very expression of that denial and as the closest condition possible to the achievement of non-being.

Dos Anjos continual recurrence to scientific vocabulary hides then the approach to a deeper truth of being that is defined as organic matter in search for stability outside of itself. Negation then becomes the defining mode of human reality, and the upsurge of consciousness of which Sartre speaks in section II of *Being and Nothingness* appears as the very expression and result of that negation. While human existence is the ultimate expression of Being's search for stability, dos Anjos' alleged scientificism comprises the vision of an existential search grounded in the contingency of Being.

If the in-itself is pain because it is in constant flux, and if from the very attempt of putting an end to that flux the for-itself, or consciousness, ensues, individuality, as a dimension that is posterior to and grounded in the pure reflexivity of consciousness, can be regarded as equally determined by the universal contingency of Being/pain. The achievement of dos Anjos' poetry consists, thus, in accounting for the individual self as nothing more than a moment of that larger movement of Being. As negation issues from the very Being that is negated (for we consider human reality as belonging to the totality of Being), the "night of identity" from which the for-itself ensues appears as an important dimension of the individual self that can never be totally transcended. Dos Anjos, then, proceeds to rendering this basic axiomatic truth through a poetic effort that results in the expression of the destruction of the individual self. It is in this sense that in "Psicologia de um vencido" we perceive the human subject reduced to little more than its basic inherentedness to universal contingency:

Eu, filho do carbono e do amoníaco,  
 Monstro de escuridão e rutilância,  
 Sofro, desde a epigênese da infância,  
 A influência má dos signos do zodíaco.

Profundíssimamente hipocondríaco,  
 Este ambiente me causa repugnância...  
 Sobe-me à boca uma ânsia análoga à ânsia  
 Que se escapa da boca de um cardíaco.

Já o verme – este operário das ruínas –  
 Que o sangue podre das carnificinas  
 Come, e à vida em geral declara guerra,

Anda a espreitar meus olhos para roê-los  
 E há de deixar-me apenas os cabelos,  
 Na frialdade inorgânica da terra! (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 203).

Appearing in the sole volume published by the author during his lifetime called *Eu*, this poem is part of a larger inquiry on the untenability of the self. The very title of dos Anjos's book denote the search for an "I" that is hardly discernible from the totality of Being's plight in an existence determined by pain and unfulfillment. Here I will point to fact that the self is being denied the dignified existence it might have achieved in an otherwise simply materialistic world-view. Monstrosity, abjection and the images of the body in the state of putrefaction bring dos Anjos' poetic expression to a critique of the self that goes beyond the mere identification of the material nature of existence.

Monstrosity appears in the poem's second line as an adjectivation of the "I" that is brought forth through the first word of the piece. The aesthetic category of the grotesque sets itself in the poem as the function of an undesirable existence. The self is thus regarded as lack and deformity, and its presence is hardly discernible from that of a purely biological instance that is prone to decay. Abjection appears as a primordial sense of undesirability (Kristeva 81) in face of the inability of the self to come into existence completely: captured in the sheer contingency of biological upheaval, dos Anjos's "I" is virtually absent from the poem as an entity that would be capable of taking the reins of its own destiny.

The scientific vocabulary of dos Anjos emphasizes the grotesque in a naturalistic manner (Bruflat 780). Such naturalism discloses putrefaction as a recurrent theme of the self's captivity to the body as such. Thus, the self is translated into an entity that is form the most part untenable: the "I" of dos Anjos, while reduced to pure body, is portrayed as an insignificant moment in the malstrom of pure contingency.

The ontological nature of pain then plays the role of determining what being is, that is, the house of contingency's eternal attempt to surmount itself. As pain, as Being, makes Being want to depart from itself, the illusion of a secure place appears as love when beings are disclosed as moments of that eternal attempt. Love and pain thus are complementary as love is identified as the effort to achieve the unity that is precluded to beings from their ground in disunity and dispersion.

Sartre talks of love as the desire of the for-itself to take hold of the self-identity, construed as the body (flesh), of the other. The other would then be the threshold to the unity that is denied the for-itself because of its separation from itself. Here we would have to, again, qualify Sartre's assertions concerning love so that they could be accommodated to the perception of the contingency and instability of the in-itself as pain.

According this view, love would be less the attempt of the for-itself to achieve the concreteness of the other's flesh than its desire to achieve the stability and cessation of contingency and pain present in the other's nothingness (that is, the negation of itself). The aim of love appears thus as the taking hold of the other's freedom in a deeper sense than that acknowledged by Sartre. The other's consciousness, that is, its ultimate realm of freedom, is what the lover attempts to bring under his or her control. Sartre is right when he recognizes the attempt to operate on the other's freedom as the final goal of love. Nevertheless he comes short in perceiving that such attempt results from a desire for

nothingness, instead of issuing from what he avows as the alluring manifestation of self-identity in the other's flesh.

The flight from eternal pain is thus translated as love. As such flight is doomed to failure (for nothingness as such is unattainable) love appears as a useless enterprise that cannot but result in conflict. Aware of this reality, dos Anjos writes em "Estrofes sentidas,"

Eu sei que o amor enche o Universo todo  
E se prende dos poetas à guitarra  
Como o polipo que se agarra ao lodo  
E a ostra que às rochas eternas se agarra.

O amor reduz-nos a uniformes placas,  
Uniformiza todos os anelos  
E une organizações fortes e fracas  
Nos mesmos laços e nos mesmos elos. (DOS ANJOS, 1994 p. 475)

Here dos Anjos' poem portrays desire for unity as the fulcrum of love. Self-identity, understood now as the final and complete merging with the other, is intuited as pertaining to a larger, universal movement (a movement that "fills the whole Universe"). Thwarted by the absolute impossibility of achieving such unity that lies outside of being, however, the poet recognizes the ultimate meaninglessness of love:

Todo o ser que no mundo turbilhona  
Veja no Amor, à luz das minhas frases,  
Uma montanha que se desmorona,  
Estremecendo em suas próprias bases (ibid., p. 475).

Here nature and love bring forth again the organic character of Being's search for its own contradiction. Pain is also called into play to integrate the tripartite unity of nature/love/distress:

Dos meus sonhos o exército desfila  
E, à frente dele, eu vou cantando a nênia  
Do amor que eu tive e que se fez argila,  
Como Tirteu na guerra de Messênia!

Transponho assim toda a sombria escarpa  
Sinistro, como quem medita um crime...  
E quando a Dor me dói, tanjo minha harpa  
E a harpa saudosa a minha Dor exprime! (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 476).

The poet sings his pain as his love becomes petrified. However, the capitalized “Dor” points to a sort of pain that is larger than any soreness momentarily experienced by the individual. We are faced with an inescapable feeling that in spite of manifesting itself in individual instances belongs to the deeper structural layers of Being, and as such is never completely passive of being transcended.

Pain brings nothingness into the world. And as nothingness belongs primarily to the domain of the human, the female figure, in its unattainability, becomes the instantiation of Being’s failure to achieve the stability that lies in its own contradiction:

Nas frias antecâmaras do Nada  
 O fantasma da fêmea castigada,  
 Passa agora ao clarão da lua acesa  
 E é seu corpo expiatório, alvo e desnudo,  
 A síntese eucarística de tudo  
 Que não se realizou na Natureza! (DOS ANJOS, 1994, p. 319)

Somewhere very close to nothingness, but without ever entering its domain, the woman synthesizes all that is not realized in nature, namely, the encounter with the negative realm of pure cessation and tranquility. The disclosure of the plight inherent to the search for nothingness as the ultimate reality of Being is what characterizes dos Anjos’ poetry as pertaining to a heightened awareness of Being. Such awareness takes the stand point where Being is prior to mind, and where reality is taken for existing independent of a human witness that can account for it.

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