

Teo
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Texto enviado em

29.07.2020

aprovado em

29.09.2020

V. 10 - N. 21 - 2020

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Love's crossing through self-emptying language: Augustine of Hippo's *confessio* and Adélia Prado's mystical poetry

Travessia do amor pela linguagem do auto esvaziamento: a *confessio* de Agostinho de Hipona e a poesia mística de Adélia Prado

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Resumo

“Travessia” pode ser descrita como um deslocamento entre dois pontos, caracterizado por um ponto de partida, caminho e um ponto de chegada. Além da viagem geográfica externa, a travessia é uma metáfora do coração errante na via, uma jornada interior. Este trabalho aborda dois “barqueiros” que propõem a travessia da vida interior, o teólogo norte-africano Agostinho de Hipona e a poetisa brasileira Adélia Prado. Agostinho e Adélia Prado usam linguagem de auto esvaziamento, *confessio* e poesia mística, respectivamente, para expressar sua pobreza existencial. Enquanto Agostinho esmaga seu orgulho pela vulnerabilidade da confissão, Adélia Prado usa a linguagem poética como exercício espiritual para aniquilar seu ego. Essa linguagem de esvaziamento não é apenas um discurso informativo, mas performativo; é a linguagem que afirma finitude e vulnerabilidade, abrindo o eu a uma jornada de anseio por uma alteridade. O objetivo final de se humilhar na vulnerabilidade poética diante do Mistério é capturar o convite dinâmico do amor. A linguagem

confessional de Agostinho e a poesia de Adélia Prado promovem a passagem do egocentrismo para um centro relacional amoroso. Adélia Prado pode nos ajudar a ler Agostinho não apenas como o “Doutor da Graça”, mas também como “Doutor Humilitatis”, uma reception escurecida por séculos de discussões teológicas.

Palavras-chave: Travessia; Agostinho de Hipona; Adélia Prado; Humildade; Amor

Abstract

“Crossing” can be described as a displacement between two points, characterized by a starting point, a path and a point of arrival. In addition to the geographical, exterior voyage, crossing is a metaphor for the wandering heart *in via*, an inner journey. This work approaches two “boatmen” who propose the crossing of inner life, the 4th-5th century North-African theologian Augustine of Hippo and Brazilian poet Adélia Prado. Augustine and Adélia Prado use self-emptying language, confessio and mystic poetry respectively, to express their existential poverty. While Augustine crushes his pride through the vulnerability of confession, Adélia Prado uses poetic language as spiritual exercise to annihilate her ego. This self-emptying language is not only informative, but performative speech; it is the language that affirms finitude and vulnerability, opening the self to a journey of longing towards an alterity. The ultimate goal of humbling oneself in poetic vulnerability before the Mystery is to capture the dynamic invitation to love. Augustine’s confessional language and Adélia Prado’s poetry foster the passage from self-centeredness to a loving relational center. Adélia Prado can help us read Augustine not only as the doctor of Grace, but as “Doctor *Humilitatis*”, a reception clouded by centuries of theological discussion.

Keywords: Crossing; Augustine of Hippo; Adélia Prado; Humility; Love

INTRODUCTION: AUGUSTINE AND ADÉLIA PRADO PROPOSE THE CROSSING OF INNER LIFE THROUGH SELF-EMPTYING LANGUAGE

T

he concept of “crossing” can be described as a displacement between two points, which is characterized by a starting point, a path or a route and a point of arrival. Crossing, *traversée* in

French, *travessia* in Portuguese, is the action of traversing something, a movement from one place to the other, perhaps a body of water, a lake, river; or crossing land areas, such as deserts or forests. In addition to the geographical, exterior voyage, crossing is also a metaphor for the transformation of subjectivity, an inner journey. It is a metaphor of the wandering heart seeking its place, the path of an internal crossing.

Christoph Theobald (2006, p. 73) refers to the existential transformation that is made possible by intimacy with revelatory people, “boatmen” who propose the crossing of inner life. Leaving the undifferentiated crowd for a trajectory towards interiority, the space of singularity, these boatmen invite a passage, a crossing to the other side: they wish that others, whose path is traversed by them, can get to the bottom of the experience of revelation intended for them. They are people who trust in the mystery of existence and propose a new way of inhabiting reality.

This work approaches two writers as revelatory boatmen, firstly the 4th-5th century North-African theologian Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and secondly Brazilian poet Adélia Prado, born in 1935. Their road is an invitation, an opening to the transformation of one’s interior life from pride to humility in order to become relationally responsive to love. If Augustine materializes the relational opening towards transcendence through confession (*peccati, laudis*), confession of sin and praise, Adélia Prado uses existential emptying in the poetic writing experience in order to bring concreteness to her crossing. When weaving the threads of meaning, uniting texts with convictions, Augustine and Adélia Prado invoke in our common humanity an attention to interiority in contact with transcendence, an invitation for self-dispossession which becomes intimacy with the divine.

For Augustine of Hippo, a human being is called to a deeper contact with his/her interior life, and to be dazzled by the deepness of one’s inner world, “people go to admire lofty mountains, and huge breakers at sea, and crashing waterfalls, and vast stretches of ocean, and the dance of

the stars, but they leave themselves behind out of sight” (Conf. 10.8.15).¹ Augustine has been a model of the seeker, the embodiment of the *cor inquietum*, restlessly seeking to respond to God who placed his heart in a journey to find its proper transcendent destination.

In a likewise movement towards interiority, crossing (*travessia*) in Adélia Prado goes back to the idea of life as a valley of tears, *sertão*. Thrown in existence as if launched on a journey of suffering in a valley of tears, life overcomes tragedy by affirming a movement towards transcendence, the treasure, the center of meaning. According to Navarro (2009, p. 47-48), Prado describes her first book with the title *Bagagem*, evoking the image of being on journey transporting what is precious, carrying what is valuable, the pearls of her experience which she cannot abandon. In Adélia Prado’s reception of Augustine she calls him “a great lover” who experienced the limitations of human love and found rest and joy in emptying himself before the Mystery. Furthermore, she also adds that Augustine rediscovered himself as a creature, and by being God’s creation, the happiness of his heart is identified with bowing down before the Creator (PRADO, 1999, p.31-32). Adélia Prado seems to find in Augustine an inspiration for her own dispossession, for her own journey towards a spiritual poetry of humility, specially the movement of intentionally emptying one’s self towards a loving relational Other.

This article argues that Augustine of Hippo and Adélia Prado use self-emptying language, *confessio* and mystic poetry respectively, in order to express their option for existential poverty which is an invitation to humility in order to effect a crossing which ends in love. While Augustine crushes his pride through the vulnerable language of confession, Adélia Prado uses poetic language as spiritual exercise to annihilate her ego and invite readers to an alternative way of inhabiting ordinary life.

1. Concerning English translations of *Confessions*: citations are from Maria Boulding’s excellent translation in *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997.

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO'S CONFSSIONAL LANGUAGE

In order to comprehend the importance Augustine of Hippo's self-emptying language, *confessio*, one is called to retrieve his biography in order to realize the transformation effected after his conversion. Augustine, a former professional orator, became a convert well-aware of his long-living distorted relationship with language. His own pre-conversion life was bound by rhetorical manipulation, which often denied truthful, authentic, humble speech. Augustine's *Confessions* (397-401), a biographical account in which he is not the center of his own narrative, is a masterpiece in which vulnerable prayer is a response to his previous self-centered linguistic performance. As Augustine becomes a convert to Christianity in his thirties, he abandons his career as a professional rhetorician and embraces an alternative mode of communication, labeled as *confessio*. Through his confessional language of sin and praise (*peccati, laudis*), Saint Augustine expresses an intimate self-emptying through a heart-language in a dialogical I-thou relationship. Augustine's *Confessions*, written by a master of the Latin language, is no elaborate human discourse that expresses achievement. It is, instead, deliberate and purposeful selfless speech which portrays a vulnerable subject before a divine Thou.

In Augustine's *Confessions* language occupies an especially important function (BURTON, 2007, p.10). During the course of his former life, Augustine had built a reputation as a skillful rhetorician serving his ascending career at his self-interested pursuit. Even though Augustine's conversion marked a new stage in his communication, he remained a potent handler of words. After his conversion and ordination as a bishop, Augustine would become an unusual kind of orator. His new language had the specific purpose of bringing those around him to deny self-centered speech and embrace surrender, "I should withdraw the service of my tongue from the market of speechifying, so that young boys who were devoting their thoughts not to your law, not to your peace, but to lying follies and legal battles, should no longer buy from my mouth the weapons for

their frenzy” (Conf. 9.2.2). Augustine denies a self-centered inner life and stands as a beggar asking for grace to pray, “allow me to speak in your merciful presence” (Conf. 1.6.7). This turn entails that his conversion is not only a transformation of heart but also one of language, towards a humbler expression of one’s self as a response to the words given and gifted to him by God through Scripture.

Augustine’s previously self-centered marketed speech was swallowed by an innovative prayerful communication: confessional language. *Confessio*, therefore, articulated the materialization through words of a conversion from death to rebirth in an other-affirming expressiveness. Augustine found a mode of communication that highlighted his vulnerable self which arose against the cunning use of words of a previously self-centered man. It is through the language of humility and existential poverty that Augustine finds the suitable place for communication, for his conversion surrendered him to the words he did not express, but were gifted to him through an encounter with Scripture at a garden (Conf. 8.12.29). Previously regarded as imperfectly weak and to be avoided by the learned, Scripture effected in Augustine an inner revolution towards humility, “Scripture is a reality that grows with little children, but I disdained to be a child and in my high and mighty arrogance regarded myself as grown up” (Conf. 3.5.9).

Confessional language articulates an intricate connection between existential poverty and mercy, vulnerability and grace. It is not self-reliant expressiveness, but rather the suppliant heart panting for love that manifests both defenseless self-disclosure and other-centered worship. In this double movement of confessing one’s own sins (*peccati*) and voicing praise (*laudis*), the twofold confession of sin and praise announces the prominence of God that overpowered his misery. By recognizing sin, the confessant returns to the God who saves; the outcome is praise and gratitude. Augustine recalls his miseries in order to love God, for while remembering the falsity and bitterness of his past life, the presence of God recreates his life in blissful and serene sweetness (Conf. 2.1.1).

Augustine suggests that confession expresses the hope of finding oneself in a responsive relationship, not in our own miseries, but in a loving other-affirming humility that praises the creator God, “by confessing we lay bare your loving devotion. Our hope is that we may cease to be miserable in ourselves and may find our beatitude in you; for you have called us to be poor in spirit” (Conf. 11.1.1).

The language of the Psalms, the paradigm language of *confessio*, became a substitute, a counter-cultural discourse that altered his previous self-serving flattering communication. His new language was gifted to him rather than formulated by his linguistic abilities. Through the Psalms, Augustine found his most authentic voice, a rehabilitated language of a former addicted and fragmented orator. As it connects emotions, feelings, metaphors, and lament under an other-centered worldview, Augustine was being displaced from an egocentric position and supplanted by humble speech. This linguistic movement towards heteronomy and dependency involved the rejection of his earlier pride and the embrace of humility in order to convey praise to a benign Creator universe. Augustine has his discourse converted by the incarnate Word who humbled himself and spoke through the Scriptures. Of particular importance is the voice of Christ revealed through the Psalms, the prayer book of the faithful. The psalms turned out to be the key manner of verbal expression through which the bishop of Hippo learned to express his own voice, an alternative discourse that altered his prideful communication, “how loudly I began to cry out to you in those psalms, how I was inflamed by them with love for you and fired to recite them to the whole world, were I able, as a remedy against human pride!” (Conf. 9.4.8).

Grace leads Augustine into the emptying of self in order to receive his renewed being in a loving relation, a journey from self-absorption to responsive relationality. Confessional language deliberately empties one’s self to the lover in order to return to its proper place. By finding its location in God, his *cor inquietum* finds rest. By surrendering, the self seemingly loses itself; however, loving humility is a movement that, paradoxically,

brings it to life anew, to be renewed in the other. Augustine's Confessions can be properly understood by embracing the mystery which is paradoxical, the passage of losing one's life in the other to find it resurrected by the power of been found in love. The mode of expressing this loving transformation is in a prayerful communication, in which love is transformed into praise, "Let me love, Lord, and give thanks to you and confess your name" (Conf. 2.7.15). Through confession, a language that does not merely describe transformation but effects it, Augustine crosses from sin to praise, from pride to humility.

Augustine's threefold crossing

According to Peter Brown (2000, p.163), Confessions is the manifesto of the inner world, a narrative of affections, a story of Augustine's heart. It is, therefore, the crossing of his inner life, a conversion towards the love of God. This crossing is characterized by three dynamics: a human is a finite being marked by a desire for transcendence (existential), by the action of God in converting him to himself (theological) and by a self-emptying towards another (relational-confessional).

The first dimension of Augustine's inner crossing is an existential one, expressed by a dramatic anthropology of infinite desire. According to Augustine, human nature carries an impulse that makes one to aspire for transcendence. As Johannes Brachtendorf observes (2008, p. 42), human beings have not lost the desire for happiness, but the explicit knowledge of well-being that fulfills that desire. The true meaning of life, therefore, is mysterious and hidden from the external eyes. In addition to not understanding the secrets of his inner capacity and ignoring his transcendent destiny despite wanting it, the human being has a divided will to pursue the highest good when it is recognized. Helplessly dependent upon grace, Augustine's dramatic anthropology highlights the search for an unseen yet present God in the heart.

The trademark of Augustinian spirituality is a heart on a journey

(MARTIN, 2003, p.41). This restless heart directs a human being to cling to different creatures in search for affection and meaning, but if he seeks it outwardly, one remains outside truth. In his own journey, Augustine describes how the earthly goods became sterile suffering, leaving him in exhaustion and not fulfilling his aspirations, "I continued to wander far from you and sowed more and more sterile seeds to my own grief, abased my pride and wearied by my restlessness (Conf. 2.2.2). Since true longing is related to the pursuit of God, by desiring lower things Augustine is obliged to renewed its search, only to discover the insufficiency of his misguided affections. As Brachtendorf (2008, p. 42) suggests, by describing the story of his wandering life, Augustine considers himself blind to the highest good and unable to see beyond his pleasure and self-centered honor, seeking happiness in transient things; this was an empty search until his eyes were opened and he learned to love God.

Augustinian anthropology presents the human being marked by finitude and desire to connect with his transcendent destiny. As Pieretti (1998, p. 349) suggests, Confessions reaffirm an ontological deficiency penetrated by a change in perfection and completeness. The man that Augustine seeks to meet is not abstract, generic and disincarnated, but a desirable human in a historical and existential reality who seeks a continuous improvement of his experience. Being restless, pursuing transcendence, being *in via*, is not a problem per se. It is actually a movement originated by God himself that, as Dupont and Walraet (2015, p. 53) argue,

It is a God created restlessness that keeps us from abandoning the path that we need to take. This restlessness keeps us from losing sight of our Destination. It causes us to move on from our self-created rest. It is actually a positive restlessness. This restlessness is fed, according to Augustine, through the consciousness of our insignificance (a part of your creation) our mortality, and our sinfulness. The rest that we hope to find in God means two things: the abolishment of our moral shortcomings or sinfulness, and the abolishment of our mortality.

The second dimension of Augustine's inner crossing is a theological

one, the action of God in transforming, converting and directing the itinerary of the human heart. The term conversion or *convertere* in the classic Latin carries the sense of a change in religion or philosophical doctrine or a change in behavior. In Augustine, conversion means orientation of the soul towards the divine, indicating the act of returning to God, not by philosophical reflection, but by imitating Christ's humility (OROZ RETA, 2009, p. 239, 241). Augustine reinforces the divine initiative in calling him to himself: if there was a step in the son towards the return home, a loving voice previously attracted and sought him. Augustine recounts his trajectory through the lens of the parable of the prodigal son of the Gospel of Luke, "I took care that this excellent part of my substance should be under my own control, and I did not guard my strength by approaching you, but left you and set out for a distant land to squander it there on the quest for meretricious gratifications" (Conf. 4.16.30).

If the conversion has a state of withdrawal, an intermediate period of crisis and a return to order and unity, in Augustine's *Confessions* conversion establishes a return based on the intervention of God, as a gift and mystery of grace. The bishop of Hippo recognizes that the essence of conversion is the divine gift, a fundamental decision of God, based in divine interference and not the human will. Augustine alludes to the call of grace as the fundamental element of conversion, and the priority of grace will resonate as a motto of his life and theology. Later in his life, in order to protect orthodoxy during the debate with Pelagius, who denied original sin and the solidarity of human race with Adam, Augustine grew in the realization that the grace of Christ is absolutely necessary. In this second dimension of Augustine's crossing, the priority is not given to human works and its merits, but by the free gift of grace, as in "on your exceedingly great mercy rests all my hope. Give what you command, and then command whatever you will. You order us to practice continence. A certain writer tells us, I knew that no one can be continent except by God's gift, and that it is already a mark of wisdom to recognize whose gift this is (Conf. 10.29.40).

The third dimension of Augustine's inner crossing is relational-confessional. Augustine's biography is not just an objective retelling of facts, but a dialogue which includes an intentional description of a relational proposal, a human position of humility and emptying in the relationship with the Creator. As a consequence, relationship of humility and vulnerability is established. Augustine's confessional language is an antidote against individualism, self-centered autonomy, moving humanity to recognizing its vulnerability in order to embrace a responsive and humble relationality.

Augustine materializes the dependent and vulnerable relational openness through a double confessional movement, including two main meanings: a confession of his misery and sins and the complementary confession of praise to the greatness of God. If confession is taken as merely admitting sins, confession is incomplete and bound to failure: true confession is self-emptying which requires a matching responsive act towards praising the kindness received. By becoming aware of his sin, or by confessing to turn to God who liberates, and by receiving greater salvation, the resulting movement is praise and thanksgiving. The goal is not to overburden the penitent, but freeing him. By recognizing the depth of his sin followed by the greatness of the liberating work, Augustine makes his life a song of praise.

ADÉLIA PRADO'S MYSTICAL POETRY

I refuse to believe that people invented languages
 It's the Spirit driving me
 Wanting to be adored
 (Prado, 2013, *The birth of the poem*).²

In 1976, notable poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade announced that Saint Francis was dictating poems to a housewife in the countryside of Minas Gerais state, in the city of Divinópolis. Ever since, Adélia Prado

2. Recuso-me a acreditar que homens inventam as línguas, é o Espírito quem me impele, quer ser adorado (*O nascimento do poema*).

has been praised as one of Brazil's foremost poets. Although Adélia Prado has been an acclaimed poet, nevertheless, she intentionally deflects praise in order to empty herself and fall into "absolute poverty before the Mystery" (PRADO, 1999, p. 26). Adélia Prado, to whom poetry and spirituality are experiences born from the same transcendent root, writes from the viewpoint of existential poverty, that of a frail creature that in ordinary life embraces self-emptying before the divine. By refusing to make one's own view of the world an absolute one, a human being opens itself up to a journey of dispossessing and rediscovery of meaning, accepting the ordinariness of the quotidian experiences and through it finding traces of transcendence. Adélia Prado embodies this existential movement through writing poetry, giving a material expression to an immaterial inner voyage.

An important influence to understand the existential dimension of interior crossing in Adélia Prado is her reading of João Guimarães Rosa, in his work *Grande Sertão Veredas*. *Travessia* is the last word of this work, as life is understood as crossing through an arid and waterless place, sertão. As Navarro (2009, p. 31) points out, in both texts, by Guimarães Rosa and Adélia Prado, there are convergences in linking a geographical crossing to an inner journey in which self-knowledge emerges. Adélia Prado's definition of poetry is the revelation of reality, an opening to what is real, an eye-opening to a condition which includes suffering. Poetry awakens humanity to the realization that life is not only a calm crossing with some storm on the way, but rather it is a constant struggle in a valley of tears. Life is worth sobbing, but human words through art and poetry are an effort to find transcendence in the midst of absence, to overcome limitations by finding meaning in ordinary things.

For Adélia Prado (1999, p. 28), the poetic and mystical experiences are born from a common origin, coming from the same source and directed to transcendence as banks of the same river. The language of the poem and the language of mysticism are purely expressive languages, connected to an element of transcendence that is constitutionally

religious (PRADO, 1999, p. 27-29). Poetry has a center of meaning that surrounds the beauty of its form, but also points beyond itself, as a sign and evidence of the “beauty so old and so new” as Augustine pointed out, human beings insist on loving late (Conf. 10.27.38). As Prado points out, transcendence inhabits the concreteness of a poem, “when I have an experience of poetic nature, it asks for a tangible body, to be guarded and experienced by myself again, or by the other: concreteness is the poem. And poetry, in this case, is pure expression, it will not connote the experience, it will not denote, it expresses experience and that’s it. It is religious and again it escapes me, it conveys an order and beauty that transcends me and that is constantly beyond” (PRADO, 1999, p. 19). A poetic expression carrying order and beauty in the midst of restricted horizons points that poetry is a servant of hope, as in the poem *Impressionista*,

On a certain occasion,
my father painted the whole house
bright orange.
For a long time we lived in a house,
as he said,
constantly dawning.
(PRADO, *Impressionista*, my translation).³

There is also a theological logic for Adélia Prado’s poetry, that of an interdependence between the material and the spiritual, through a poetic comprehension of the doctrine of incarnation. As God became flesh, materializing the divine in human corporeal form, an epiphany of transcendence inhabits a human body and its immanence. And that realization is not only a doctrinal statement but the very essence of poetic expressiveness. As Alex Villas Boas argues (2017, p. 285), Prado’s poetry is the embodiment of beauty in the world, and as such an epiphany of God for Christ’s incarnation is the “maximum of poetry possible”. Christ is the incarnation of meaning despite the absurdity of existence. The Word is the poetry that awakens reality to the Mystery of God, for the beauty of me-

3. Uma ocasião, meu pai pintou a casa toda de alaranjado brilhante. Por muito tempo moramos numa casa, como ele mesmo dizia, constantemente amanhecendo (*Impressionista*).

aning that is already present, but hidden. Insofar as mystical experience and the poetic expression coincide, two banks of the same river, poetry is itself a manifestation that seeks to grasp the embodiment transcendence in reality. Adélia Prado often expresses her passion for the incarnation,

Who do I love, after all?
 Was I seduced by the Son of Man –
 And now confuse stingy you,
 Conceited you,
 With the One who wants me with him
 Moaning on his bed, his cross?
 The European said he was stunned by how much sun we waste here.
 Thank you, I replied, embarrassed by Carnaval,
 Afro-Brazilian drumming, my own extravagant hips.
 Is Jesus Bulgarian? Afghani? Dutch?
 A Brazilian He's not. He's way foreign,
 With his naked, perforated body,
 Begging for affection, just as I do.
 (PRADO, 2013, Two o' Clock in the Afternoon in Brazil).⁴

Adélia Prado's poetic language is also an embracing of her condition as a creature, of existential poverty before another, acknowledging to be standing before someone infinitely greater than her: "It is an emptying, a humility before the Mystery; It is not my head tool. The only thing I think it is necessary to do, and this is not my invention either, it is a counsel of the mystics, it is you to strip yourself and fall into absolute poverty, a poverty before the Mystery." (PRADO, 1999, 26). Adélia Prado's poetry intentionally uses a language of responsive self-emptying in order to affirm an anthropological condition of being a sinner that annihilates her pride and embraces the death of the ego. As she suggests, "one of

4. A quem amo enfim?

Acaso fui seduzida pelo Filho do Homem
 e confundo você, mesquinho,
 e confundo você, vaidoso,
 com o que me quer com ele
 gemendo na sua cama de cruz?

O europeu diz-se aturdido com o desperdício de sol.

Obrigada, respondo, com vergonha de carnaval,
 de batuques, me meus quadris excessivos.

Jesus é Búlgaro? Afegão? Holandês de colônia?

Brasileiro não é. Estranhíssimo, sim,

com seu corpo desnudo e perfurado, mendigando carinho, igual ao meu (*Duas horas da tarde no Brasil*).

God's greatest gifts to us is the ability to perceive sin. That's what salvation is. It is precisely through this work of annihilating my pride that I understand the nature of the human condition. Otherwise, I would have an inflated ego and I would confuse myself with God and they'd send me away to an asylum" (PRADO, 2000, p. 67). For Adélia Prado, as it is with Augustine, since humanity is prone to be tempted by pride and struggles to accept reality as it is, one materializes its most authentic position by humbling oneself, "strip yourself and fall into absolute poverty before the Mystery."

As a creature before her Creator, Adélia Prado suggests that rest is found in accepting one's state of a dependent and yet desiring creature. It is in weakness, embracing meaning within constraints, in everyday experience, that Adélia Prado materializes poetry as her way towards the reality of incarnation-salvation, or the poetic path of incarnating her love for Christ. In a similar fashion to Augustine's *cor inquietum*, Adélia Prado's writing proposes a humble responsive relationality that recognizes oneself as creature that remains longing and begging before Christ,

Neither sea nor political storm
 Nor ecological disaster
 Could keep me from Jonathan.
 Twenty winters would not be enough
 To make his image fade.
 Morning, noon, night,
 Like diamond
 My love perfects itself, indestructible.
 I sigh for him.
 Getting married, having children-
 All just pretense, diversion,
 A human way to give me rest.
 There are days when all I want is to avenge myself,
 Blurting curse words: damn, damn,
 But it's myself I damn,
 Since this love lives inside me
 And maybe it's only God playing the mime.
 I want to see Jonathan
 just as fervently
 as I want to kneel down and worship
 and belt out the "Panis Angelicus."

I've been singing since childhood.
 Since childhood I've desired and still desire
 the presence that would silence me forever.
 While other girls danced, I stood still, wanting,
 I lived on wanting.
 Pomegranate liqueur,
 invisible blood pulsing in the presence Most Holy.
 Lustly, I sing out:
 Jonathan is Jesus
 (PRADO, 2013, *The Sacrifice*).⁵

As Maria Clara Bingemer points out (2015, p. 255), in Adélia Prado's poetry there is an intimate connection between God and poetry, where one reveals the other, a poetic turn driven by a loving and erotic dynamic in which partners are carried by the love that has them and for which they

5. Não tem mar, nem transtorno político,
 nem desgraça ecológica
 que me afaste de Jonathan.
 Vinte invernos não bastaram
 pra esmaecer sua imagem.
 Manhã, noite, meio-dia,
 como um diamante,
 meu amor se perfaz, indestrutível.
 Eu suspiro por ele.
 Casar, ter filhos,
 foi tudo só um disfarce, recreio,
 um modo humano de me dar repouso.
 Dias há em que meu desejo é vingar-me,
 proferir impropérios: maldito, maldito.
 Mas é a mim que maldigo,
 pois vive dentro de mim
 e talvez seja Deus fazendo pantomimas.
 Quero ver Jonathan
 e com o mesmo forte desejo
 quero adorar, prostrar-me,
 cantar com alta voz *Panis Angelicus*.
 Desde a juventude canto.
 Desde a juventude desejo e desejo
 a presença que para sempre me cale.
 As outras meninas bailavam,
 eu estacava querendo
 e só de querer vivi.
 Licor de romãs,
 Sangue invisível pulsando na presença Santíssima.
 Eu canto muito alto:
 Jonathan é Jesus (*O Sacrifício*).

are taken.⁶ Furthermore, the radicality of the divine incarnation and beauty of God effects a recovery of the bodily experience. Her positive and erotic appropriation of the body, effecting a cultural change that subverts the Platonic soul makes explicit the imagery of the incarnation as the possibility of recovering bodily desire rather than effecting its denial. Having being raised in the first-half of 20th century countryside of Minas Gerais, Adélia was raised in a repressive Catholicism. But she is a woman that rediscovers a passion for God which includes her erotic desire rather than denies it. In Adelia's poetry the body of the poem is an exercise of response to Christ's incarnation, in the interplay between the material and the transcendent, which redeems ordinary simple and everyday life becomes a privileged place to recognize and adhere to transcendence from a point of view of existential poverty.

IMPLICATIONS OF DIALOGUE: SELF-EMPTYING FOR LOVE'S CROSSING

What does a contemporary mystic poet from the countryside of Minas Gerais, Adélia Prado, has in common with a 4th-5th century North-African theologian, Augustine of Hippo? Primarily, Adélia Prado and Augustine write from a poetic responsive humility in order to effect a *reductio*, a kind of existential *kenosis*, self-emptying to recover meaning and hope in the midst of existential poverty. Since Augustine and Adélia Prado have been compared to two boatmen that invite a passage, a trajectory towards interiority, this paper will highlight four implications of this self-emptying language that express this inner crossing.

Firstly, their language effects an inner crossing for it not only in-

6. Maria Clara Bingemer puts it this way, "Deus e a poesia se confundem e um é o nome da outra e a outra revela o nome do Um. Falar de um é falar da outra e vice-versa. E este giro poético é comandado por uma dinâmica erótica e amorosa na qual os parceiros são carregados pelo amor que os possui e pelo qual são tomados". *Teologia e Literatura: afinidades e segredos compartilhados* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2015), 255.

formative, but primarily performative. Augustine's Confessions can be described as a performative speech act that opens the self to transcendence. The sacrificial and vulnerable response to God's love catalyzes the transformation in his inner life. His language was received through Scripture rather than invented; he did not make it, for *confessio* itself was "making him", generating an effect upon his heart. Likewise, Adélia Prado's poetic language has also been described as performative. It is a kind of spiritual exercise that produces meaning even as one recognizes that the beauty of life is not self-evident to the exterior eyes. The words give new significance to the ordinary, bringing to reality the pearl that is beyond the surface. Poetry is an epiphany that enters the mystery of Easter, embracing the promises of a God that announces his communion and joy amidst the valley of tears. As Villas Boas puts it, "this is how poetry communicates salvation, because it is performative, involving the affections and structuring them in the poetic exercise so that faith is not mere conceptual or imaginary cultural adhesion, but an epiphany of the presence of God in his beauty of love unconditionally (VILLAS BOAS, 2017, p. 289).

Secondly, the language that affirms finitude, vulnerability and humility opens the self to a journey of longing towards an alterity. Adélia Prado's poems are done in a profound consciousness of the need to reduce the ego and embrace *humilitas*, for an individualistic being is a monad that does not move outside itself, towards another. Since vulnerability is necessary to keep a relational movement, denying self-sufficiency is not against finding meaning, but precisely its condition. Adélia Prado suggests that orphanhood is an intrinsic condition of being human, a vulnerability that leads us to seek for answers beyond ourselves, "the thing that mostly brings us rest is being a creature, that's why we dearly miss father and mother" (PRADO, 1999, 31). Adélia's portrayal of original orphanhood resembles Augustine's, and even more by affirming that the condition of being a creature corresponds to the heart's rest. Augustinian anthropology presents the human being marked by finitude

and eager to connect with the heart's transcendent destiny, "you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (Conf. 1.1.1).

Augustine, previously living in a self-centered way, recognizes himself as a dependent creature before his loving God, "allow me to speak, though I am but dust and ashes, allow me to speak in your merciful presence" (Conf. 1.6.7). That consciousness is very present not only in Augustine's *Confessions* but also Adélia Prado's writings. Both affirm an ontological insufficiency permeated by a demand for wholeness. If Augustine materializes the relational opening towards transcendence through a recognition of one's mortality and frailty, Adélia Prado uses the existential emptying in the poetic experience to give body to her *travessia*,

Dear God,
don't punish me for saying
my life was so lovely!
we're human,
our verbs have tenses,
they're not like Yours,
eternal.
(PRADO, 2013, *Woman at Nightfall*).⁷

Thirdly, the ultimate goal of humbling oneself in poetic vulnerability before the Mystery is to capture the dynamic invitation to love. Both Augustine's confessional language and Adélia Prado's poetry foster the passage from self-centered inner life to a loving relational center. Augustine and Adélia Prado invoke to a scattered and inattentive contemporary generation a consideration to interiority in contact with transcendence in order to call them to a center of intimacy and belonging.

7. Ó Deus,
não me castigue se falo
minha vida foi tão bonita!
Somos humanos,
nossos verbos têm tempos,
não são como o Vosso,
eterno (Mulher ao cair da tarde).

God, who inhabits the heart's deepest core, *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo* (*Conf.* 3.6.11), is himself the unitive force of love seeking to be adored. For Augustine, for love is the goal, the dynamism (desire that drives us) and the essence of interior life. He uses the idea of the "weight of love" to describe this movement, which moves people to their proper end and makes them leave self-centeredness. The weight of love carries us upwards, "my weight is my love, and wherever I am carried, it is this weight that carries me. Your Gift sets us afire and we are borne upward; we catch his flame and up we go. In our hearts we climb those upward paths, singing the songs of ascent" (*Conf.* 13.9.10). By moving restless hearts upwards, like fire, it is weight that brings us to our destiny as responsive creatures to the call of grace. In her poem *No céu*, Adélia Prado points out her Christian hope: in the end, the militant, penitent and triumphant, *ecclesia militans, poenitens, triumphans* will be only lovers (PRADO, 2017, 366).

Fourthly, speaking from the margins, as a spiritual writer from the global south rather than an academic theologian, Adélia Prado can help us read Augustine not only as the "Doctor of Grace", but as "Doctor Humilitatis". Humility has been an essential Augustinian trait, at the root of his *confessio*. Due to his importance in modern theological debates, Augustine has been given the title doctor of grace. Can centuries of reception shift the attention from Augustine's essential core? Posthumous debates can even take "Augustine" to places he would not go himself. Simon Icard (2017, p.196) has argued that the title "Doctor of Grace" is a later reading on Augustine and a modern invention, as the outcome of a process of hierarchization and specialization.⁸ Since this reception is partial, Augustine could be better recovered as the doctor of modesty rather than the doctor of grace. Humility is medicine against pride, and God is the doctor who transforms the patient's heart through divine grace. Grace

8. In Simon Icard's words, "l'invention du titre *doctor gratiæ* est la synthèse d'un double mouvement de hiérarchisation et de spécialisation, qui accorde une place particulière à Augustin dans le renouveau patristique à l'époque moderne." In "Augustin, docteur de la grâce: histoire d'un titre," *Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques* 63, no. 1 (2017): 196.

does not belong to Augustine; it is rather ascribed to Christ. Augustine is the patient; the healing grace of the doctor effects his transformation. Augustine himself would probably have rejected the title “Doctor of Grace”, but could have accepted to be labelled a man seeking to model humility. Through Adélia Prado’s appreciation of Augustine and her model of poetic self-emptying, she can foster a deeper comprehension to the spirit of humility in Augustine. This Augustinian humility has been captured by the poem *Bendito*, one of Adélia Prado’s poems that bears a resemblance to Augustine’s confessional language with its double movement of *peccati* and *laudis*. She expresses her confession of sin and praise in vulnerability and voices it brilliantly in contemporary fashion, as if bringing Augustine’s voice anew,

Praised be God my Lord.
 Because my heart is cut in the blade
 But I smile in the mirror
 In the light of unexpected things he is promised;
 Because I’m disgraced
 as a man touched to the gallows,
 But I remember one night in the country,
 The moonlight on vegetables and a cricket
 My shadow on the wall.
 May you be praised because I want to sin
 against the pleasant place of the dead,
 To violate the tombs with the scratch of the nails,
 But I see your head hanging
 and I hear the rooster crow
 Three times to my rescue.
 Praised be God for life is horrible,
 Because more is the time that I spend
 Gathering spoils- old at the end of a war like a goat -
 But I clean the eyes and the mucus of my nose
 for a flowerbed.
 May you be praised, because I want to die, but I’m afraid
 And I insist on waiting for the promised one.
 Once when I was a boy
 I opened the door at night
 The garden was white with moonlight
 And I believed, without any suffering.

May you be praised!
(PRADO, *Bendito*, my translation).⁹

CONCLUSION

Adélia Prado and Augustine of Hippo dwell the movement of intentionally emptying oneself in order to move towards a loving relational Other. Their language of existential poverty proposes a crossing towards love. Augustine established a mode of communication that rejoiced and praised his Lord's name (*Conf.* 9.4.12), that arose against a manipulative use of words. Augustine's language, in the spirit of *humilitas*, combats his pride through the vulnerability of confession. Adélia Prado practices spiritual exercise through poetic language to overpower her pride; by doing so, her valley of tears, her *travessia* (crossing) receives new meaning, conveying a renewed way to inhabit ordinary life.

As a result of this common self-emptying language, this article has

9. Louvado sejas Deus meu Senhor,
porque o meu coração está cortado a lâmina,
mas sorrio no espelho ao que,
à revelia de tudo, se promete.
Porque sou desgraçado
como um homem tangido para a força,
mas me lembro de uma noite na roça,
o luar nos legumes e um grilo,
minha sombra na parede.
Louvado sejas, porque eu quero pecar
contra o afinal sítio apazível dos mortos,
violiar as tumbas com o arranhão das unhas,
mas vejo Tua cabeça pendida
e escuto o galo cantar
três vezes em meu socorro.
Louvado sejas, porque a vida é horrível,
porque mais é o tempo que eu passo recolhendo os
despojos,
— velho ao fim da guerra com uma cabra —
mas limpo os olhos e o muco do meu nariz,
por um canteiro de grama.
Louvado sejas porque eu quero morrer
mas tenho medo e insisto em esperar o prometido.
Uma vez, quando eu era menino, abri a porta de noite,
a horta estava branca de luar
e acreditei sem nenhum sofrimento.
Louvado sejas! (*Bendito*)

discussed four main implications. Firstly, this self-emptying language is not only informative, but performative speech; secondly, it is the language that affirms finitude and vulnerability, opening the self to a journey of longing towards an alterity. Thirdly, that goal of humbling oneself in poetic vulnerability before the Mystery is to capture the dynamic invitation to love, a passage from self-centeredness to a loving relational center. Fourthly, Adélia Prado can help us read Augustine not only as the doctor of Grace, but as “Doctor *Humilitatis*”, a reception clouded by centuries of theological discussion.

As Adélia Prado suggests, she is inviting her readers to open their eyes to true humility, to refuse having oneself as the center of one’s own life. This “void” creates the space for listening, for a deeper connection to the Mystery,

I believe that the movement is about self-emptying from ideologies, philosophies, doctrines and putting oneself before the Mystery. This is what I call opening the eyes with true humility. In this case, I think that, if I’m not mistaken, is synonymous with the evangelical advice on poverty of spirit. The real poor is the one who refuses an absolute interpretation of the world having the self as reference. So, when I get rid of my own opinion, my vision, that emptiness is the great “place” of mystics. Every mystic preaches the void: “I am going to the desert; I am going to retreat”; I will do this to place myself in a listening attitude. I think it is listening that allows me to connect in the Mystery (PRADO, 1999, p. 26).¹⁰

10. “Eu acredito que o movimento é de despojamento de ideologias, de filosofias, de doutrinas e se colocar diante do Mistério. É isso que eu chamo de abrir os olhos com uma humildade verdadeira. Nesse caso, eu acho que isso, se não estou enganada, é sinônimo do conselho evangélico da pobreza de espírito. O pobre verdadeiro é o que recusa uma interpretação absoluta do mundo a partir de si mesmo. Então, quando eu me despojo da minha própria opinião, da minha visão, esse vazio é o grande “lugar” da mística. Todo místico prega o vazio: “eu vou pro deserto, vou fazer retiro”; vou fazer isso para me colocar numa atitude de escuta. Eu acho que é a escuta que me permite a conexão no Mistério”.

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