



## JÚLIA CORTINES, UNDEAD

Henrique Carvalho Pereira

Brown University

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to closely examine the poetry of Maria Júlia Cortines Laxe, or simply Júlia Cortines (Rio Bonito, December 12, 1868 — Rio de Janeiro, 1948) as an instance in which language and consciousness develop into poetry. I argue that this development overlaps and at times identifies with the development of the mind into philosophy, but turns away from it at key points, becoming distinctively poetic. Most of the very few serious commentators of Cortines's work have acknowledged the proximity of her poetry to philosophical thought, but have failed to demonstrate of what this proximity consists and what its unique shape is. What kind of philosophical thought Cortines's poetry comes closest to and why is her language particularly poetic is what I intend to disclose throughout this reading.

**KEYWORDS:** Poetic Language; Philosophy; Poetry; Júlia Cortines; Consciousness.

**RESUMO:** O propósito deste ensaio é examinar de perto a poesia de Maria Júlia Cortines Laxe, ou simplesmente Júlia Cortines (Rio Bonito, 12 de dezembro de 1868 — Rio de Janeiro, 1948) enquanto instância em que uma linguagem e consciência se desenvolvem na forma de poesia. Meu argumento é que esse desenvolvimento coincide com o desenvolvimento filosófico da mente, mas afasta-se dele em pontos chave, tornando-se distintamente poético. A maioria dos poucos comentadores da obra de Cortines já reconheceu a proximidade de sua poesia ao pensamento filosófico, mas não logrou demonstrar no que ela consiste e qual seu formato único. De que tipo de pensamento filosófico a poesia de Cortines se aproxima e por que sua linguagem é particularmente poética é o que pretendo revelar ao longo desta leitura.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Linguagem Poética; Filosofia; Poesia; Júlia Cortines.

When in 1891, at the age of 27<sup>1</sup>, Maria Júlia Cortines Laxe presented her debut collection *Versos* to an enthusiastic public<sup>2</sup>, one might reasonably have wagered that lasting fame awaited her. Alas, Cortines—praised by no other than Machado de Assis—soon faded into obscurity, her work now surfacing only sporadically, like a spectral figure resisting the early burial of its mortal remains. Closer examination reveals that Cortines’s near-erasure from literary history is not simply the result of external factors—sexism<sup>3</sup>, philological neglect<sup>4</sup>, or any other form of short-sightedness—but appears paradoxically inscribed into the logic of her poetry itself. In her effort to respond to her poetic vocation, her language reveals itself radically ascetic: turned away from sensual immediacy, committed instead to

---

<sup>1</sup> Cortines’s exact date of birth remains subject to controversy though credible sources list her as being born in the 1860s. *O Fluminense*, a newspaper from the region in Rio de Janeiro where she lived, gives happy birthday to a Mrs. Júlia Cortines Laxe Coelho, from Rio Bonito (Cortines’s hometown and place of residence in the 1890s), married to a Mr. José Lino Coelho, on August 18 1896. In 1899, Mr. Coelho is not mentioned as her husband, and the surname “Coelho” is no longer present in her name, implying they separated in the meantime. Cortines’s interview cited by Lacerda champions a favorable view on divorce (she claims it to be preferable to the way in which Brazilians customarily solve their disputes, namely, stabbing and shooting). In his introduction to her collected works, however, her editor, Gilberto Araújo, confidently states she was born on December 12, 1863 rather than August 18. Araújo does not cite any sources to back his claim, so the date of August 18 has more documental evidence, if we assume, of course, that she was the only person named “Júlia Cortines Laxe” in the city of Rio Bonito in the 1890s, and that this gentleman José Lino Coelho was once the poet’s husband. But, again, situating her exact birth date seems at best of anecdotal importance. There have been no serious attempts at a biography of Cortines, and the scarcity of documentary proof may permanently hamper any such enterprise.

<sup>2</sup> A.V.A.S. Blake says of her debut book that “The book is divided into two parts, and its apparition had already been announced by the *Jornal do Commercio* on July 14, 1891, with the news about a meeting of writers to hear a few of her strophes, which were enthusiastically applauded” (p. 241, my translation. In the original: “É dividido este livro em duas partes e já sua aparição havia sido anunciada pelo *Jornal do Commercio* de 14 de julho de 1891 com a notícia de uma reunião de litteratos para ouvirem algumas estrophes delle, que foram muito applaudidas”).

<sup>3</sup> José Veríssimo’s “Uma Poetisa e Dous Poetas” in *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira (Sexta Série)*. Garnier, 1907, pp. 165-8, praises her as being “pretty good for a woman,” and Renato de Lacerda’s *Júlia Cortines (A Musa Fidalga de Rio Bonito): Traços Biográficos*. Niterói, 1967, does the very same, and goes so far as to call Cortines a “muse,” although his definition of muse seems to fall more into that of “poet.” Apparently, however, Lacerda’s definition of “poet” does not encompass female writers, hence the highest title Cortines could achieve to him being that of the “muse.”

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Perlingeiro Paixão, in an article called “A liberdade na morte” (“Freedom in Death”), *Travessia*, n. 23 (1991): Mulheres - Século XIX, attributes “A si mesmo,” “Estou fatigada,” and “Sinal na frente” to Cortines, which are poems Cortines translated from Giacomo Leopardi, Annie Vivanti, and Ada Negri, respectively. She also places “Versos de um suicida” in Cortines’s second book, *Vibrações (Vibrations)*, when it was published in *Versos*. Credit must be given to Paixão in her noble attempt to show the feminist side of Cortines’s poetry both in its reference to pagan female deities and the daring gesture of simply being a woman writing in late-imperial and early republican Brazil. That my reading of Cortines largely differs from Paixão’s, as will become clear if one compares what I say in the next pages about Cortines’s poetic language here with what Paixão says about it, is no reason to deny her credit for this important move. But praising this move also does not allow one to overlook the slips mentioned above.

the task of epistemological and ontological inquiry, attempting to undo itself of its flesh in the name of its intellect. Or rather, it somehow seems to cast sense experience and the matters of immediate perception as obstacles against which poetic language fights, for hers is a poetry of the intellect rather than sensuousness. In short, death and self-erasure are at the center of her poetic enterprise, manifesting her commitment to a philosophical poetry that draws itself into the spectral and semi-visible appearance we know from her.

Fausto Cunha notes the connection between asceticism or detachment towards intellectuality in Cortines's work. According to Cunha (Cortines, *Poesias Reunidas*, p. 9), throughout her poetry there dominates an insisting "sentimental renunciation," in the name of intelligence and rationality. But this intelligence and rationality, in aiming to transcend the world of affect and embodiment, throws itself into a deadly battle against the poet's own flesh. The more her poetry seeks immaterial clarity, the more it stumbles over the irreducibility of bodily sensation and emotional residue. Is it possible for poetic asceticism to fully transcend its corporeality? And why does a poetry of intelligence, such as Cortines's, feel such a strong need to fight that which is bodily? In its attempt to defeat the body, Cortines's poetry ends up suspended between the lucidity it desires and a double-sided lament—for, in attempting to think itself out of the world, it becomes a testament not only to the world's ineradicable imprint, but also to the pain involved in the necessity to rid itself from its own bodily existence.

Whether or not poetic intelligence must remain bound to its bodily existence, and why is it that both intelligence and body enter a deadly and self-mutilating conflict despite their inseparability are the fundamental questions that drive Cortines's short but meaningful poetic development. These matters are also what makes her poetry so relevant and timely, for, as we will see, the struggle between the intellect and the body, which operates at the center of Cortines's poetry, marks a clear distinction between poetic and philosophical language. In the 2010 complete edition of her poetry her most faithful editor, Gilberto Araújo, remarks on the philosophical thrust of Cortines's writings as one of the most important yet unexamined threads of her work. He comments that "isolation [in Cortines's writings] transcends the condition of poetic ferment and turns into the

metaphysical principle of incommunicability” (in Cortines, p. xvii<sup>5</sup>), going on to list several poems collected in the edition as representing a confrontation inside poetic language with existential and philosophical matters. Fausto Cunha, in the above quoted introductory text to the same collection (p. 10), also parallels her thought to that of several continental philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries, refraining, however, from entering into detail as to how such connection may be possible. None of this is surprising if we are indeed dealing with a poetics of detachment from the sensible to the benefit of intelligence. For I propose that in Cortines’s poetry is to be witnessed a moment in which poetic language, or rather the development of consciousness into poetry (which, as we will see, is linguistic through and through), conflates with philosophical language, and then moves away from it. Becoming philosophical, in our frame of reference, means that language develops itself into the contemplation of the faculties through which it not only experiences reality but also how reality, in having ontological status only through being linguistically represented to consciousness, necessarily carries within itself the demand for representation if it is to achieve any existential status. This means that consciousness, as language, actively participates in the creation of reality. Becoming philosophical means therefore becoming aware of this process and gaining the ability to analyze it. Philosophy, however, tends towards idealization in that it displaces the conceptualizing faculties into an idea of the subject. Poetic language is less deluded. In the case of Cortines, we will see that language begins to enter this process of idealization, but moves, at a certain point, in a different direction, becoming instead distinctively poetic. In her case, the development of the mind into poetic language takes a somewhat tragic shift, bound to its own determinations, and what it reveals about a pointedly poetic self-awareness is of interest not only to those who occupy themselves with Brazilian modernist and pre-modernist poetry, but also to all those who, for whatever reason, wish to gain more a refined insight into the essence of poetry. And because in this instance poetic language begins with the same steps as philosophical

---

<sup>5</sup> My translation. In the original: “O isolamento ultrapassa a condição de fermento poético e converte-se no princípio metafísico da incommunicabilidade.”

language, and yet follows its own route, its process of becoming poetry contributes to a better understanding of the philosophical enterprise.

Bodily experience is unquestionably the departure point for all signification. Even the most abstract of sentences cannot do without the positing of potential eyes to read it, or a mouth to speak it, ears to hear it, or, in the deficiency of such functions, any sensuous way of absorbing external stimuli that are to be converted into meaning. But external stimuli would be tantamount to nothing if the mind that should be affected by them lacked even the most basic capability of perceiving and understanding them, apprehending, making sense of the perceived, and fitting it into representational categories that precede and transcend these stimuli. What tells us even more is that certain signs abandon the realm of possible sensuous experience, and seem to transcend into the realm of pure formal determinations, suggesting their independence from the very topics they are suited to represent. Or, in other words, that in every instance in which a given topic is brought to representation there underlies something of a transcendental drive, that of form, which, taken purely as form, suggests an existence independent from that which it represents as well as from the mind to which it represents. The shape of the first contradiction encountered by a consciousness on its way to become poetic has therefore to be that between its poetic form (as, for instance, a genre), and its sensuous content. Any kind of utterance can address the abstract figure of the poet, but to do so in the crafted form of the Petrarchan sonnet, as do the opening lines of Cortines's debut book *Versos*, already hints at the push for autonomy of poetic form:

Poeta, dentro de ti, desmesurado e arcano,  
Ou se cava, ou se empola, ou se espedaça o oceano  
De tua alma, que exala um contínuo clamor,  
– Brados de imprecações e soluços de dor!

Nele canta e suspira a lânguida sereia  
Do Amor; a Mágoa geme; a Cólera estrondeia;  
E a essas vozes se prende a dolorida voz

Da Saudade, chorando o que ficou após...

E em torno desse mar, que ulula, e chora, e guaia,

E que o vento revolve e a aresta dos escolhos

Rasga, do mundo vês a indiferente praia...

E acima dele vês a abóbada infinita

Do céu plácido e azul, onde o esplendor dos olhos

Das estrelas, sereno e distante, palpita...

(*PR*, p. 20)<sup>6</sup>.

One immediately sees why this contradiction would be delicate and even painful. There could not be any imaginable shape of a “pure sonnet form,” divorced from any content, for the sheer possibility that the “sonnet form” be understood already requires that it takes on the representation of a distinct theme. However, no theme can claim to be the pure form in itself, even if one chooses to write a sonnet about sonnets—or, as in this case, about the poet’s soul. Such a contradiction takes the aspect of the discrepancy between the finite body of the poet and the metaphorical endless ocean inside this body, which is said to “either dig itself in, blister, or shatter” (line 2, my translation) and, further down, reflect the heavens. Not only this thematization of a self-mutilating endlessness (which can also be seen as representing the mutilating self-particularization of linguistic forms), but also the alternating “either / or” with three different verbs casts poetic language in a mood of fragmentation and self-separation of the anaphora, the reference that shatters itself in its own multiplicity. The endlessness of the ocean, which represents the poet’s infinite capacities through transcendental categories, shatters and digs in because it needs to divide and distort itself into the objects of representation. At first, as in a language on its way to become philosophical (this is, as remarked, the first poem in her first book) locates these

---

<sup>6</sup> All references to her poetry are to the one-volume collection *Poesias Reunidas*, edited and with an introduction by Gilberto Araújo (Academia Brasileira de Letras, 2010), henceforth *PR*, pages. For a more detailed commentary on the incidence of classical forms in her poetry, a quantitative study of her verses has been published not that long ago: Ana Paula Nunes de Sousa & Andressa Silva Sousa, “Júlia Cortines e o Parnasianismo,” *Estudos Literários, Sinop*, v. 17, n. 47, pp. 384-403, jan./jun. 2024.

transcendental categories within the poetic mind, and this mind is poetic because it is capable of experiencing the pain of the contradiction between the endless, unchanging categories of representation and the objects into which they must limit themselves.

The “I” uttering these lines is not talking to its readers, but to “the Poet,” from whom we get no response. Such a mood is heavily pathos laden. “Soledade” links it directly to sobbing pain, groaning sorrow, and the poet is set as hanging between an earth that it has been torn apart and detached from, and a heaven that it craves, yet has been banished from. Not only do we have a metaphorical ocean within, but we also have more palpable images of heaven and earth. And heaven, in this poem, will progressively become the preferred image for the transcendental, overcoming the inward ocean. As it does so, in the last lines, rather than being a potentiality within the poet, it reveals itself as something that stimulates the poet, but which remains unreachable to her:

acima dele vês a abóbada infinita  
Do céu plácido e azul, onde o esplendor dos olhos  
Das estrelas, sereno e distante, palpita...

Just like the ocean within, the heavens are “infinite,” and they are an “infinite dome” (“abóbada infinita”). In their boundlessness, they are, as dome, limiting to the poet’s capacities. They also identify with the poet’s inner ocean in their deep blue color, but, unlike this ocean, to which the heavens can be said to give origin as well as an outline, they are calm and distant in their palpitations. As such, the transcendental source for poetic language is marked by a contradiction between its presence to the poet and its removal from her, its mirroring within her and, at the same time, its distance from her. It is unclear whether the aspects of the heavens owe to their transcendental character or to how they are perceived by the poet.

Down below on earth, on the other hand, we find the sensuous content of linguistic utterances without which no language can occur, for the transcendental forms of representation would otherwise not be able to take on a perceivable form. In heaven, the

invisible transcendental forms of language lie calm or serene, without which no sensuous element could be made to signify. In turn, heaven cannot exist without being disfigured into a, namely, earth. Between them stands the poet, who laments her inability to remain on earth, since she acknowledges the transcendental drive of signification, but also knows that she cannot yet reach the heavens, whose forms can only manifest themselves distorted into the shapes they ultimately cannot identify with. The earth, as we see it in the second stanza, is described as revolting, pregnant with potential symbols that defy the poet's understanding. Yet, more importantly, these symbols are kept at a distance from which the poet can contemplate—"see"—them. Their counterpart, the heavens, while exhibiting the opposite characteristics of the earth, clear and serene, are also far removed from the poet, who occupies a mediatory position. Rather than a divinely gifted mediator between heaven and earth, however, the poet fails to grasp both, and the pathos of this failed mediation is expressed in the first verses, cited above. The stanza that begins with "O Poet, inside of you..." ends with "Clamors of cursing and sobs of pain" coming from the poet, the emotional response of one to whom it is bestowed a role of mediation they cannot fulfill. The voice that utters these lines is not that of the poet, but rather of one who observes the poet in their role of failed mediator. Conserving the earth would mean living a purely bodily existence, something poetic language cannot do once it acknowledges that, without the heavens, earth cannot exist. But the drive towards the heavens must remain incomplete, for, without a particular earth in which to materialize and without a turbulent, suffering poetic soul to disfigure the heavens into an ocean, the transcendental has no existence, it is inessential. However, the one who utters the lines in "Soledade" seems committed to the transcendental, to reaching the infinite dome of heavens, however painful the path to it may seem.

A consciousness rifted between sensuous particularity and transcendental generality initially takes the shape of poetry as a duality. On the one hand, it detaches from the sensible theme on which it dwells, its object, the earth. On the other hand, the supersensible or purely formal aspect, without which there can be no proper presentation of the object, but which itself is not perceivable if not by having an object, heavens. As such, the two are

intertwined in a strange and uncomfortable togetherness, the poet, within which the form of the contradiction is a metaphorical ocean. The experience of the posited object (the theme of the poem) quickly becomes an awareness not of the structure of experiencing this object, but rather of the poetic capabilities to grasp, conceptualize, and imagine it. This is how poetic language becomes aware of itself. It becomes aware not that it needs a particular thematic, but rather that poetic language hinges on its own capabilities of representing and self-representing its objects to establish a thematics, therefore preparing itself to become an intellectual poetry, i.e., a poetry that thematizes its own poetic and intellectual capacities. It is a poetry that struggles to detach from the earthly and becomes able to contemplate what it refers to as the heavens. At a first glance, the asceticism of Cortines's debut volume appears to be based on a decision to sever itself from the earth in the name of the seemingly intangible heavens, a painful enterprise that will set the tone of *Versos*.

For all language speaks but the general. In addressing the poet abstractly, the first line of "Soledade" is already an acknowledgement of this condition. Even if this poet was to have been given an individual name (say, "Júlia" rather than "Poeta"), still the name does not belong to any particular and unique individual, since it could very well be given to someone else. Apostrophe, in the first line, is a hint at generality not under the transcendental form of the genre, the contemplation of which would be impossible, but of the quite graspable generality of words themselves. "Poeta" is a general category, and this owes not to it being a noun, but simply to the breadth of its designation. In the case of the apostrophe, the poet is a "you," and anyone can be a "you" without the instances of "yous" doing any damage to the generality of the personal pronoun. Meaning, in taking stock of its own indeterminacy (by referring to the widely comprehensive name "Poet") already begins by negating any possible priority of the earthly and turning inward. But the inward is an ocean in trouble, for it still holds on to the earth. The road to heaven, therefore, appears to be paved with ascetic renunciation of all things earthly and the mutilation of the sensuous part of meaning that keeps it bound to the particularity of earth. We are in the face of a poetry of the ocean that seeks to become a poetry of the heavens, or an intellectual poetry, detached from the constraints of bodily particularity, the earth. Its task is that of a

dissipation of its internal ocean into the transcendentality of the ethereal heavens, detached from all things earthly.

Detachment from all things earthly should make one receptive to the most abstract levels of generality, and therefore all a poet of the heavens speaks will be true, for it will not be bound to the one-sidedness of particularities. But detachment is not a given, it must first be earned: within the poet there revolves an ocean full of pain, which craves for its dissipation into a heavenly form. “Soledade” does not tell us how the poet can achieve her detachment from the earth, for this will be the burden of the poems to follow. Achieving absolute detachment first takes the shape, in Cortines’s further poems, of the biblical parables of self-immolation. “Via Dolorosa” recasts Christ’s Road to the cross by replacing him with another widely comprehensive and abstract name, which was already present in the first poem, “Alma” (“Soul”):

Alma, galgando vais o teu Calvário abrupto,  
Em farrapos, em sangue, em lágrimas, em luto,  
Por fragas arrastando, em convulsões de dor,  
O lenho, que te verga ao peso esmagador.

Ruge em torno de ti a tempestade; o açoite  
Do vento dilacera a cortina da noite.  
Como um túrbido mar, roto pelo escarcéu,  
Vês na altura rolar o proceloso céu,  
E em baixo, à proporção que no espaço te elevas  
Subir, rente a teus pés, um dilúvio de trevas,  
Que a esperança afogou, e afogará até  
A dor no turbilhão da crescente maré...

Mais um passo, e verás desse abrupto Calvário  
No tope, em que branqueja um anônimo ossário,  
Entre o olvido e o silêncio, o madeiro se erguer,

Onde vais, para sempre, exânime, pender...  
(*PR*, 28).

Until it reaches the cross where it is to be sacrificed, the soul remains bound to earth. Not only does it bleed and cry (l. 2), but it also looks up to the heavens (which appear again as heavens, but are still dependent, as objects of contemplation, on the subject's capacity to gaze, l. 8). However, the soul is capable of seeing the end of its earthly bindings, the still earthly cross (synecdochically referred to through its wooden making, l. 15) on which it shall, like the poet from "Soledade," "hang" (which is also the last word in "Via Dolorosa," inevitably cast as an unreachable and boundless, eternal future). And yet, does not this hanging drive the soul right back to where the poet was in "Soledade," namely, the agonizing place of mediation, where, rather than achieving complete freedom from all bodily particularity through death and sacrifice, the tortured soul only finds itself back in the position from which it started? It is not altogether certain that poetic language has finally found a form that supersedes its initial contradiction, an uncertainty aggravated by the reticence with which "Via Dolorosa" ends. Detachment seems to remain an unreached goal, or at least one that can only be fully enjoyed after the death of the individual body, possibly, a realm from which there can be no notice, since, as the most complete form of generality, it finds no expression through which it can make itself sensible. For reasons different from those found by Paixão in Cortines's poetry, death appears as a form of liberation, but death, so far, is still chained to its earthly corporeality and limited by it in its transcendental drive.

The drive to absolute asceticism can therefore only lead up to a failure of poetic language to achieve full contemplation of itself and its capabilities, since, as it realizes itself as language, it realizes at the same time that it cannot particularize itself or make itself into a particular. Every attempt to make oneself a particular already makes oneself into a generality, but generality, per definition, hangs, as the soul, on the cross, where, hanging, the soul cannot become *spirit*, detached from all things earthly, but also refuses to give in to the delusion (or rather its impossibility, as mind and language) of being only a bodily, sensuous form of existence. As such, all of its experiences are nothing but ever-passing

temporary shapes, substituted by one another in a temporal experience that another poem (“Indiferente” *PR*, 23) deems meaningless. On its way to an uncertain sacrifice, the soul sees the heavens, but it also sees, right after that, a darkness that, although perceived after heavens have been mentioned, is perceived as coexisting with the heavens (l. 10). It had also perceived the storm, its own pain, and then its own body, its movement, and the cross on which it shall hang, as well as the different spatial and temporal categories with which it deals. None of these perceptions becomes fixated in its consciousness as a final form.

But in thus experiencing the alternation of sensuous perceptions, poetic language becomes aware of their unity in space and time. That *time* passes means it can be grasped as temporal experience, and that appearances alternate in *space* means that space is a grounding category of understanding which is always present to perception despite the different shapes that are made to occupy it. This insight, however, is strangely grim. Instead of addressing the soul, now the poetic consciousness becomes addressed by the soul, and, in a poem called “Desencanto,” is informed by it that the more basic and always self-present categories of space and time take the shape of a “dismal abyss” (*PR*, 31; my translation). Here is what the speaker of the poem claims to have heard from the soul in their conversation with each other:

– “Da treva apenas vi, surpresa e triste,  
O ilimitado e lúgubre golfão...”

Here, “ilimitado” (“boundless”) and “lúgubre” (“dismal”) appear to be comparable, since they belong to the same name phrase that determine “abyss.” Because it is boundless and causes awe, this abyss is comparable to the heavens of “Soledade,” and seems to be what the soul attains in its ascetic quest. “Surprised” and “sad,” because of gender inflection rules in Portuguese, are unmistakably qualities of the soul when it contemplates “darkness” (“a treva,” in the singular), and they are direct internal parallels to the externally observed “boundless” and “dismal.” The pathos of the subject thus emerges as a direct mirroring of the qualities observed in the object. Or rather, its suffering reveals that its object has always already been inside of the subject. What seems to be surprise and sadness can be cast as a

victory for consciousness. For it understands that the external, sensuous earth from which it was attempting to detach itself, had always already been inside of it as produced and determined by its own linguistic capacities—but this is also why earth haunts the poet’s soul. The soul experiences its inwardness as “boundless” because its thoughts are manifestations of something much larger and more abstract than it fails to grasp, and which somehow make it flinch in fear. The poet is no longer afraid of the earth, but of the darkness within, the transcendental capacities it possesses and which are always in danger of becoming objectless dusk. Detachment turns into fear.

This insight is unfortunate and frightening because it casts outside of itself and at an unreachable distance from itself that which “Soledade” refers to as the heavens, that is, the invisible formal determinations that poetry as pure language strives to grasp. This is a key point in the development of poetic language, for it is where it shall separate itself from a philosophical form of becoming. Rather than misrepresenting the formal dimensions of meaning into subjective faculties, poetic language, in this case, had already been remedied against this grievous misreading of itself by noticing that heavens lie above. There is no better description of this stage (thus included the point in which a turn is made, away from the philosophical and into the poetic) than the following passage from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

[The Unhappy Consciousness] brings and holds together pure thinking and particular individuality, but has not yet risen to that thinking *for which* the individuality of consciousness is reconciled with pure thought itself. It stays rather in this midpoint where abstract thinking is in contact with the individuality of consciousness *qua* individuality. The Unhappy Consciousness is this contact; it is the unity of pure thinking and individuality; also it *knows* itself to be this thinking individuality or pure thinking, and knows the Unchangeable itself essentially as an individuality. But what it does *not* know is that this its object, the Unchangeable, which it knows essentially in the form of individuality, is *its own self*, is itself the individuality of consciousness (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 130-1; translation modified).

But rather than displacing the Unchangeable into itself, a truly poetic consciousness, such as Cortines’s, knows that this Unchangeable, as formal linguistic category, can only apply to the subject’s interiority the way in which it applies to the objects of recognition: by being turned into a particularity with which it cannot ultimately be fully

identified. Poetic consciousness will never reach the point in which it will know itself as the Unchangeable, first of all because it knows that it is inextricably bound to the particular, and second, it also knows that the only thing that is unchangeable is eternal change. It knows, in a word, that the Unchangeable, the formal categories of meaning, heavens, can only *be* if they are turned into that which they are not—be it the object or the subject of recognition. The only way in which a truly poetic language can say what it means is by not meaning what it says. In this way, poetic language, in being what it is not, is paradoxically closer to a pure form of language than its philosophical counterpart, for it remains faithful to its essence and refuses to be blinded by its own workings. This condition of self-contradiction and internal split of having to constantly be troped into a form that is not its own is what, in Cortines's case, gives origin to suffering. No wonder it flirts heavily with religious themes, since religion too displaces the transcendental into an external form of being. But in contrast to religious language, the poetic knows that it participates in the transcendental by creating it rather than being created by it, while still being in direct determination with it as it reveals its grandeur and power over the subjective ocean. Religious revelation requires that heavens manifest themselves for the individuals, but remain separated from them and determining them. When the poet acknowledges, as she does in "Soledade," that this revelation would be impossible if not by the poet's inner capacity to represent the categories of representation, which she can only do by distorting them into the particular, she shuns away from a religious into a painfully poetic language. This painful dynamic where heavens and the ocean engage with each other without the ability to sublate their difference is described, self-consciously in difference to itself, in a poem still in the first volume called "Suprema Dor:"

O sofrimento, da razão liberto,  
Explose no delírio da loucura.

E ao desvairado e espavorido e incerto  
Olhar, em qualquer parte a que o volvamos,  
Sombrio quadro se apresenta aberto:

– No passado, se vê-lo procuramos,  
Vemos a torda face condenada  
Substituir a face que adoramos:

O presente é uma vaga enovelada  
Pelo ríspido sopro da desdita,  
Pelos escolhos do sofrer rasgada:

O futuro, uma estática e infinita  
Solitude, por onde uma só fonte  
Não desenrola a prateada fita  
(*PR*, 34-5).

“Suprema Dor” paradoxically names permanence as the permanence of change, the eternality of heavens only being possible if taking the transient shapes of the earth. Suffering, freed from reason, means an abandonment of the heavens in the name of the earth, which results in uncertainty and complete loss. Suffering needs reason so that it does not find itself “in the delirium of madness” (“no delírio da loucura”), but, at the same time, the resort to the transcendental categories of space and time offer no solace to the poetic consciousness. Temporal distinction, separating itself from its past, means observing all that is earthly “condemned” to its destruction, and, in turning to the present, we encounter the word “substitution.” The past is substituted by the present, which, in being present and close to perception, is “a tangled wave / By the harsh breath of misfortune” (“uma vaga enovelada / Pelo ríspido sopro da desdita”). Finally, in substituting the perception of the present for that of the future, one reaches no resting place either, for the future is absolute indeterminacy. However, in all this pain, by bringing about the word “substitution,” poetic language has achieved valuable insight into the workings of language as a whole, in the relationship between the transcendental character of the heavens and the bare meaninglessness of sheer earth. The corruption of the heavenly into the earthly, without

which it cannot be grasped, is thoroughly tropologic. It is based on substitution. In this case, substitution is motivated by belonging to the category of time, and, as such, poetry acquires the character of a narrative sequence of substitutions, i.e., an allegory.

Earth, ocean, heavens, are metaphors to things which are ultimately nameless, and the transformation of the transcendental, unchangeable categories that belong to the heavens into the particulars can happen only through troping, through the giving of palpable figures to that which is abstract and infinite. And the sequence of poems in *Versos* is a thorough allegory of tropes, a sequence of different terms for heaven and earth which name their dialectic while failing to grasp them and overcome their contradiction. Only now poetic consciousness becomes aware of its figurative status, which allows it to fulfill its destiny as poetry. This awareness of tropology is what motivates the predominantly symbolic language of Cortines's second volume, *Vibrações*. Wilson Martins, remarking on this shift in her language from the first to the second collection of poems, deems her trajectory "inverted" in comparison to other Brazilian poets of the same time, who went from conventional symbols to abstract forms of the heavens (cf. Martins, p. 491). The turn to self-conscious symbols, in the second volume, is in no way a more conservative move from Cortines, but rather the conscious attempt to deconstruct the symbolic form as the final shape in which poetic language simultaneously materializes and undoes itself. Symbolic images, paradigmatic of which in *Vibrações* are the condor and the sphinx, attempt to resolve the contradiction between a heaven that resists being touched and an earth that cannot be conserved save by means of the decline into what "Suprema Dor" had called "the delirium of madness," that is to say, the inability to make any sense from perception. Let us observe how the symbol of the condor operates in the poem "O Condor:"

Dessa altitude, onde a voar te atreves,  
Audaz, sustido pelas asas grandes,  
Dessa altitude, para além das neves  
Que refulgem nos píncaros dos Andes,  
Se, acaso, o olhar indiferente fitas,

Longe, através da imensidão dos ares,  
Mal percebes as terras infinitas  
E os infinitos mares...

Embaixo, entanto, do arvoredos as sombras  
Tanta frescura têm, de aromas cheia;  
Das relvas corre o arroio entre as alfombras;  
As ondas espreguiçam-se na areia;  
Verdeja o pampa ao sol; do vento ao brando  
Ofego ondula murmura a floresta;  
E no ar revoam, gárrulos, cantando,  
Os pássaros em festa.

Tu, galé da grandeza e do fastígio,  
Tens ao redor e acima a vacuidade  
Do espaço, e o céu azul, sem um vestígio  
De nuvens no esplendor da claridade,  
Sempre gelado e sempre emudecido:  
– Vasto, triste e monótono cenário,  
Onde tu pairas, como um rei banido,  
Imenso e solitário...  
(*PR*, 107)

A symbol of the poet, the condor has to its advantage that it cannot have an ocean within. Instead, the ocean is cast outside of the condor, which, devoid of inward content, appears hollow. Like the poet of “Soledade,” it hovers—hangs—between heaven and earth. Only it has achieved complete detachment from bodily existence, contemplating the earth from a position much closer to the transcendental heavens than the one occupied by the poet earlier. The condor’s flight is bold, it “dares to fly” (l.1), and it is beyond the snows of the earth and the Andes (ll.3, 4). While it still acknowledges the earth, it does so in utter

indifference, and his gaze meets what is below only by chance. This is no doubt a victory to detachment, which, having fought language's reliance on the object, now asserts the priority of its abstract capacities over it. The more decisively the mind frees itself from attachments to fleeting objects or experiences, such as the ones under which it had suffered in "Suprema Dor," the more it opens itself to the possibility of grasping its transcendental capacities. The image of the condor, in hollowing itself completely from all sensuous attachment, is significantly closer to the level of detachment aimed at by a poetry of the intellect. This is why detachment and indifference play such an important role in Cortines's poems from her last collection, for they free the poetic consciousness both from the attachment to its sensuous object and from the "ocean," which is the mistake of an idealist philosophy, in equating capacities which are linguistic to an idea of the self.

As we saw in the first volume, the swiftest path to such liberation is hardship, for no one experiences more profound forms of peace than those who have endured the most intense forms of difficulty and who understand that the conservatism of the body equals madness. Nothing is more acutely painful than suffering, and nothing more deeply restorative than having endured it, which is why poetic language had come so close to Christian symbolism. But having defeated bodily attachment, the poet cannot be comparable to Christ or any religious symbol, for this would wrongly elevate her to the kingdom of heaven. As we see from the final lines of "O Condor," the poet dwells in mediation, and is to both heaven and earth like a "banished king" (l. 23).

This hollow figure of the condor is perfectly ascetic and detached, but it doesn't resemble a condor at all. Condors are organic beings with insides, even if these insides are not the agitated ocean of a poet fraught between transcendence and the flesh. This is also why the poem ends in a simile, not a symbol. Simile, "como um rei banido" ("like a banished king") keeps both the "you" (the condor) and the king, with which it is to be equated, separated. This separation is at once the victory and the failure of the intellect. For it can finally understand that the mediatory role of the poet, in bringing together the heavens and the earth, no matter how detached from the latter it can make itself (for it still

remains dependent on it) also mutilates both. This is why its condor looks so much more like the sphinx from and unnamed fragment in *Vibrações* than to a real animal:

Não te dirá jamais, indiferente e calma,  
Da natureza a muda e implacável esfinge  
A razão por que acende o desejo em tua alma  
De um bem que atrai, que foge e que nunca se atinge.  
(*PR*, 126).

The unreachable good bestowed, promised but unreachable, by the sphinxlike force of nature (the heavens as abstract capacities, made noticeable by a perception of the earth) may be cast outside and beyond grasp, but cannot be made unaffected. Like Odysseus with his ears full of wax, tied to his ship's mast so as not to give in to the song of the sirens, the condor, indifferent to all of which is under the sun, still cannot help but take notice of them, even if by chance. Caught up in its own self-contradiction, poetic language is able to recognize its source, but, by this very move, remains unable to extricate itself from its own truth and name the source as source. This truth must be projected outside of itself, where it can be contemplated, but never become true with it in the sense that its form of address will finally be able to coincide with its concept. The sphinx does not answer back. Unlike everyday language, which is captive to an illusion of truth—as when one says, like Hegel, of a friend that he is a true friend, meaning his actions coincide with determinations of the concept of friend<sup>7</sup>—, the truth of poetic language is precisely the ability to name its object without becoming one with it. It names truth without being true, and it can only name truth by being untrue. Yet only by doing so can it fully become a poetry of poetry, self-

---

<sup>7</sup> *Theorie Werkausgabe*, vol. 8, p. 86: “Im philosophischen Sinn dagegen heißt Wahrheit, überhaupt abstrakt ausgedrückt, Übereinstimmung eines Inhalts mit sich selbst. ... Übrigens findet sich die tiefere (philosophische) Bedeutung der Wahrheit zum Teil auch schon im gewöhnlichen Sprachgebrauch. So spricht man z.B. von einem *wahren Freund* und versteht darunter einen solchen, dessen Handlungsweise dem Begriff der Freundschaft gemäß ist.” [“In the philosophical sense however truth, above all abstractly speaking, means attunement of a content with itself... And by the way this deeper (philosophical) meaning of truth also finds itself partly also already in the common use of language. So one speaks, for instance, of a *true friend*, and understands under this heading such a friend whose behavior is adequate to the concept of friendship.”]

recognition that, in itself, has to give up on its ability to recognize itself (or be *for itself*, which would mean that the sphinx talked back). The curse of poetry is to pass on to various objects without ever finding one it can hold on to, ultimately bound to negate its object and itself so that it can be itself. This is the only way to conceive of, which is not the same as to understand, the self-immolation and self-disfigurement of poetic language that Cortines arrives at.

The sphinx, just as the poet from “Soledade,” is addressed, but does not reply back. It preserves a riddle that cannot be answered and can only be guessed, for any grasp of it is immediately its disfigurement. The sphinx remains calm and indifferent, qualities that poetic language had struggled to achieve by means of its efforts in detachment, while the soul is back to being agitated. The sphinx is therefore not the poet, but the poem. A poet ultimately becomes one who suffers through the contradiction between earth and heaven, and from her suffering receives her determination and solid existence in the form of writing, the silent inscription that takes the shape of a sphinx. To a true poet, a poem is entirely hollow, and the main achievement of the poet lies precisely in that, by completing her project of overcoming the earth in the name of the heavens, her victory is a mutilation of her own body, both as earthly existence and as transcendental capacities. This victory can finally be expressed in the lines of an unpublished poem written in Cortines’s old age, under the title “*Regret*.”

Está findo o combate. Eu venci e, contudo,  
Vencedora eu me sinto igualmente vencida...  
Cada gesto me traz um sofrimento agudo,  
Dá-me em meio do peito uma larga ferida.

E com que intrepidez, com que audácia e energia,  
Não me lancei da vida à aspérrima batalha!  
Nem me atemorizou a boca que rugia,  
Nem o brilho da espada e o estrondo da metralha.

Para no alto plantar, ufana, aos quatro ventos,

Desfraldada a bandeira ofuscante da Glória,  
Galguei por entre o fumo, e as pragas, e os lamentos  
A estrada que conduz ao cimo da vitória.

E venci. E, contudo, eu me sinto vencida...  
Antes ser como quem à fraqueza se entrega,  
E rolar pelo solo à primeira investida,  
E morrer à explosão da primeira refrega!  
(*PR*, 163).

Even the passage into the English or French language, in the title (whichever it is, it is foreign to Cortines's preferred tongue), already denounces that poetic consciousness can only be an other it produces but which radically detaches itself from the mind that brought it about and was always wider than and severed from this mind. Poetic language, in *Vibrações*, figures out that it must kill its object, but in doing so, it kills itself. This murder, however, can only be incomplete, since we still have poetry, language, consciousness, though it will look back at us "indifferent and calm" as the silent sphinx, not allowing us to tell if its gaze is even a gaze at all. Poetry is trope rather than what could loosely be called poetic reason. That is, instead of the deluded form of a language that experiences itself as its own reality, or the awareness of being its only reality, it is the undeluded language that is aware of its dependency and relation to its posited other, to which it will never achieve parity nor be able to fully incorporate without leaving an excess or lack—the poem, the sphinx. The condor is an exiled king, never to occupy the kingdom of heaven, which, in reality, does not exist. The poet's final shape is therefore that of the mutilated body, unhappiness, since it hurts itself in the attempt to extricate itself from itself, expressed by the lines quoted above ("*Regret*"): the battle that, having been won, has been lost. A cadaver left to wander the earth, this poetic consciousness claims that it would much rather have been killed in an earthly manner, through machine-guns or the sword (l.8), than to have to remain as an undead, banished from heaven and detached from the earth. In the end, this is the only true victory of poetic language. Poetry understands that the

external, sensuous earth from which it was attempting to detach itself, had always already been inside of itself, as produced and determined by its own linguistic capacities. In attempting to extricate itself from the earth, a poetry of the heavens, of the intellect, makes its way into fulfilling its destiny. But, in doing so, it must remain bound to its object, for it would dissipate into thin air in its absence. It can therefore only produce works that are indifferent and silent toward it, like sphinxes, which are but shaped stone, and be left to wander the earth in the form of a mutilated, undead body, surfacing in the time that follows it only once and again, a spectral figure resisting the early burial of its mortal remains.

Such is the lesson of a formidable poet like Cortines, who, in candid and unsullied rigor, was able to name the rotting and self-fleeting character of poetic language in its full thrust. It is the burden of every great poet to have their insight fettered to that which is no more, and the burden of great poetic insight to be manacled to that which has renounced the power of this insight. For as long as we are doing criticism, we are in the realm of the undead, and it is their job not to let us rest in peace. The reason why their message ought to remain fleeting and unattainable, yet constantly awakening our duty to pay homage to it, may well remain beyond reach, and this is precisely why it will inevitably continue to exist. We are not allowed to bury Cortines under the earth she acknowledged as the main obstacle to her poetic enterprise, nor let her escape into the ethereal nothingness of the heavens, falsely crowning her the queen of a non-existing kingdom. Instead, we are forever condemned to come back to the grandeur of her poetic insight, time and time again, so that it receives us indifferent and calm as the sphinx, unrevealing of the reasons why it appeals to us and calls us in its spectral, dim voice.

## REFERENCES

Blake, A.V.A.S. *Diccionario Bibliographico Brasileiro*. V, Imprensa Nacional, 1899.

Cortines, Júlia. *Poesias Reunidas*. Academia Brasileira de Letras, 2010.

De Lacerda, Renato. *Júlia Cortines (A Musa Fidalga de Rio Bonito): Traços Biográficos*. Waldeck, 1967.

De Sousa, Ana Paula Nunes & Sousa, Andressa Silva. “Júlia Cortines e o Parnasianismo.” *Estudos Literários, Sinop*, v. 17, n. 47, p. 384-403, jan./jun. 2024.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Werke: in 20 Bänden mit Register. Theorie Werkausgabe*. Suhrkamp, 2021.

Hegel, G.W.F. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford University Press, 2004.

Martins, Wilson. *História da Inteligência Brasileira*. IV, Editora UEPG, 1977.

Paixão, Sylvia Perlingeiro. “A liberdade na morte: Júlia Cortines.” *Travessia*, n. 23, p. 198-208, 1991,

Veríssimo, José. *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira (Sexta Série)*. H. Garnier, Livreiro-Editor, 1907.

**Henrique Carvalho Pereira** holds a Bachelor's degree in History with a minor in Brazilian Literature and Romance Philology from the University of São Paulo, a Master's degree in Comparative Literature from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, and a Master's degree in Modern German Culture from Indiana University. He is currently a doctoral student in German Studies at Brown University.

Artigo recebido em 09/08/2025.

Aprovado em 03/12/2025.