

Drenched Eyes: The Prophets of Rain and the imaginary of the *sertão*

Farley Valentim

Article



Abstract

The purpose of the present work is to present the Prophets of Rain, men who dedicate themselves to observe the nature signs that they describe as “winter experiences”, as a way of predicting the coming of rain to the Northeastern *sertão* (the Brazilian backcountry), hereby demonstrating how the imaginary of the *sertanejo* (people who live in such hinterlands) is built according to time and climate, among other possibilities. Thus, it will be shown herein how the imaginary of the *sertão* is associated with two compelling images, namely the drought and the rainy winter, which are sources of ambiguous feelings, such as hope and anguish, relief and affliction. Finally, through this imaginary, this work strives to build a Jungian reading of this practice based on the notion of *Anima Mundi*, as thought by James Hillman.

Keywords: Prophets of Rain; Sertão; Imaginary; *Anima Mundi*.

1. The Drought

In his novel *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives), Graciliano Ramos recounts the hardships of a migrant family in the torrid backlands of *sertão*. Walking along a parched riverbed, two of the main characters, Fabiano and Sinhá Vitória, look, amid a resigned sigh, at a lonely cloud forsaken in the blue sky.

Enxugaram as lágrimas, foram agachar-se perto dos filhos, suspirando, conservaram-se encolhidos, temendo que a nuvem se tivesse desfeito, vencida pelo azul terrível, aquele azul que deslumbrava e endoidecia a gente (RAMOS, 2019, p. 9).

In this quote, Graciliano describes how the characters dry their tears, fearing that the cloud would melt away and leave them overpowered by this terrifyingly blue sky that awes and drives people mad. Those familiar with such an image understand why the author tells us that their eyes are brimming with dread. The cloud

is a harbinger of rain, it's the manna of the *sertão* that bears the redemption of the suffering caused by the drought. The fear that Fabiano and *Sinhá* Vitória feel is that this frail cloud may disintegrate and disappear, vanishing and taking all hope with it, leaving only that dazzling, maddening blue sky in the thick of the arid land's suffering.

Graciliano Ramos' novel *Vidas Secas*, first published in 1938, is one of several literary works dedicated to portraying the dramas of the drought in the Brazilian backlands. Graciliano tells the story of a family at the heart of the dry season, narrating their degradation into a subhuman condition of survival and their transformation into *retirantes* (climate refugees), a word used to designate those who, in the midst of *sertão's* inhospitable climate, are forced to leave their homes in the Northeastern hinterlands in search of better conditions elsewhere, on the coast or in other states. Throughout the pages of the novel, we are confronted with the desolation of this poor family, subjugated by the weather and the scorched soil, hoping and dreaming with a full and happy life marked by the return of the rains, with which the strength of the land could reawaken once again, and the lush green would take over the horizon.

This same reality is depicted in the expressionist work *Os Retirantes (Migrants)*, by the Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari. Painted in 1944, it epitomizes the rural exodus from the Northeast and portrays a family fleeing from the drought. The nine people who make up the painting, four adults and five children, are haggardly rendered amid a barren and desolated landscape. The work presents the conflict against a world that can become cruel, aggressive and filled with imminent death. Their scrawny bodies, the sad, frightened, wraithlike features, with vacant and hopeless stares, seem to burst out of the canvas. The poverty is evident through the character's bare feet, their thinness, and even the sickly body of one of the children. Upon the desiccated earth, carcasses of dead animals are scattered, hunted by the black birds, vultures, heralds of death, flying high in the same blue sky as Graciliano, this blue sky that makes us mad. The historical context of this work dates back to 1944, a period in which the stereotypical image of the Northeast as a region of hunger and death was still closely related to the dry periods, mainly associated with the great drought of 1877, in which almost 500 thousand lives were lost during the Empire (TAMANINI; SILVA, 2019), as well as the great droughts of 1915, portrayed in the novel *O Quinze (The Fifteen)* by Rachel de Queiroz, an author from Ceará, and the drought of 1932, already during the Republic (QUEIROZ, 2012).

Therefore, the concern regarding the deleterious effects of these extreme weather events predates Graciliano and Portinari by centuries. There are records from 1605, still in colonial Brazil, of the general apprehension about the problems caused by the adversity of the semi-arid Northeastern climate. The drought of 1932, particularly,

produced a perverse phenomenon that is now almost erased from history: the concentration camps or “government corrals”. Instituted in six cities of Ceará - Fortaleza, Crato, Ipu, Quixeramobim, Cariús and Senador Pompeu – in the vicinity of the railway tracks, these concentration camps aimed to prevent the *retirantes* fleeing the drought from reaching the capital, Fortaleza. The climate refugees accepted to remain in the camps, attracted by job offers and promises of medical assistance only, however, to be retained in unhealthy conditions, relying on the food sent by the government. The objective then was to avoid the episode that occurred during the drought of 1877, when over 100,000 *retirantes* migrated to the capital, which at the time had only 30,000 inhabitants. The refugees thus became a social problem associated with chaos, considered to bring poverty and disease to the coastal cities, creating a collective fear that businesses would be looted by the starving migrants (BARBALHO, 2005).

The abovementioned intense periods of drought, among many others that followed later, in addition to the occurrence of the “government corrals” coupled with the images of people and animals killed by hunger, helped to consolidate the stereotype of the Northeastern semi-arid region as a place of inhospitable, cruel nature, difficult to deal with, where the *sertanejo*, regardless of their strength, as Euclides da Cunha stated in *Os Sertões (The Backlands)*, was always destined to lose their battle against nature.

It was this impression of a cruel nature, which demands from men a resilience and an almost superhuman strength in order to survive, that instituted this climate issue as the main root of the evils faced by the *sertanejo*. The drought began to characterize the Northeastern identity through the representation of misery, suffering, underdevelopment, being related to the constant confrontation with nature, despite the fact that climate related problems are usually symptoms of the lack of public policies to aptly face such conditions (DANTAS, 2007).

Apart from the literature, music is equally devoted to conveying the northeastern's distress when confronted with the dry season. The composition *Asa Branca (White Wings)* (1947), by Luiz Gonzaga and Humberto Teixeira, the former from Pernambuco and the latter from Ceará, both knowledgeable about the effects of the drought in the backlands of the Northeast, masterfully portray this imagery in their lyrics:

Quando oiei' a terra ardendo

Qual fogueira de São João

Eu preguntei' a Deus do céu, uai

Por que tamanha judiação?

Que braseiro, que fornaia'

Nenhum pé de prantação'

Por farta' d'água perdi meu gado

Morreu de sede meu alazão

In this section of the music, the composers describe how the earth burns like a bonfire, where plants wither and horses die of thirst, as men look up in prayer, supplicating and asking why there is so much pain. It's the earth blazing under the sun, becoming a furnace, preying on the northeasterner. Surrounded by such woes, the men cannot farm; that which is sown dies. The sun kills the cattle as well, bringing hunger and misery, leading the *sertanejo* to raise their hands to the sky, silently questioning the reason for so much suffering.

This desolate image only finds parallel in another that is so characteristic of the *sertanejo*: the request for a blessing and the prayer for a good winter. For if the greatest evil that can afflict this region is the drought, then the arrival of the rain is understood as a redemption.

Other Northeastern composers also identify this cruel dichotomy. In the song *Último Pau de Arara* (homonym with no direct equivalent translation, an expression that simultaneously refers to a type of plant of the *Parkia* family, a type of informal and precarious refugee transportation, and a type of torture frequently used by the Brazilian dictatorship that dates back to slavery punishments), the composer from Ceará, Fagner, conveys this difficulty, saying how the hardships of life are bound to the drought:

A vida aqui só é ruim

Quando não chove no chão

Mas se chover dá de tudo

Fartura tem de porção

The rain is the counterpart of the drought. Everything grows in moist earth. It is bountiful. It is fertile soil.

These two great images compose the landscapes of this Northeastern *sertão* which, comprising an extensive strip of land that spreads across the states of Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe, is characterized by the predominance of only two seasons: one dry and the other rainy, which makes up for about three or four months of the first half of the year.

The scarcity of the short period of the rainy season compared to the many months of the year where the sun prevails, accompanied by the memory of the difficult times coping with the drought, makes the always uncertain wait for the rain happen with a mixture of anguish and hope. Even today, when large reservoirs such as Castanhão or Oros – or with the transposition of the São Francisco River – are able to marginally reduce the hardships of the previously experienced drought periods, the fear of water shortages still haunts the population of the *sertão*. Notwithstanding the fact that the construction of these reservoirs may mitigate the effects of drought, they still reach mainly city people, not being enough to save the crops and grazing animals.

The approach of the end of the year leads to the proximity of winter and the first signs of redemption by the rains or punishment by the sun are already there, available to the eyes that know how to see. Therefore, every beginning of the year carries with it the hope for a good winter, longing for a better weather to sow, waiting for the fattening of the livestock, for the greenness of the fields, yearning to be once again reunited with the fertile land where everything grows, given that, for the small farmer and the small rancher, a bad winter produces only poverty and scarceness.

It is not difficult to realize how important this wait is, given the extreme imagery and the triggered impacts, let alone how much the beginning of the year and the proximity of the rainy season is loaded with expectation by the *sertanejo*. In scenarios like these, any forecasting possibility, for better or for worse, becomes vital. It is in this environment that we find the figure of the Prophet of Rain and their so-called “winter experiences” (CÂMARA, 2021).

2. The Rain

It is hard to determine when the custom of winter-related prophecies began. Forecasting or the practice of prediction has existed since time immemorial, after all, inspired by the gods or divinatory practices, men have always tried to draw the future closer, reducing the effects of its unpredictability. In the specific case of the Rain Prophets, it is very likely that the predictions are a mixture of the cultural traits brought by Europeans with the culture of the native people, eventually enriched by the African culture, deriving from the slavery period.

That being said, two disclaimers must be made regarding this issue. First, although it bears the name of “prophecy”, the word of the Prophet of Rain cannot be precisely understood as a divinatory practice. The Prophet, as we will see in more detail later, does not guess whether there will be a good winter or not, but rather observes and reads the signs offered by nature that, in their understanding,

can indicate the possibility of having a good winter or not. Second, although currently presenting the characteristics of an oral tradition, the prophecies have been historically published in newspapers, small books or *cordel* leaflets (a type of troubadoresque-like literature, traditionally Northeastern, similar to a chapbook) while still in the Empire, undergoing a great expansion from the 1930s on, as radio and other dissemination media emerged.

It is believed that the figure of the Prophet itself came into being, most likely, from the amalgamation of the countryman's experience united with the cultural traditions. Given their needs as small farmers or ranchers, the rural individual would always be concerned about the coming of rainfall, which is decisive for planting season and productivity. In the very act of always being attentive to the changes of nature, to the signs that point to this or that prognosis, the *sertanejo* learned to predict the weather through their daily experiences. Their predictions would be then gradually exchanged with other people, so that, over time and with the forecasts' confirmation, their word would be heard and valued. In this process of perceiving the world and sharing the experience, the word became "prophecy" and, its enunciator, a "prophet" (PENNESI; BRAGA, 2012).

Given that they often are humble men from the countryside, although many live today in urban settings, the Prophet tends to be a rustic person, and, in most cases, with no formal education. Hence, their mindset and perspective are not based on academic schooling, which is well exemplified by the speech of one of the Prophets, Chico Leiteiro: "I understand almost nothing by letter, no... but by nature... that's another open book. Sometimes the lads say, 'How do you understand this?' My friend, seeing is one thing, knowing is another" (BRUNO; MARTINS, 2008, p. 7, my translation).

The Prophets of Rain are not considered to be a cultural heritage of a specific place and do exist throughout the Northeast, however, we chose to highlight herein one of the Prophets' meeting, held in the city of Quixadá, in the central hinterland of Ceará. This event, which always takes place on the second Saturday of January, happens in the period prior to the beginning of the rainy season, which is equivalent to the four months of the year in which winter is expected. The meeting was formalized in 1996 and is supported by the Shopkeepers Association (CDL – *Centro de Diretores Lojistas*) of Quixadá, bringing together farmers from various states of the Northeast and also counting on the presence of meteorological technicians from the Meteorology and Water Resources Foundation of Ceará (Funceme - *Fundação Cearense de Meteorologia e Recursos Hídricos*), as well as amateur meteorologists. During this event, each participant presents their predictions regarding the upcoming winter: whether there will be rain or not, whether it will be a little or a lot, or if it will be a year of drought (PENNESI; BRAGA, 2012). Meteorologists

deliver their statements centered on science, while the Prophets, for the most part, follow different criteria of naturalistic observation, systematically reinforced by experiences and readings of signs such as the star position of stars, the wind, the mating of animals, the singing of birds, the way they build their nests, the body's humours and temperament, etc. Furthermore, it should be also pointed out that when the event began in 1996 it had only six Prophets, and in 2024 this number reached almost thirty.

It is possible to observe in this meeting's formalization a clear clash between scientific assessments and popular culture. The meteorologists tend to devalue the Prophets of Rain, considering them of less importance since their forecasts are not scientific in nature. The Prophets of Rain, in turn, tend to be suspicious of the meteorologists, as they consider that sometimes scientific predictions contradict nature's signs.

This quarrel recalls a similar situation recounted by Jung when he visited Africa and realized that the arrival of the European colonizer elicited a confrontation between the European and the African cultures. The quote can be found in the book *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

We once talked to *laibon*, the old medicine-man chief. He appeared dressed in a gorgeous blue monkey skin robe: it was a sumptuous ceremonial garb. When I questioned him about his dreams, he explained to me with tears in his eyes: "Once, the *laibons* had dreams and knew when there would be war or disease, if the rain would come and where the herds should be taken." His grandfather still dreamed. But since the white people arrived in Africa, no one else had dreamed. There was no more need for dreams, because now the English men knew everything (JUNG, 2016, p. 175, my translation).

It is a conflict between the word of science and the word of tradition, of the countryman who build their outlook based on their daily work with nature. Another interesting feature is visible in this rivalry: while larger producers always give preference to what Funceme's technical representatives say, the small producer, who represents the majority of those who go to the event, tend to believe more in the predictions made by the Prophets of Rain, always looking with mistrust at the scientists' predictions. This means that the Prophet's words have quite a relevance in their communities, despite the existence of scientific methods for weather forecasting, showing, as stated above, that their words go beyond the mere transmission of knowledge.

What is seen here is not only the opposition between two discourses, but the fact that, in the formalization and application of a scientific method, the distance between the subject and the object to be known is reenacted. In the search for a more reliable predictions, science seeks to make an objective reading of nature, bestowing them with more credible attributes, while the Prophet reads this same nature based on their intimacy with the world. Being largely made

up of farmers, the Prophets of Rain tend to build their knowledge not only from the tradition that was passed on to them, but also through the daily work with the land, with the animals, with the observation of the phenomena which they call “winter experiences”.

It is worth reminding that the Prophet’s word is not a divinatory practice that eliminates the unpredictability of the future, because in the *sertanejo*’s perspective, as a deeply religious individual, it belongs only to God. The prophecy is not a certainty, but a possibility. Their speech, therefore, is halfway between religion and science, between popular belief and scientific knowledge, expressing the ancestry of so many experienced accounts spread out through the *sertão*, full of hope for the confirmation of nature’s signs. Thus, the predictions are not the result of a scientific method, calculated from objectively collected data, nor are they a divine revelation made to the the Prophet’s eyes, as if they were chosen by God to lead the mission of showing the way and guiding their people to the blessings. Instead, their word is an utterance that coordinates the present around the possibilities shared with all of those who listen to it and who are part of that same horizon in which the *sertanejo* lives. Here, “prophecy” is the word that organizes and unites those who listen, as they also wish to believe in the the Prophet’s words, meaning that it generates social cohesion - their experience becomes therefore useful, as a way of building an identity related to the social group of which the Prophets and so many other farmers are part of (BRUNO; MARTINS, 2008).

As such, the prophecy is the force that maintains a functioning social identity among the Prophet and the small farmer, providing a proximity with the future, reducing the distress of its uncertainty and allowing it to presentiate itself so that an action can be implemented accordingly. Ergo, a prophecy deeply defies the powerlessness of the *sertanejo* when faced with such forces of nature and the world.

3. Anima Mundi

For the Prophet of Rain, nature is an open book waiting to be read. There are no secrets to be deciphered or rituals to be performed, there are just signs that only an attentive ear and a trained look can recognize, because this listenable word is born connected to another sense: it is birthed from the gaze. The Prophet’s perception differs from the contemporary view that always seeks to see everything all the time; at this point, it is not a matter of seeing more than others, of seeing everything. It is an intimate visibility, especially concerning the way the individual reacts to the world. Unlike the scientific approach, which perceives the world as a supposedly objective field that one must scrutinize and grasp, the Prophet’s gaze requires the world’s subjectivity, the awareness of how this world affects their body, letting

themselves be filled by the world in order to be able to recognize the near future that this world carries embedded in the present.

In other words, it is not only the outside nature that attracts the Prophet's gaze. The "winter experiences" are also about reading how your own body responds to the world. Headaches, bone pains, neuralgias, sleep alterations and, of course, dreams are all signs that must be considered, in anticipation of realizing what the coming time holds. The Prophet reads both nature and the way nature affects their body, considering the world outside, but also the world inside themselves - the flight of the bees, the paths built by the ants on the ground, the way certain birds build their nests, the brightness of the full moon; all this coupled with the small pains of the body, the neuralgias, the night sweats, in short, with this body that reacts to the rhythms of the world (SILVA et al., 2014).

This way, men's body is no longer separated from nature, they infiltrate this world to build their visions and substantiate their words. Nature does not pertain solely the outside world, from which individuals distance themselves to see it from afar, but dialogues with another one, with which one lives in communion (VIEIRA, 2006). The world is first felt, perceived, and only then signified. The Prophet is the one who unites imagination with feeling once more, circumventing the notion of a separation between the Self and the World, rescuing the world's ability to provoke us imaginatively, embodying the imagination and fusing it with matter again, be it either from the earth around them or from their own body.

As stated by Hillman (1993), in order to feel we must imagine, and to imagine we must let ourselves be permeated by the world. Being open to the world, looking at it properly, as the Prophet does, implies letting ourselves be affected by it, allowing it to provoke our imagination, which then becomes filled with hope, fear or other feelings, leading us to observe more and more carefully the world that is presented before us. The world has something to communicate to us in its images - for the Prophet, nature is a being who exists insofar as it is perceived, also granting existence to the individual to the extent as they perceive themselves in nature (HILLMAN, 1997). Moreover, it is possible to conclude that the Prophet has an aesthetic reaction to the world, given that whenever we let ourselves be affected by the presence of a phenomenon, we can say that we are facing the idea of aesthetics, meaning that we are affected in an aesthetic way:

The Greek word for perception or sensation was *aisthesis*, which originally meant to inspire or lead the world inward, the breath interrupted (...) in the face of surprise, fright, amazement, an aesthetic reaction to the image (*eidolon*) presented (HILLMAN, 1993, p. 17, my translation).

The world that reveals itself to the Prophet through its signs is aesthetic, it is therefore an aphrodisiac world, since one of Aphrodite's

epithets was precisely “the one who reveals secrets” (SCHENK, 1992). Aphrodite is the representation of the way we understand the world, the nakedness of things as they reveal themselves to an aesthetically affected imagination.

The world of the *sertão*, consequently, communicates something to the Prophet, it affects them. The world becomes a *pathos*; not suffering itself, but affectation. The very adjectives used by writers, musicians and farmers demonstrate this *pathos* of the land: sometimes it is a furnace that burns, sometimes it is a form of Judgment Day, a punishment or pain, the madness of the *sertanejo*, but it can also be abundance, wealth, happiness, redemption. In these various images, the Hillmanian notion of *Anima Mundi* is rescued, and the world is recognized as that which provokes us in our imagination.

Let us imagine the *Anima Mundi* not above the world that surrounds it, as a divine and remote emanation of the spirit, a world of powers, archetypes and principles transcendent to things, somewhat within the material world as its unifying panpsychic life principle. Instead, let us imagine the *Anima Mundi* as that special soul gleam, that seminal image that presents itself, in its visible form, through everything. So *Anima Mundi* points out the animated possibilities offered in each event as it is, its sensory presentation as a face revealing its inner image - in short, its availability to the imagination, its presence as a psychic reality (HILLMAN, 1993, p. 14, my translation).

What is enunciated from this aesthetic reaction is the very existence of oneself and the world: to be is to be perceived. The word's power lies in the evocation of what it represents and, as such, the individual announces nature itself, the world itself, as the perception of the world's presence evokes the affections that will be enunciated in the their word.

The Prophet seeks, in a way, to speak of that which, in the end, does not belong to the sphere of man, but far surpasses him, entering the field of the transcendent. They seek, with their words, to appease the anguish engendered by so many years of built up fear, in a world where a bad prognosis can severely affect people's lives. The reading of the signs and the prophecy of a good winter contributes not only to social cohesion, but also to the maintenance of hope and to the support of an ever-changing tradition, that, regardless of the scientific knowledge development, is constantly being enriched over the years, as it is modified by new “winter experiences” in a world that remains aesthetic, brought in, provoking us while revealing itself aesthetically. At last, a beautiful world comes into view before our eyes in an aphrodisiac way, coming into existence as it gives us existence, sometimes in the form of redemption, rain and abundance, sometimes amid the always present possibility of drought, death and this “blue that dazzles, but maddens us”.

REFERENCES

- BARBALHO, A. Trajetos. **Revista de História UFC**, Fortaleza, v. 3, n. 6, p. 139-150, 2005.
- BRUNO, F.; MARTINS, K. P. H. Profetas da natureza: ver e dizer no sertão. **Intexto**, Porto Alegre, v. 1, n. 18, p. 1-12, 2008.
- CÂMARA, Y. R. Profetas da chuva quixadaenses: ancestralidade, cultura popular, oralidade, memória, resistência. **Ensino em Perspectivas**, Fortaleza, v. 2, n. 4, p. 1-11, 2021.
- DANTAS, E. W. C. Imaginário social nordestino e políticas de desenvolvimento do turismo no nordeste brasileiro. **GEOUSP - Espaço e Tempo**, São Paulo, n. 22, p. 9-30, 2007. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2179-0892.geousp.2007.74063>.
- HILLMAN, J. **Cidade e alma**. São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 1993.
- HILLMAN, J. **O código do ser**. São Paulo: Objetiva, 1997.
- JUNG, C. **Memórias, sonhos, reflexões**. São Paulo: Nova Fronteira, 2016.
- PENNESI, K.; BRAGA, C. R. O encontro anual dos profetas da chuva em Quixadá: a circulação de discursos e a invenção de uma tradição. **Horizontes Antropológicos**, Porto Alegre, v. 18, n. 38, p. 159-186, 2012. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-71832012000200007>.
- QUEIROZ, R. **O quinze**. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 2012.
- RAMOS, G. **Vidas secas**. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2019.
- SCHENK, R. **The soul of beauty: towards a psychology of appearance**. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1992.
- SILVA, N. M.; ANDRADE, A. J. P.; ROZENDO, C. 'Profetas da chuva' do Seridó potiguar, Brasil. **Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas**, Belém, v. 9, n. 3, p. 773-795, 2014. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1590/1981-81222014000300014>.
- TAMANINI, P. A.; SILVA, E. D. R. O Nordeste, as imagens e o ensino: o real e o imaginário na iconografia da seca. **Revista Linhas**, Florianópolis, v. 20, n. 43, p. 317-337, 2019. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5965/1984723820432019317>.
- VIEIRA, D. S. L. Paisagem e imaginário: contribuições teóricas para uma história cultural do Olhar. **Fênix - Revista de História e Estudos Culturais**, Uberlândia, v. 3, n. 3, p. 1-14, 2006.

Farley Valentim is graduated in Psychology by the Federal University of Ceará (1996), has a master's degree in Psychology from the Federal University of Ceará (2011), was a professor at the Christus University Center (UniChristus) from 2011 to 2022, is a psychologist at the Psychosocial Care Center (CAPS - *Centros de Atenção Psicossocial*), in Maranguape-CE, and is a member of the Archetypal Psychology Institute of Mantiqueira (IMPAR - *Instituto Mantiqueira de Psicologia Arquetípica*).

farleyvalentim@gmail.com