

THE POETIC, THE PROPHETIC, AND THE PATHETIC IN “PELAS TABELAS”, BY CHICO BUARQUE

O POÉTICO, O PROFÉTICO E O PATÉTICO EM “PELAS TABELAS”, DE CHICO BUARQUE

Gladir da Silva Cabral¹ 

Jorge Geraldo de Camargo Filho² 

¹Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense, Criciúma, SC, Brasil

²Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, São Paulo, SP, Brasil

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the song “Pelas Tabelas”, by Chico Buarque, and explores its main allusion: the Biblical figure of John the Baptist as a symbol of resistance to tyranny, violence, and irrationality. Buarque uses poetry, irony, and references to Brazilian culture in order to create a story of love and alienation with pathetic intensity. The paper contextualizes the song in the context of Buarque’s musical *oeuvre* and in that particular political moment in Brazilian history – the 1980s – in which a great movement for the reestablishment of democracy was on its way: the movement called Diretas Já. This analysis proposes a dialogue with the fields of cultural studies, theology, and literature. It shows that Buarque’s song is imbued with the poetic, the prophetic, and the pathetic.

Keywords: Chico Buarque. Brazilian Pop Song. Alienation. Pathos. Art and Politics.

Resumo

Este trabalho apresenta uma análise da canção “Pelas Tabelas”, de Chico Buarque, e explora sua principal alusão: a figura bíblica de João Batista como símbolo de resistência à tirania, à violência e à irracionalidade. Buarque usa poesia, ironia e referências à cultura brasileira para criar uma história de amor e alienação com intensidade patética. O trabalho contextualiza a canção no âmbito da obra musical de Buarque e no momento político da história brasileira – os anos 80 – em que um grande

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un análisis de la canción “Pelas Tabelas”, de Chico Buarque, y explora su principal alusión: la figura bíblica de Juan el Bautista como símbolo de resistencia a la tiranía, la violencia y la irracionalidad. Buarque utiliza la poesía, la ironía y las referencias a la cultura brasileña para crear una historia de amor y alienación de intensidad patética. El trabajo contextualiza la canción en el ámbito de la obra musical de Buarque y en el momento político de la historia brasileña –la década de

movimento para o restabelecimento da democracia estava a caminho: o movimento chamado “Diretas Já”. Esta análise propõe um diálogo com os campos dos estudos culturais, da teologia e da literatura. Mostra que o canto de Buarque está imbuído da poética, do profético e do patético.

Keywords: Chico Buarque. Música Popular Brasileira. Alienação. Pathos. Arte e Política.

1980– en la que estaba en marcha un gran movimiento por el restablecimiento de la democracia: el movimiento llamado “*Diretas Já*”. Este análisis propone un diálogo con los campos de los estudios culturales, la teología y la literatura. Muestra que la canción de Buarque está impregnada de lo poético, lo profético y lo patético.

Palabras-clave: Chico Buarque. Canción Pop Brasileña. Alienación. Pathos. Arte y Política.

Now Herod had arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, for John had been saying to him: It is not lawful for you to have her. Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered John a prophet.

On Herod’s birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for the guests and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist. The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother (Bible, Matthew, 2011, 14, p. 3-11).

John the Baptist knows really well what is going on around him. He knows that he himself is just a voice that cries in the desert. He met “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”. He woke the sleeping cat called Herodes, pointed out his sin, unmasked his unmentionable sins and most hidden ambitions. John the Baptist knows he is walking into a hazardous field, amidst “brood of vipers”. Acquainted with the dryness of the deserts, he knows about power traffic in palatial banquets, the thin soup of prisons in Machaerus fortress, but prefers to follow a balanced diet of “locusts and wild honey”. This is the mysterious prophetic figure Chico Buarque elects as final [central] allusion of the song “Pelos Tabelas”.

The song “Pelos Tabelas” (Out of my mind), by Chico Buarque, was written and published in 1984, as part of the album *Chico Buarque* alongside political and romantic songs such as “Vai Passar”, “Mil Perdões”, “Brejo da Cruz”, “Como se fosse a Primavera” (Pablo Milanés and Nicolás Guillén), “Tantas Palavras”, among others. Its structure is “cyclical” (Santos, 2014), and the lines are intertwined, without amendments or slots, as a seamless robe. The structure of the rhyme suggests an organization of verses in quartets that

unfold and repeat themselves, that is, a complete repetition, culminating in one last stanza that makes a variation. There are four stanzas of four verses that repeat themselves four times, always starting over. There is not a final touch in the song; it ends in *fade out*, with no cycle break whatsoever. The feeling is of a certain monotony, were it not for the evolution of the arrangement, which continues to grow, while adding new instrumental and rhythmic elements. These effects are present in other songs by Chico, such as “Construção” and “Pedro Pedreiro”, for instance. In this way, there is not a moment of final relaxation and relief, but of containment and recharge.

The song “Pelas Tabelas” starts with a subject somewhat confused and alienated regarding what goes on around him. He is in love with a woman who one day left and looks forward to seeing her return, the loving reunion. In the first four verses, he confesses he’s confused, already “out of his mind”, with affliction and anxiety. He must have slept poorly. When he sees on the street a group of people wearing “yellow shirts”, he thinks it is Carnival and has the illusion that his beloved one is leading the crowd. It is known that Carnival is an important symbol in Chico Buarque’s repertoire (Cavalcanti, 2009). In the same album there is the song, “Vai Passar”, which juxtaposes political openness and popular celebration, samba and redemption. Renato Janine Ribeiro wrote a very interesting text on the political and utopic dimension of Chico Buarque’s work. According to Ribeiro, Chico’s songs reveal in particular the ongoing tension between utopia and dystopia (2004). For him, utopia inhabits the universe of “gestation of a collective, more than that, of a collective that is a hero as a group, as a nation, perhaps even as a class – ultimately, as a cohesive and harmonious totality that practices high deeds, a feat, an epic, a career” (2004, p. X). In other words, the utopian focus on the centrality of the public, in contrast with private interest.

In the case of the song “Pelas Tabelas”, the situation is quite ironic. The persona of the song, watching a group of people celebrating on the street, thinks it is indeed Carnival, and his beloved is “leading that crowd”. He makes a wrong reading of the scenario. The movement of the people suggests public and political manifestation, but the persona is wrapped up in himself and his passion, alienated from his own being and his historical context. The people go to the streets to protest against oppression and celebrate a new time, a moment, yet brief, of democratic robustness, something similar to what Walter Benjamin calls “messianic moment” (Benjamin, 1987). The figure of John the Baptist, the one who comes to prepare the way for the Messiah’s arrival, seems to confirm this reading as possible. He was a character of a Biblical story who eagerly waited for the arrival of the Messianic time. Here one can find superimposed the strength of the political movement and

the introverted strength of love, the clash between disinterest for the public sphere and fascination for what is private (Starling, 2009).

The intro of the song “Pelás Tabelas” seems to allude to another song, “Morena de Angola”, great hit from his album *Vida*, of 1980. The bar, the instruments, the beat are very similar. It is as if Chico wanted to suggest that the Morena was coming back, with her moves, her ding-dongs and her sensuality. On the other hand, this allusion highlights the contrast between engagement and alienation. The Morena of Angola is a woman of political and revolutionary engagement, while the persona of the song “Pelás Tabelas” is a totally alienated guy. This politically engaged Morena seems to align herself with the beloved woman of the song, and contrasts with the alienated persona. He belongs to a certain social class that she also belongs to; both come from the slums.

The musical arrangement of the song is conceived in such a way to create the sensation of a whirlwind, of a cycle to be repeated, almost a perpetual motion, with very little variation, except in the stanzas in which the lyrics are altered and a variation of the verse is inserted, by saying that: “I swore she was arriving/with my head on a plate”. The lyrics of the song seem to suggest a flow of thought by association, one scene followed by another, in an unending movement. One can feel the oscillation on the melodic line wandering around on the musical score, highs and lows, on a continuous ripple on hold and always delaying the rest. “The drama lived by Chico Buarque’s persona becomes permanent, since the song has no end. Therefore, it is structured in a perpetual, continuous motion, a characteristic observed by Walter Garcia (2010) when analyzing the song ‘Águas de março’ (1972) by Tom Jobim” (Santos, 2014, p. 104).

Starting with the title, one can see the crisis the persona of the song has gone through. The expression “out of my mind” suggests the vulnerable position of this guy, his physical and mental exhaustion, his inability to think clearly and objectively. This expression is a short version of the popular saying: “getting out of his mind”, to be out of strength, heartbroken, weary, sold out, suffering from insomnia, sleepy. Over the course of the song, one sees that the mental confusion in which the persona finds himself in gets deeper and deeper and has no end.

In the following four lines, the melody repeats itself and the lyrics give another spin. Using a refined resource, Chico bounds the fourth verse to the next. Thus, “I thought she was leading the crowd” merges to “It’s eight o’clock and I dance with a yellow shirt”. The song introduces here an impressive feature. The last word of the first quartet – “cordão” – merges with the first word of the second quartet – “Dão”. Here comes an important detail about narrative time: “It’s eight hours”. Involved by the crowd and thinking it is

Carnival, the persona dances in a yellow blouse, along with the people amidst the rhythmic sound of the city banging pots. Again, the persona misreads: “I thought it was her coming back to me.”

And once again, the last word of the second quartet – “mim” – merges with the first word of the third quartet – “Minha”. “I thought it was her coming back to [me] / [My] head at night banging pots.” In this way, the structure of the song is tied together and gives the impression of an inseparable whole. Line by line, the stanzas are being melodically and poetically bounded. In the third stanza, the persona says that it is his head that is “banging pans”, certainly one more reference to his mental confusion state. His head is throbbing. He has the feeling that the whole city is being disturbed by this noise, which fills the song with irony by reinforcing the discrepancy between collective and individual, public feast and private suffering. And in this stanza, he refers to the people going down the slums, which is confirmed by the *crescendo* of the musical arrangement.

And again, the end of the third stanza – “I swore it was the people who’d come to ask” – is linked both syntactically and semantically to the fourth stanza, that complements the idea – “The head of a man who looked at the slums”. One observes that it is not just one slum specifically, but many. Asking for a man’s head is the first mention to the prophet John the Baptist. Although the name of the city is not mentioned, one knows it is Rio de Janeiro, with the unmistakable reference to “Maracanã”, scenario of the last dramatic scene of the song. In it, the persona’s head appears, now serving as a soccer ball and ends up “rolling in Maracanã”, with a “standing ovation from the crowd to the gives-and-goes”. Even so, in this uncomfortable decapitation situation, the persona still swears that he sees his beloved coming back to him. The conviction that he has in relation to the loving illusion he lives makes the persona impervious to any hint of connection with reality. The severed head seems to suggest this moment of loss of rationality. A surreal vision: Maracanã, cheering fans, table moves between the players, head rolling, and then the image of the beloved appearing with “my head already on a plate”. Interestingly, the Biblical text narrating the death of John the Baptist contains these elements: the surreal, the violence, the exchange of power, the banquet, the carnival, the suffering, the *pathos* and the pathetic. In the song, the word head occurs 21 times. In contrast to the steadfast resolve of John the Baptist, the song’s persona is ensnared in a state of mental disarray, adrift in a sea of alienation.

After this first presentation of the plot, the song is repeated in its entirety, the 16 verses, an evolution of the samba school parading on the avenue. The variation is on account of the arrangement, increasingly full of musical instruments, harmonies and Chico’s voice being duplicated. The

song's intro starts with the guitar and the agogô, which later receives the addition of flutes and percussion. When the lyrics return to the second cycle, the percussion grows, the brass and the second voice of Chico himself enter. After the stanza that refers to the "head on a plate", there is the third cycle in which the lyrics are repeated. After that, there is another transition and a fourth cycle in which the lyrics are sung again. As can be seen, it is through repetition and the crescendo movement that the song builds the feeling of perpetual motion. The persona is constantly on the move, through the city streets, through the slums, in the heart of Maracanã. And this continuous wandering revolves around an absence: this woman that the persona is waiting for so long to arrive.

The song received numerous readings throughout the history of its reception. It was first read as a political manifesto related to the Diretas Já movement, suggesting a clear reference to General João Batista de Oliveira Figueiredo (Werneck, 1989). This version was later contested by Chico himself in an interview with *Folha de São Paulo*, saying: "This tendency to always see through the political somehow crystallized an idea that does not satisfy me at all. [...] The song is called 'Pelas tabelas'. He is a guy looking for a woman, in love, in the middle of the demonstration for the right to vote. This is the confusion of the individual with the collective and points a lot to the individual in that collective moment" (Homem, 2009, p. 227). In fact, the song's reference is to another John the Baptist: The Biblical prophet who welcomed Christ Jesus and who ended up being arrested for denouncing Herod's abuse and his incestuous relationship with Herodias. The theological or religious reference is discreet and ironic. There is no divine intervention in the song, no supernatural deliverance. Not even the name of the prophet John the Baptist is mentioned, only the reference to the head cut off and placed on a tray.

The song's first historical reference is to the campaign for Diretas Já, which took place in the decade in which the song was written and published, especially a march held on April 30, 1984. This is a fundamental allusion to the understanding of the song, which is certainly not exhausted in its political implications. The Diretas movement already represented the clamor for the return of democracy in a country ruled for almost twenty years by a military dictatorship. Ironically, in a not too distant future, other marches would take place in Brazilian history and mark the clamor for the end of democracy and for a new military intervention. It would be the 2013 marches that would bring significant new light to the song and the symbol of the yellow blouse. The street marches in 2013 and more recently the presidential campaign of then-candidate Jair Bolsonaro brought another meaning to the yellow jersey symbol, now with ultra-right values. Hitting a pot and wearing a yellow shirt

have gained new meaning since the 2016 coup. History seems to repeat itself as a farce. Not quite the same way. In 1984, those who wore yellow shirts and hit the pot wanted democracy. In 2018, those wearing yellow shirts and banging pots wanted the intervention of a messianic dictator. The irony of the situation brings a new nuance to the song's reading. As historical circumstances change, the reading of the text also changes. The tension between engagement and political alienation present in the song is also present in the current political scenario. But this was mere coincidence, or else the song is prophetic and captured the contradictions that were already present at that time (1984) in the Brazilian population.

In the song, some images stand out: the guy out of his mind, the yellow blouse, the city banging the pots, the people descending the slums, asking for the head of the man who looked at the slums, the head of the persona of the song rolling through the Maracanã. Idioms, figures of speech, surreal scenes, there are several poetic features in Chico's song. The song's lyrics play with the various meanings and expressions around the word "head": losing your head, a head on a tray, your head hitting pots... In general, the head works well as a symbol of rationality, of centrality of thought, of the individual. Here, the head is in crisis, in terrible condition, dysfunctional, since it can no longer think coherently and understand what is going on. The persona's head is separated from the rest of the body.

He is a being torn apart by this fundamental decapitation. The crisis of the song's persona is in the head. It has to do with exhaustion, precariousness, difficulty in organizing thought. The verbs that describe it are: "I found", "I thought", "I swore". The persona always expresses its subjective perspective, its relative and human point of view. His impressions are what's left. There is no place for what it is, but for what I thought it was. In football, in the democratic game, in the game of love, all that remains are the personal impressions of this disoriented subject.

The image of the give and go is also an important sign in football, a move that reminds us of dance moves, of art. Carnival and football have some points in common: both are shows, involve crowds, include dance as their repertoire of performance acts, in addition to partying, laughter, popular synthesis, mass participation. These are rituals that bring together crowds. Football and Carnival are symbols that are always very present in Chico Buarque's songs, signs of Brazilianness, elements of strong appeal in popular culture.

The succession of images in an almost kaleidoscopic way seems to suggest a progression towards the stadium. At the beginning of the song, the persona sees the people wearing a yellow blouse and has the illusion that it was his beloved who had been pulling a "cordon" of revelers, an expression

that introduces the metaphor of Carnival. Afterwards, it is eight o'clock (at night, probably) and the persona is already dancing in a yellow blouse, imagining himself appeased and thinking that it was his loved one who was coming back to him in the middle of the crowd that was beating pots. Then it is the persona's own head that beats the pots, and he has the impression of disturbing the sleep of the city, as he imagines that the same crowd comes to ask for a man's head, probably his own. The suggestion here is that of an execution, a lynching. At the end, the poet sees his head rolling in a great spectacle in the middle of Maracanã. This sequence of scenes repeats itself cyclically throughout the song, until reaching the verse that brings a change in the initial stanza, with the head of the persona no longer making him "lose his mind", but "on a plate", a pastiche version of the silver tray who received the head of John the Baptist.

Herod lost his mind over Salome's dance and nearly put his kingdom to waste in a maddening distribution of territory. John the Baptist lost his mind over Herod and his obsession with women, thanks to the prophet's office, who does not mince words when it comes to telling the truth, with the arid honesty of a desert prophet. John the Baptist's head is alienated from his body, just as Herod's is alienated from his people, and the persona of the song is alienated from himself, from his historical moment and from the collective experience. The persona of the song is the epitome of alienation, confuses democratic demonstration with carnival, confuses his personal fantasies with the collective dream.

In fact, it is known that John the Baptist is far from being an alienated person. He is much more a prophet engaged in the struggles of his people, a preacher of the divine Kingdom, a prophet who criticizes power and his time. He is slain by proclaiming the possibility of another order, unlike the persona of the song, who cannot understand what is going on around him and who cannot get out of his confused state of mind. The prophet John the Baptist was under control of his voice, he knew the gravity of his situation, the oppression of his people, the sin that dominates the representative of power, the rottenness that surrounded the entire Roman court and palace routines, he knew what was going through Herod's mind and heart. He was not intimidated by a political system that is anything but democratic. The party at Herod's palace is the party of lust, of the extravasation of power, unlike the party that spreads on the streets of Brazil at the time of the song, the party for the return of democracy.

If, on the one hand, the persona of the song is alienated from its social context, its bond with the community, just the opposite of John the Baptist. On the other hand, they have something in common: passion. The prophet is totally in love with his mission as an itinerant preacher of a radical

message: “Repent!”. He himself is the victim of an execution without a legal process and suffers the death penalty. The word passion is linked to the root “suffer”. His innocent suffering is pathetic, in the etymological sense of the word. As for the persona of the song, he too suffers, his head is fuzzy and loose, and he’s also pathetic, but in another sense, a little less noble or admirable, nothing heroic, nothing patriotic. John the Baptist is a prophet: denouncer of wrongdoings, announcer of changes, preacher of conversions, divine kingdoms, and divine wrath. In contrast, the persona of the song is a quiet citizen who is not too concerned with his citizenship, but with his heart, with his conflict in love. He is obsessed with the image of a woman, so he loses all sense of reality. His obsession is Herodian, his beheading is Baptist. The situation is also ironic if we consider that the audience that hears the song knows what the yellow shirt means in the demonstrations for Diretas Já; the persona does not. He is stuck in the universe of song, in his condition of not knowing.

In the song, “losing the head” indicates a process of alienation, something that is not verified in the story of John the Baptist. He is not alienated. The one who is enchanted by Salome is Herod. The one, in turn, who acts in full use of a cold and controlled rationality is Herodias, who suggests to her daughter the request for the head of John the Baptist on a tray. The one who loses his mind is John. In the Biblical story, it is not about the conquest or the return of democracy, but about authoritarianism and the abuse of power at the hands of a criminal and despot: Herod. Therefore, the reference to John the Baptist has its limits, but it is perfectly in keeping with the complexity of the Biblical story. Herod doesn’t know it, but he is alienating himself from his people’s love, from democracy, from his country’s history, from God’s blessing. Herod is the leader who acts from the lower belly. He doesn’t act rationally. In turn, John the Baptist was the one who had his head separated from his body. It was a violent process of physical alienation.

The arrival of the woman never materializes in the song, which seems to be an update to Samuel Beckett’s (2011) drama *Waiting for Godot*. In the play, two solitary and confused characters await the arrival of Godot, who is always postponed and who also never materializes. This female figure in Chico’s song can be read, in her terms, as a woman of flesh and blood, an old passion of the persona, but it can also be read as something transcendent that never materializes, a continual absence, an always-postponed presence. Does it mean Brazilian democracy, absent for a period of almost 20 years? If so, the song has a strong political ingredient. It would show the great mismatch between the persona and the democratic vocation. This would explain the mental confusion that surrounds him, the tension between his individual project and the irrepressible forces of the collective movements that surround him.

Dance is another important element in Chico's song, after all, it is by dancing in a yellow blouse that the persona blends into the crowd. This element is also important in the Biblical account of John the Baptist beheading, for it was Salomé's dance that drove King Herod mad with desire to the point of motivating him to offer her half of his kingdom. Advised by her mother, Salomé asks as a reward for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. John the Baptist's prized head is worth more than half of Herod's reign. The prophet's head on a platter reveals the irrationality that had established itself in the heart of the Empire. Dance is also linked to the Carnival party and revolutionary performance, as a challenge to the order in force in that Palestine, which functioned as a branch of Rome. However, the periphery of the Empire was to become the heart of the Christian narrative, the center of another kingdom.

In a way, this song by Chico thematizes the artist's place amid society's movements, encounters and disagreements. In the song, personal dilemmas and social aspirations cross paths. But there is no conversion or engagement on the part of the persona. The artist must assume his ambiguous position of nurturing and alerting so many dreams. The persona and his beloved. The artist and his muse. Salomé's dance in contrast to the dance of the people in the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Power (Herod) and its missteps, its abuses.

Eduardo Calvani (1998) defines the song as a form of "sung literature". For Charles Perrone, the song is "performance literature" (1988). The song would have, therefore, a hybrid character, a sort of blended place between music and literature. Luiz Tatit (2016), on the other hand, understands the song as born from the intonation of colloquial speech. The origin of the song, in this perspective, would not be music or literature or lyrical poetry, but everyday language, common speech. It is from this ground that popular song is born, from the popular classes, from the poorest people, not from the elite. Song is not a concession of the nobility, but a plant whose root is the people. From ordinary prosody comes the rhythmic speech, which once fixed in a certain format, in bars, becomes the song.

Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna comments that, when studying the work of Chico Buarque, he observed that it is divided into three major thematic currents: 1) nostalgia (love); 2) violence; 3) the party (Calvani, 1998, p. 142). In the case of the song "Pelas Tabelas", the presence of the themes nostalgia, love and party is evident, with violence as a surrounding threat, whether in the "people who come to ask for the head of a man who looked at the slums", in the rolling head in Maracanã or in the head "already on a plate". Although the persona of the song is suffering from the mismatch with his beloved, from the distance from love, the melody is light and rhythmic, suggesting joy and celebration, which produces an ironic effect. The contrast is striking and runs through the whole song, which goes on in perpetual

motion. The persona neither finds the loved one nor gives up on the search, moving forward in its alienated stubbornness.

Calvani, in his book *Teologia e MPB* [Theology and MPB] (1998), celebrates the transforming power of art in general and song in particular. Art transforms realities into new realities, full of meaning, and can still offer “anticipation, albeit temporary, of the desired reconciliation” (Calvani, 1998, p. 142). This is not the case with this song by Chico, in which reconciliation never happens and the persona goes on without reaching the full meaning of what happens in the country and in himself, that is, in his body. Art has redemptive power, for Calvani (1998, p. 142). It can be understood that this is confirmed in the song, but in the form of a confession, an outburst, a lament, a good-humored lament, with the spirit not yet paralyzed by nostalgia. It is not about long, emotional pains. The prevailing tone is one of irony and self-laugh. Laughing at yourself can be part of that healing process that the song may make possible.

As we saw earlier, for Chico, “Pelás Tabelas” is not a political song. In fact, it is much more than that, although the political theme is present and surrounds it all the time. It is a song about political alienation, reinforced by the irony of the context, by the mismatch between both the collective and the individual dimension of life. The individual in the song is entangled by the collective, which comes to meet him in celebration and in protest for democracy, but this persona is submerged in his own *pathos*, in his personal suffering. However, more than political reflection, the song reveals a more universal perspective of the human experience, how much the individual can be separated from the collective experiences of the community to which he belongs, of his people. There is the outburst, the denunciation of isolation, of the loneliness in which the individual finds himself, and is intensified in the contrast with the partying crowd and in the absence of a final encounter between the persona and his beloved. There is no redemption for this individual, only hope postponed, although it is a time of collective celebration. And the constant turning of pain into perpetual motion. The persona of the song goes through several alienation processes, several indexes, such as disconnection from the collective, disconnection with his loved one and disconnection with thought, since he is “out of his mind”, in short, disconnection with himself. More than a protest song, it offers a subtle and humorous reading of Brazilian society and human condition.

The time of the song is not about work, but leisure, the people in Maracanã, love, carnival. It is also the civic time, the protest in the streets, the celebration of freedom, the return of democracy. As we noted earlier, the ending mends the beginning of the new verse and perpetually resumes the cycle. Rhythm, melody, and arrangement reinforce the semantic content of the song. Quotes to other songs, such as “Morena de Angola”, or allusions

to Carnival made by the arrangement of percussion and brass, in addition to the feeling of monotony achieved by the suggestion of perpetual motion, reinforce the content. The semantic force of the song also develops at the lexicon level, as in the choice of the word “affliction”, an indication of how much suffering the song persona experiences.

Walter Brueggemann (1983) coined the expression “prophetic imagination” to designate the performance of the Old Testament prophets, the kind of message they bring, all the criticality of their preaching towards the authorities of Israel. In a sense, one can see a bit of prophetic imagination in many of the songs written by Chico Buarque, among them the song “Pelas Tabelas”, in which an ironic allusion is made to the prophet John the Baptist and to a certain Brazilian type totally immersed in the romantic and alienated experience of the political and social movements of his time. Chico uses irony as a resource. The poet, the sage and the prophet have something in common: they produce knowledge from the imagination, the prophetic imagination. This imagination is what allows us to envision a possible society, a possible world, in front of which it is possible to put the present century in perspective. This prophetic imagination is also a subversive imagination, resists every form of distortion, every oppressive and official narrative. It gives rise to the song that, in the words of the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade, makes “men wake up and children fall asleep” (Andrade, 2013, p. X). It calls to conscience, wakes people up.

In a challenging and courageous reflection in times of scarce democracy, Archbishop Helder Câmara once said: “We must not fear utopia. I like to repeat many times that when we dream alone, we limit ourselves to the dream. When we dream as a group, we reach reality. Utopia, shared with thousands, is the mainstay of history” (Instituto Dom Helder Câmara, 2017, n.p.). The problem with the persona of the song is that his dream is private, isolated from the rest of the community, out of step with his time and his people. Your dream is not in tune with the dreams of others.

John the Baptist, in a way, was in love with the Messiah, with Christ. It can be said that he lost his mind because he dreamed of the Messiah’s return, which is where he understands all the social transformation and history necessary for his people and for the world come from. John the Baptist was awaiting the arrival of the kingdom, but suddenly what came his way was Herod’s repressive power and his court.

“Pelas Tabelas” is not a religious song, but in spite of that religiosity remains present in the language, in the culture of the people, in social practices, in popular festivals and traditions, in the collective unconscious, in people, in the narratives that they surround and sew us up. The religious experience of God’s action in the world is always incomplete, it is always an “already, but

not yet”. Only death seems to have the completeness of the closed act. Even so, in the context of religious experience, resurrection comes and changes everything. The lyrics have no religious content. The allusion to John the Baptist appears almost accidentally, but ends up sewing the meaning, the sense of the song. As Ronaldo Cavalcante once expressed, “the religious element in Chico surprisingly appears as a photo negative” (Cavalcante, 2018, p. 336).

The narrative contained in the song exposes before us a Brazilian scene in which the poetic, the prophetic and the pathetic meet, revealing the wealth of details that Chico Buarque’s work has and the countless readings it allows for. There are points of connection with theology, with the sacred, even though the song cannot be called religious. More than making the profane sacred, it comes to make the sacred something profane, mixed, intermingled with human deviations and mismatches.

Appendix

“**Pelas Tabelas**”

Chico Buarque

Ando com minha cabeça já pelas tabelas
Claro que ninguém se toca com minha aflição
Quando vi todo mundo na rua de blusa amarela
Pensei que era ela puxando o cordão

Oito horas e danço de blusa amarela
Minha cabeça talvez faça as pazes assim
Quando ouvi a cidade de noite batendo panelas
Pensei que era ela voltando pra

Minha cabeça de noite batendo panelas
Provavelmente não deixa a cidade dormir
Quando vi um bocado de gente descendo as favelas
Achei que era o povo que vinha pedir

A cabeça do homem que olhava as favelas
Minha cabeça rolando no maracanã
Quando vi a galera aplaudindo de pé as tabelas
Jurei que era ela que vinha chegando

Com minha cabeça já pelas tabelas
Claro que ninguém se toca com minha aflição, não
Quando vi todo mundo na rua de blusa amarela
Pensei que era ela puxando o cordão

Oito horas e danço de blusa amarela
Minha cabeça talvez faça as pazes assim
Quando ouvi a cidade de noite batendo panelas
Pensei que era ela voltando pra

Minha cabeça de noite batendo panelas

Provavelmente não deixa a cidade dormir
Quando vi um bocado de gente descendo as favelas
Achei que era o povo que vinha pedir

A cabeça do homem que olhava as favelas
Minha cabeça rolando no Maracanã
Quando vi a galera aplaudindo de pé as tabelas
Jurei que era ela que vinha chegando

Com minha cabeça já numa baixela
Claro que ninguém se toca com minha aflição
Quando vi todo mundo na rua de blusa amarela
Pensei que era ela puxando um cordão

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Gladir da Silva Cabral. Doutor em Letras – Inglês pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina. Professor do curso de Letras e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação da Universidade do Extremo Sul Catarinense, em Criciúma (SC).

E-mail: gladirc@gmail.com

Jorge Geraldo de Camargo Filho. Doutor em Educação, Arte e História da Cultura pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Arte e História da Cultura da Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie, em São Paulo (SP). Atualmente é Educador Cultural (áudio visual) da Universidade Presbiteriana Mackenzie.

E-mail: jorgecamargo.net@gmail.com

Declaração de Autoria

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