Maria Luísa DE CASTRO SOARES
University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro
Department of Letters, Arts and Communication
School of Human and Social Sciences
Center for Studies on Letters (CEL)
Quinta dos Prados, 5000 801 Vila Real, Portugal
lsoares@utad.pt

Maria João DE CASTRO SOARES
University of Coimbra
Faculty of Letters
Center for Humanistic and Classical Studies (CECH)
Largo da Porta Férrea, 3004 531 Coimbra, Portugal
msoares@fmed.uc.pt

DOI: https://doi.org/10.29162/ANAFORA.v10i2.9

Izvorni znanstveni članak
Original Research Article

Primljeno 2. ožujka 2023.
Received: 2 March 2023

Prihvaćeno 30. studenoga 2023.
Accepted: 30 November 2023

THE DEATH OF ONESELF AND THE MEANING OF LIFE IN "NERO" BY MIGUEL TORGA

Abstract

The paper aims to analyze the tale "Nero," from the work *Bichos* by Miguel Torga. In this work, some emphasis is firstly given to the relations of implication between the man, the environment, and the work of the poet originating from Trás-os-Montes, who gives voice to the *Tellus Mater*—that is, to "Mother Earth" (Feijó 167–84; Soares 293–303). Secondly, the work focuses on the questions of finitude and the meaning of life. In the form of an analepsis, an autodiegetic gaze of the partridge dog Nero turns to the past and, at the moment of its death, remembers the main events of its existence while recognizing that it was worth living. Written in 1940—to wit, in the context of the Portuguese dictatorship of the New State—the tale "Nero" thus alerts the reader to the value of life but also to its finitude and to the importance of building a meaningful existence, which transits through responsibility, freedom, the definition of goals, and personal choices.

Keywords: Miguel Torga, "Nero," *Tellus Mater*, finitude, analepsis, autodiegetic perspective, personal priorities

Introduction: The Author and His Work

At the outset, it is relevant to point out Miguel Torga's image as a man, doctor, and writer, even though he himself states that "a poet has no biography, he has destiny" (*Diário XII–XVI* 278).[1] In his *Diário Va–VIII*, Torga conducts his "examination of conscience" (17), and on 7 April 1949, he writes the following metatext, in which he seeks to self-define himself as a poet:

> Through everything the artist goes through:
> First, through the joy of judging himself to be a Creator
> In the bosom of nature;
> Then through this sadness
> Of seeing what he has done die,
> Without having in his hands the certainty
> Of raising the dream again. (*Diário Va–VIII* 17)

Between the creative genius and the uncertainty of creation, all Torga's writings reveal an introspective, shy man, isolated from the world and social relations, with a great attachment to the land and country life. According to Torga's own words in the work *Diário XV*, "[a] long life is enough for everything. To be born obscurely in Trás-os-Montes [and] to work like a Moor [hard work] in adolescence in the lands of Santa Cruz" (172).

Actually, Torga's struggle began very early, when he had to leave Trás-os-Montes and S. Martinho de Anta, the Portuguese village in which he was born, to go to Brazil, where he arrived at the age of thirteen. This physical separation from his parents' home, however, left him with the fond memories of the land and its people, as he wrote in his *Diário VII*:

> Deep down, it was good that I left the paternal home around my birth. I kept seeing the straws of the nest as feathers of coziness. There was no time for the slightest erosion. Wrapped in a dome of nostalgia that was never broken, childhood impressions hold all the purity of a dawn without sunset. Timeless and mythical, the geographic landscape is a perpetual mirage for my senses; as for the other one, the human landscape, I discover such virtues in it, that it seems I am only a person if I am beside it. (65–66)

[1] On the biographical aspects of the author, see Clara Rocha, *Miguel Torga: Fotobiografia*, Dom Quixote Publications, 2000, with a foreword by Manuel Alegre. All quotations of the work *Diário* by Miguel Torga were translated by the authors.

As he had studied medicine, his activity as a physician, which was carried out simultaneously with that of a writer, was considered by him as serious and important as writing. Consequently, both activities left deep marks on him as a man, whether they were discharged with a pen or with a scalpel. The medical profession contributed to his way of observing and comprehending the world—that is, to his learning and knowledge about people and all the problems that surround them. As a medical doctor, Torga was an open man, able to listen to the confessions of others and give them encouragement. As a writer, he has revealed himself to be more closed, isolated, and unable to confess, except in his writings. The activities of a medical doctor and writer, however, do not always maintain a peaceful coexistence in a man. There are some moments when the poet pesters the doctor and vice versa, and a subject with two images ends up appearing Janus-faced: the first person is the one who has dreams and ideals and therefore resembles a younger self, whereas the second person is the one who understands and treats the elderly and, therefore, is no less useful. The empirical being is involved by this duality: occasionally, Torga is an individualistic man, unique and different, who isolates himself from the world and liberates himself through creation, and sometimes he is a social man, a doctor who is in permanent contact with those around him and to whom he gives support and encouragement.

Thus, "The Wonderful Kingdom of Trás-os-Montes" is the author's fictionalized view of his childhood, his greatest love, and his preferential focus of interest (Torga, *Portugal* 23–24, 33). This realm appears in his work at every moment, always extolled as a land of Gods (Torga, *Portugal* 23–24, 33). Yet, it is not only *his* own dominion, but it could also be the land of all those who would like to deserve it. This adoration of the land leads the author of *Bichos* to appreciate and poeticize this mythical kingdom, or a place of bare, brown land, identified with a human and sociocultural panorama. In this rough piece of transmontane land, he perceives what others cannot see and exposes his truth without any restrictions, in the appreciation of reality, of people, relationships, events, and facts, without fear that he might attack what was established while so doing (Feijó 167–84; Soares 293–303). At the same time, Torga does not set aside the concepts he believes in, and therefore he changes his own positions if his truth demands it.

Torga always fought for independence and human dignity, with his eyes set on the people he felt he belonged to and whom he never allowed to be deceived. A nonconformist when it comes to the abuse of power, Torga demonstrates a

proud and conscious rudeness in his combat, revealing a personality endowed with an irreducible and solitary capacity for resistance. Throughout his life as a writer, Torga always sought, by virtue of his creative existence, the transformation of the world. So, a decision to adopt the pseudonym "Miguel Torga" was not chosen at random. The first name *Miguel* evokes the poets of his admiration, such as Miguel de Cervantes and Miguel de Unamuno, while the last name *Torga*, or "heather," evokes a wild plant, with its habitat in the harsh soil of all of Portugal, abundant in the mountains of Trás-os-Montes.

Thus, in his work, Torga reveals himself as a humanist who demonstrates vehement repulsion toward social hypocrisy, tyranny, lack of freedom, and violation of human rights, expressing his rebellion against injustices. As he cannot do it any other way, and because he must write, he wages his fight by the pen of a poet, a condition in which he identifies himself as a creative genius, or as a creature inspired by the muses, in various ways. In fact, most of the time he takes refuge in writing, in which, besides a reflection on poetry and the poet's condition (Sequeira 97–106), we find a vision of Portugal, Iberia, and many other values of humanity, even when the select characters are animals, as in his work *Bichos* (Soler 263–75).

A primordial element in *Bichos* is the Earth (Soares 293–303). It gives birth to all beings, generates everything, and harvests everything in an eternal cycle between two sides, life, and death, as a reality that permanently remakes itself:

> The Earth is maternalized both as the seat of death–birth metamorphoses and as a birthplace. And, on the other hand, the almost ventral cavities of the Earth, impregnated with diffuse maternal analogies, evoke the ideas and cults of death–rebirth and thus dialectically specify the theme of telluric motherhood. (Morin 171)

It is certain, therefore, that the Earth for Torga represents a telluric womb from which the first men, all other beings, and the constituent elements of nature have emanated. Due to this cosmic structure of the Earth, which involves everything that surrounds the living creatures, a feeling of physical solidarity is generated with space, in constant alliance with man. Therefore, the poet only feels fullness when he is in contact with this reality. The Earth thus appears as a mother-goddess, with an inexhaustible capacity to bear fruits, as a place to which the poet pilgrims to be imbued with a kind of strength and where he finds fidelity. What is more, Torga's passion for his origins, and his passion for

the knowledge of place and people, leads him to immerse himself in the land, in a search for his identity, and in the hope that this is indeed a liberating image of human condition. Throughout the tales of *Bichos*, the Earth also gains an essential importance. Still, it is both a mother and a stepmother, since Earth is the generator of life and the cradle of death.

As such, the *Bichos* collection is included in the Portuguese National Reading Plan for the students in the third cycle of basic education, aged twelve to fourteen. Although it was not written for a child reader as its explicit extratextual addressee, it can be considered a work of dual reception, ambivalent literature, or crossover literature. This Torga's work is composed of the tales in which a proximity between man and animal is revealed, with the man appearing almost as irrational as the animal and with the animal possessing a soul, emotions, and certain traits of humanity (Silva 193–200). In fact, in this gallery of animals, men are not absent but are coexisting with the animals. So, in each tale, the "brutes" may be the humanized animals, with human feelings, or they may be assumed to be the human beings disguised as animals, since the "men and the beasts" in the Torguian universe have much in common (Santos 125–46).

Simultaneous with the publication of Torga's work *Bichos*, there was, namely, a concern over social commitment, to which the author was not indifferent, seeking, subtly and symbolically, to exert an educational impact on the reader by virtue of this Torguian "Noah's Ark" (*Bichos* 7). This anxiety is evident in the author's intentions, who seems to be a person who has lost hope in the present, so that this fiction of his is, above all, is a bet on the future: "Literally betting on the future is a beautiful game, but it is a game of those who have already resigned themselves to losing the present" (*Bichos* 8–9). Yet, this Torguian "Noah's Ark" (Torga, *Bichos* 7), which, according to the Scriptures, preserved all species of animals from the fatal Deluge, is used by Torga in a political context of the Portuguese New State (*Estado Novo*) to preserve the values he himself considered essential (Sada 85), such as freedom. In this construction of the future, however, the author Torga does not intend to walk alone "like a stray wolf" (*Bichos* 9). Thus, this vow of solidarity, fraternity, and freedom is present in all the stories of the *Bichos,* particularly in the story "Vicente," describing a black crow which personifies the image of rebellion and revolt against a "lord" (Torga, *Bichos* 134) but is forced to give in, because it realizes that everything is fruitless in the face of an unshakeable will. A cry for freedom—that is, an eagerness to cut social ties and move forward—is, effectively, implicit in the whole composition of the *Bichos,*

a work that is meant to be read. And the invitation is made to the reader by the author himself in a preface to the narrative, when he states the following: "It's time to welcome you to the gateway of my little 'Noah's Ark' " (Torga, *Bichos* 7).

The Death of Oneself and the Meaning of Life in the Tale "Nero"

The "Nero" tale, which opens the work *Bichos*, has a circular construction, beginning with the dying state of the partridge dog, which is aware of the proximity of the end of its existence, and returns, in the end, to that same moment that culminates in death. The contemplation of life as a whole implies keeping in mind what it contained but also its limits and finitude (Kronman 125–27; Azevedo 417–46). The action, however, does not follow the linear scheme of chronological time, and between the initial state and the final state the life of the central character begins in a flashback or analepsis. Through the memories, Nero's life episodes are evoked, so one can see that the planes of the past and of the present are lined almost in parallel. The past evokes several simple actions in the character's life, but it is the present, marked by the dying state and consequent death, which ends the natural cycle of life. Thus, the life as a whole is a totality limited by death (Kronman 125–27; Azevedo 417–46). In the form of an autobiographical memory, a discursive plane of the text hereby consists of the reflections of Nero, who, during his process of dying, makes a retrospective narrative of his life, highlighting his condition of vigor and joviality in the past and physical decay and abandonment in the present. As such, this tale highlights the life/death dichotomy and puts these two realities in confrontation.

Nonetheless, it is through Nero's memories that the most significant episodes in the life of the main character of the story are replayed. At the beginning of the narrative, namely, there are two temporal planes: the present one—already overshadowed by the death and physical decay of the dog and by the abandonment, because of which it feels deserted—and the past one, with the account of youthful adventures that showcase his vitality. The following passage is an example thereof: "He was feeling worse and worse. He couldn´t even raise his head now. And so, he let it rest gently upon the ground and remained like that, weakly stretched out, waiting" (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 22). A morbid situation of the present is opposite to the other expressions of the character itself, showing his life and implying his past: "But Nero was a dog with dignity. Rabbits! They were the sport of mastiffs, of stray homeless curs and the rest. Neither had he ever been a lap-dog" 'Era um cão que se respeitava, que tinha dignidade.

Borgas dessas eram lá com rafeiros, com jecos do fado e do mundo' (Torga, *Bichos* 22; Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 29).[2]

The confrontation with the totality of life and the limit imposed by mortality makes it difficult but also urgent to address the question of the meaning of life (Kronman 126–27; Routledge 304; Tomer 212). Thus, toward the end of his story, Nero constructs a lifecycle narrative searching for the meaning of his own life, which makes him realize that his existence was worth living. And the meaning is central to human existence, says Viktor Frankl, considering that the "will to meaning" (38) is a primary and universal human motivation and arguing that the main goal in life is not pleasure or power but finding the meaning and value in life. Accordingly, the meaning in life can be defined as a direction or purpose to which an individual aspires, so that the consequent subjective and dynamic evaluation of one's life appears to be more or less meaningful (Schnell, *Sources* 483–99; Schnell, *Empirical Approach* 173–74; Schnell, *Psychology* 5–12). For Tatjana Schnell (*Psychology* 7), a meaningful life thus corresponds to the basic confidence that life is worth living and is grounded in the evaluation of one's life as coherent (a sense of comprehensibility and consistency and an experience that perceptions, actions, and goals make sense to the individual, leading to a coherent view of the self and the world), significant (a perception of one's decisions and actions as having resonance and consequences), oriented (an existence having direction or purpose), and belonging (a perception of oneself as part of the whole, having a place in the world).

For Michael Steger (165), on the other hand, such a meaning is a network of connections, ways of understanding, and interpretations that help an individual understand his or her experience and formulate the plans, directing his or her energies toward the realization of a desired future. The meaning in life denotes the reflection and experience of contexts of connotations related to life in general, a personal life, or the parts thereof (Beike and Crone 315–34). However, the meaning of life generates a feeling in the individuals that their lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are quite more than a sum of all the past moments, their seconds, days, and years (Steger 165).

The individuals actively construct the meaning of their lives on a day-by-day basis (Kronman 20; Sommer, Baumeister, and Stillman 298). An autobiograph-

[2] A quotation in the Portuguese language is also adduced due to the fact that there is no complete overlap with its English translation.

ical memory (Beike and Crone 315–34) and nostalgia (Routledge et al. 304–10) are the cognitive processes that facilitate the construction of meaning in life—namely, the construction of a meaningful life narrative. And it is by recalling the remarkable autobiographical experiences (i.e., the units of meaning in its life) at the moment of his death, in an agonizing state of pain and suffering accompanied by nostalgia, that Nero concocts the narrative of the evolution of his identity, the story of his existence (Bluck and Habermas 121–47) and, through this process, finds the meaning of his own life, recognizing, as we have previously said, that life was worth living.

Throughout the story, the protagonist experiences several moments that correspond to his individual maturation process, namely a journey, a change of maternal diet, an ordeal of education, hunt, mating, and the education of his canine progeny. Nero's life really begins to take shape when he finally assumes his own name, an identity—that is, when the transfer of ownership takes place, and the partridge dog feels that he is someone's possession. The transfer of ownership has an immediate result too: an effective transfer from his mother's lap to the caresses of a new owner, with a simultaneous growth resulting from a change of mother's feed to that given by a girl. This transfer, however, does not take place without Nero's suffering during the passage. Hence, the canine still remembers the roughness of the road traveled during the journey from his dependence on a maternal nest to his new home, from the separation from his mother and the beginning of a relationship with his maternal substitute (i.e., a young mistress) to the beginning of his autonomy. The attribution of a name corresponds to yet another remarkable fact in Nero's life, because he was just another dog, a canine without a name and identity, heretofore:

> The name had fastened itself to him when he arrived. Until then, he had been nobody in the place where he has been born—a poor ungainly whelp, nameless, very fat, and crazy, always glued to the dug at very end of his mother's belly . . . . When he was two months old, he made that long journey full of fear, in the untender arms of a stranger. But when arriving, he had basked in the warmth of the reception that the daughter had given him. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 25)

A reference to the "young mistress" foreshadows the significance she will have for Nero throughout the narrative and draws attention to the importance of a relationships with the others and the emotional bonds as a source of mean-

ingful experiences and meaning in life (Hicks and King 471–82). The mistress is the most faithful owner, the one who gives the dog the most affection, but also the last person to see it alive. This presence is synonymous with a welcome when Nero arrives and also with a farewell when he expires, because the mistress goes to visit the canine when he is already dying and cries, revealing to the dog the certainty of mourning, as fruit of friendship.

On the other hand, the arrival of the "young master" gave Nero confirmation that someone owned him, which marked his relations within the household. However, the "young master"—that is, "the son, a doctor, who lived a long way away" (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 25)—was his only rightful owner, since Nero merely harbored sympathies for the young master's sister, even though the canine considered himself family property:

> The others only looked after him and gave him his food, so that the doctor should have a dog when he came home. Nero, however, looked upon the three in the house as its masters, the old man and his wife and daughter; with these he had lived through the whole eight years of his life . . . . What he really liked was the crystalline voice of his young mistress, the prodigal way the old women had with her, and the old man's horny hand. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 25)

One of the significant aspects in the evolution of the central character is a difficulty the dog faces while preparing for the hunting trip. Nero's childishness does not allow him, at first, to realize that the teachings given are aimed at his personal growth, to prepare him for life and for his future work, so he refers to them as "the calvary of instruction" (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 26).

> In the first instance, he ran after the handkerchief, thinking the whole thing was a game. Later, he saw that it was serious, that this game had another purpose.
>
> "Go and get it, Nero! Good boy!"
>
> He acted as if he did not understand. And the other, after trying over and over again, tired of coaxing him, gave him a sharp cut with his stick. That was his first test. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 26–27)

Nero's first hunt, his first occupation, in which he put his acquired knowledge into practice, gave him the hitherto unknown sensations of pleasure and was one of the milestones of his existence. The canine itself gives it this importance:

> It has been the first great moment of his life! Thereafter, the hills began to tell him the things they had never told him before. He began to learn that along his spine on cold, calm mornings, as the sun was rising, a nimble partridge would be pecking at cocksfoot. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 27)

Although Nero used to stay in the nest until late, the sensation of savoring the hunt overcame the indolence of the morning. After that moment, the dog began to understand what was going on around it—namely, what potentialities and resources existed beyond the yard.

But a substratum of this excerpt of the tale is a characterization of the education of children in the Portuguese schools during the era of Portugal's New State, the period in which the *Bichos* was published. Etymologically, the word *educate* comes from the Latin *educare,* which itself comes from *educere*, "to conduct, to lead forth." The model of education in the New State was centered on the authority of teachers (who were the nurturers instead of being the leaders), on the transmission of knowledge by them, and on the memorization and repetition of learning contents by the students (Torga, *Portugal* 31). Still, an interconnection between the knowledge and practice was not established (Torga, *Portugal* 31–32), and the critical and creative capacity of a child was not fostered. School education, from the earliest ages, also aimed at educating a child morally, inculcating the values while forming and shaping the spirit of submission, obedience, and respect for the superiors and conformism, based on the trinity of God, Nation, and Family. This is also evident in the texts and phrases that were compulsory (Ministry of Public Instruction)[3] and were, as such, introduced in the reading manuals of elementary education—that is, in the first cycle of basic education. The following sentences are the examples thereof: "To command is not to enslave: it is to direct"; "The easier the obedience is, the softer the command is"; "Obey and you will know how to command"; "In the noise, nobody understands each other, and that is why nobody respects each other in the revolution" (Amado 232; Coelho 20–37). It was also a common practice in elementary education to administer physical punishment, known as the "ruler of five eyes" (Torga, *Portugal* 31), referring to a stick or to a bamboo cane, which was legal and accepted by the parents (Coelho 33–34) as a method to castigate the mistakes, discourage students' inattention, and regulate their

[3] This decree proclaimed it mandatory to insert certain phrases in the officially adopted reading textbooks.

behavior. Many children in the Portuguese New State schools had reluctance for school due to the austerity of the teachers and the punishments administered (Coelho 34). Then, those who have experienced learning difficulties might exactly be those who were particularly affected. In Torga's opus, the character of Nero considered the punishments unfair too.

Thus, the ideological matrix of the New State is characterized, writes Rómulo de Carvalho, by "economic, social, and moral centralism, a rural ideal, unparliamentary democracy, anti-communism, limited schooling, and a limited access to knowledge" (728)—that is, by "the inculcation of state values and a control of minds"—which was promoted particularly via the schooling system (Coelho 23). As Paulo Freire states, "When I speak of education as intervention, I am referring both to that which aspires to radical changes in a society in the field of economy, human relations, property, a right to work, to land, to education, and to health and to that which, on the contrary, reactionarily intends to immobilize history and maintain the unjust order" (42). Carvalho continues:

> The inconvenience of people knowing how to read was not in the fact of reading but in a dangerous use that could result from it. Through reading, the people would have access to the knowledge of corrosive doctrines and stinking faculties, as Alfredo Pimenta said, and if this consequence was inevitable, then it would be better to close the schools, leaving them open only to the well-behaved children of the bourgeoisie interested in maintaining their privileges. (728)

The New State's education policy fits into the latter, as it aimed at conservatism while consolidating a prevailing ideology, molding minds, creating the army of followers, and maintaining the stability of the regime and a closed society. However, in contrast to the prevailing political ideology, Torga warns (on the example of events confronted by his character Nero) that one can personally grow through education or instruction, so the new horizons can be unveiled, the doors can be opened beyond the backyard, and the hills will began to tell the "things they had never told [us] before" (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 27).

In the existential context, the feeling of belonging stems from the experience of having a place in the world, of being a part of something that goes beyond the self, of promoting social inclusion, of establishing and maintaining social relationships. Social relationships are described by people as a major source of the meaning of life and include the emotional connections that are established with

friends and within a family (Schnell, *Psychology* 5–12). At least for some, having a child is a goal and another source of meaning in life (Schnell, *The Psychology* 5–12; Baumeister et al. 505–16). Subsequently, the memory of the son Jau is one of the most striking moments in the narrative. It signifies the joy Nero felt in the past because he had a progeny, to be nurtured and admired right there by his side even though the little guy took after his mother: "But the little beast had his mother's bad points: not much of a nose and being impatient while following" 'Mas o raio herdara os defeitos da mãe: mau nariz e um pouco de sofreguidão' (Torga, *Bichos* 23; Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 29). The aforementioned defects led to the progeny's later loss, as he did not respect the rules by which a partridge dog should be governed during hunts. Thus, the fact that Jau was donated to a villager from Jurjais only reinforces the estrangement and increases the loneliness that has taken hold of Nero.

The importance that is attributed to the progeny is clear when, already in agony, Nero regrets not having a successor to "to take his place in the corner," to inherit his nesting ground. These episodes—that is, those to which Nero gave more significance throughout his personal retrospective—mark a difference between this character's description in the past and in the present, a hero's quest of a kind, and represent a process of individual maturation that culminates in the surrender of life in the face of the certainty of death. Nero recognizes what he was, how he has evolved, and realizes the physical degradation he has suffered, which places him in a state of decrepitude on the brink of an end. The idea of irreversibility of life—namely, of certainty and loneliness in death—are the concepts that permeate the entire tale.

Knowing that he has nothing left to do, that all he must do is to die, Nero is aware that he can no longer dream of a beautiful burial like so many he had seen, with a yellow-and-white coffin, followed by everyone, as "[t]hat was only for humans, rich or poor" 'Isso era só para gente, rica ou pobre' (Torga, *Bichos* 11; Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 22). The character knows that his destiny will not have this pomp and that subsequently his final resting place will be "a sad burial place beneath a fig tree in the garden. Their [domestic dogs' and cats'] cemetery was there" (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 22). Exactly in the moment in which Nero foresees his death, there is the first—and perhaps the only—sign of recognition of a dog's inferiority to a human being but also a recognition that death equalizes humanity.

Toward the end of the narrative, the reader witnesses the certainty of death and the anguish of realizing that it is even desired, considering a lamentable state in which the protagonist finds himself. Therefore, in evoking the past, self-worth is evident, but there is also a great deal of nostalgia and some dissatisfaction:

> Because, in spite of his blue blood, who was he that had barked at the wolves, at a fox, and a weasel when they had brought fear and consternation on the hen run? When all inside was suspense? He had. He, Nero, who was dying there, without a fang, with his bladder in blood, blind of one eye. And to think what he had been! Nimble, handsome, and the pride of his generation. Illusions of the world!
>
> Indoors, they were frying meat: he heard them clearly. In other times, it would have been sufficient to make it slaver at the mouth and down his chin. Now, even the very memory of all that sent deep agonies down into the pit of his stomach. Decayed—all of it! They were frying meat, perhaps pieces of fat pork, browned and toasted. . . . Curse his life! And the rascally cock treading a hen. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 30)

In the tale "Nero," a partridge dog is the protagonist and the center of the story, seeing the other characters as a function of himself.[4] He is a figure that evolves throughout the narrative, with a psychological density, and everything is narrated to the reader according to his perspective or focus. For this reason, the canine assumes the position of an autodiegetic narrator—to wit, of an "entity that conveys the information derived from his own diegetic experience—that is, having lived the story as a character, the narrator has drawn from this the forms he needs to construct his account" (Reis 257). It is, therefore, through an internal focus that the events of the past are revealed, that the present is perceived, and that the characters are characterized, either by alluding to their behavior or by explicitly referring to their characteristics. A tragic vision of the present and a nostalgia for the past are conveyed through the gaze of the main character.

Only at the end of the tale, when no more memories were allowed to the dog, does the author/narrator assume the function of a reporter concerning the mo-

[4] The secondary characters (i.e., the young mistress, the young master, the hunter, and the progeny Jau) are valued or devalued according to the relationships they have established with Nero, the central character. They are the flat characters, who do not evolve during the action, and their attributes are not made explicit by direct reference but rather according to the importance that Nero gives them throughout the narrative. As for the other figures, they appear in the story only as a complement and enrichment of a retrospective on the life of the central figure, allowing their characterization.

ments of happiness that Nero feels, when it sees the "young mistress" mourning his death and watching him during his last breath, as such an account can only be observed from the outside, in a view that is distinct from the character:

> Through the fringe of his eyelashes, he made out her face: she was crying. He let the eyelids fall, content.
>
> And at night, when the moonlight was flooding its fullness into the bare tiles of the house, and the hills of St. Dominic were beckoning to him from the distance, longing for him and a delicate touch of his paws, when the scent of the last partridge had evaporated with him, when the cockerel began to herald the morning that was coming near, and when the picture of his small pup had vanished from his consciousness, Nero closed his eyes for the last time, and died. (Torga, "*Bichos*," *Farrusco* 30–31)

After having said goodbye to everyone and seeing his "young mistress" crying, Nero ends up dying happily, like someone who has a desire to leave a mark on this world and to feel that he or she has been loved. Without being anthropomorphized, the dog Nero is an animal submerged in introspective cogitations that are the basis of the plot of this tale, which is a metaphor of what a happy life of a human being can be: a discrete and simple existence, but one that is striking and causes joys.

As already noted, *Bichos* is a bet on the future, since the author has lost hope in the present. In this anthology, each character is also a symbol: Nero transcends the hunting dog obedient to his or her master, and from a social and political point of view, assumes the role of a man or of a woman who, without freedom, with a behavior that was imposed on him or her, is content with a quotidian lifestyle. From an individual perspective, although his lifecycle had followed a common path, Nero the dog led a life full of meaningful experiences: he had his own identity, a name, was indispensable to his owner, fulfilled his obligations, was competent, valued by all, deserved the respect of the others, and was loved. In short, from Nero's perspective, it was a life in which the relationships with others were relevant and in which the goals were achieved—that is, a meaningful life worth living.

Nero's demise is a tragic culmination of life, and the dog, while dying, does no more than reflect on the question of life and death as the two confronting reali-

ties—a tragic vision of the present and a nostalgic memory of the past. But these confronting realities complement each other, since finitude is inherent to life.

Toward the moment of his decease, Nero predicts the future at the last moments of life, in a search for the meaning of his existence. Thus, the very moment of death may be "the last moment of life, the indefinable instant of passage in which the whole of life is assumed, accepted, and transformed . . ." (Azevedo 434). Nero thus presents himself as the one who has found the meaning of life at this instance. The meaning of life, however, is interrelated with the meaning of death (Tomer 209–31). In the last moments of his life, when he faces his own finitude, the approaching end, Nero also seeks for the meaning of his death. While finding the meaning of life, Nero simultaneously provides the meaning to what seemed to be meaningless—namely, to a chance, to the tragic, to his own death. The experience of affiliation, a certainty that he was respected by all and competent in a discharge of his responsibilities, an accomplishment of his goals throughout his life, and a consequent judgment that the life had a meaning and was worth living allowed him the acceptance of death and the achievement of a state in which he felt less the fear of death (Tomer 209–31), a state of some satisfaction, peace, and emotional well-being and beatitude of the moment (Tomer 222).

Besides being an existential condition (as it appears in the context of life and corresponds to the inevitable reality of its finitude), death is thus also an enigma, "a metaphysical vertigo of nothingness or, what is more, an awareness of mystery, a dramatic intuition that it is a gap through which the infinite lurks" (Azevedo 425). Nero accepts mortality with resignation, as a cause for anguish and, at the same, as a time of relief, of liberation, given his pitiable state, his physical limitations, and his suffering (Tomer 213–16). But, in the very last moment, he also faces the anguish of nonexistence, a question about what will be afterward, the postmortem events, the eternity: "I, the one who I am now, will soon cease to be. . . . What will be of 'me' when I do not exist?" (Azevedo 428). The body will be buried, like that of the other domestic animals and that of a human being. Yet, death is not presented as an extinction but as transformation into another level of existence, a return to the *Tellus Mater*, of the *fons et origo*, a union with the Cosmos. It is therefore accepted as a process, the end of a normal cycle, where nothing is extinguished, and everything is reintegrated in an expectation of a new rebirth.

Conclusion

Bichos can be considered a work of dual reception, of ambivalent literature, or of a crossover literature and is included in the Portuguese Government's National Reading Plan for the students in the third cycle of basic education (aged twelve to fourteen). Having chosen an animal that is so close to man as a central character, Torga endowed the canine with human characteristics without neglecting the animal demarcations, and the tale is centered on a problem common to men and animals: life and death. These confronting realities complement each other, since life is limited by death.

Written in 1940, during the Portuguese dictatorship of the New State, the tale "Nero" focuses on the questions of finitude and the meaning of life. The action, however, does not follow the linearity of chronological time. In the form of an analepsis, an autodiegetic gaze of the partridge dog Nero at the moment of his death turns to the past and recovers and appraises the most important moments of his existence (that is, the units of meaning in his life) while constructing his life narrative and recognizing that life was worth living through an autobiographical memory. So, Nero alerts the reader to the value of life and to its finitude, to the importance of living a meaningful existence. In a country dominated by illiteracy (in 1930, seventy out of every hundred Portuguese persons could not read and were illiterate), the question of education was also addressed by Torga in Nero's tale (Mónica 321). Although education suffered from some problems at that time, including teachers' authoritarianism, disconnection of curricular content from reality, and the administration of physical punishment, the author alerts the reader to the fact that education facilitates personal growth, knowledge, and the expansion of one's horizons. This position contrasts with the thinking of the New State ruling class, which surprisingly considered illiteracy and rurality as virtues, as the ways of maintaining the prevailing order (Mónica 321–33, 338–45).

The meaning of life is interrelated with the meaning of death, and Nero, in the last moments of his life, also seeks for a meaning of his death. Death, however, is not considered as an extinction but as a return to the *Tellus Mater*, where nothing is extinguished, and everything is reintegrated for the sake of a new rebirth. For Torga, each man or woman must be able to achieve self-realization in the world. Therefore, he or she must unite with the Earth and be faithful to it, so that life has a meaning and so that the sacred itself is expressed. The land is man's concrete and natural place. Life takes place on the Earth and must be

accomplished here. The origin of life and the origin of time are located here. For Torga as a poet, the Earth appears to be a maternal womb. In his homeland, Torga found tenderness and suffering, the actual people with their joys and sorrows, their tranquility, and their efforts. So, Torga's tellurism is constantly expressed in his attachment to the land, made explicit in the spaces where his stories take place.

In the tale "Nero," the allusions to hunting in the hills, to the lame fig tree in the backyard, and to the chicken coop are not rare (although the physical space is undervalued in relation to the psychological one), which aims to unravel Nero's inner conflict between what it was and what it is now. Nevertheless, the whole narrative makes it clear that Nero's adventures and misadventures take place in an environment where the land assumes a fundamental importance, as in other tales written by this author. An almost umbilical connection to the landscape of a village, to the mountain, and to the natal humus is realized through a process of joining the experience and communion with nature, through its instinctive, violent, and even sacred side. Indeed, in Torga's opus, nature can be considered a metaphor for the forces of the universe. The trees, the flowers, the wind, the rocks, the snow, the Moon, and the sky referred to in this tale are the elements that, in Torga's fiction, translate these manifestations of universal life, the spirit, and the absolute at their very best.

Yet, a succinct reflection remains to be made to the work *Bichos* solely. Of the fourteen tales that comprise the work, nine eventuate in death, and five provide an apology of life. In Torga, the code of death and life has underlying values. Still, fidelity, loyalty, honor, and justice are the motivations present in all of the tales. Thus, it is perceived that death, being a tragic condition of life, is allied to the sense of purification. And implicit in death is a desire to be reborn and to purify a human condition.

Works Cited

Amado, Casimiro Manuel Martins. *História da Pedagogia e da Educação: Guião para Acompanhamento das Aulas*. Universidade de Évora, 2007, pp. 225–36, home.dpe.uevora.pt/~casimiro/HPE-%20 Guiao%20-%20tudo.pdf.

Azevedo, Maria da Conceição. "Valores Culminantes: Educação para a Morte / Educação para a Vida." *Teoria da Educação: Contributos Ibéricos*, edited by João Boavida and Ángel Garcia del Dujo, Coimbra UP, 2007, pp. 417–46.

Baumeister, Roy F., et al. "Some Key Differences Between Happy Life and Meaningful Life." *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 6, 2013, pp. 505–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.830764.

Beike, Denise R., and Travis S. Crone. "Autobiographical Memory and Personal Meaning: Stable versus Flexible Meanings of Remembered Life Experiences." *The Human Quest for Meaning: Theories, Research, and Applications*, edited by Paul T. P Wong, Routledge, 2012, pp. 315–34.

Bluck, Susan, and Tilman Habermas. "The Life Story Schema." *Motivation and Emotion*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2000, pp. 121–47.

Carvalho, Rómulo de. *História do Ensino em Portugal*. Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1996.

Coelho, José Maria dos Santos. "Primary Education in the Portuguese Estado Novo." *Aurora: Journal of Art, Media and Politics* [São Paulo], vol. 8, no. 22, 2015, pp. 20–37.

Feijó, Elias J. Torres. "A geo-cultura dos contos de Miguel Torga e o seu progressivo desaparecimento: De 'Bichos' a 'Novos Contos da Montanha,'" *Veredas*, vol. 11, 2009, pp. 167–84.

Frankl, Viktor E. *A Falta de Sentido na Vida. Psicoterapia Para os Nossos Dias*. 1963. Editorial Pergaminho, 2017.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogia da Autonomia: Saberes Necessários à Prática Educativa*. Paz e Terra, 2002.

Hicks, Joshua A., and Laura A. King. "Positive Mood and Social Relatedness as Information about Meaning in Life." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 4, no 6, 2009, pp. 471–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271108.

Kronman, Anthony T. *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life*. Yale UP, 2007.

Ministry of Public Instruction, General Secretary. Decree Law No. 21014 of 19 March 1932.

Mónica, Maria Filomena. "'Deve-se Ensinar o Povo a Ler?': a Questão do Analfabetismo." 1977. *Análise Social*, vol. 13, no. 50, 1997, pp. 321–53.

Morin, Edgar. *L'Homme et la Mort*. Éditions du Seuil, 2002.

Reis, Carlos, and Ana Cristina Macário Lopes. *Dicionário de Narratologia*. Almedina, 2002.

Rocha, Clara. *Miguel Torga Fotobiografia*. Publicações Dom Quixote, 2000.

Routledge, Clay, et al. "Finding Meaning in One's Past: Nostalgia as an Existential Resource." *The Psychology of Meaning*, edited by Keith D. Markman et al., American Psychological Association, 2013.

Sada, Rodrigo Castro Ribeiro. *Um Só ou Muitos Bichos: Uma "Literatura Menor" Torguiana dentro do Estado Novo*. 2018. Federal Fluminense U, MA thesis, app.uff.br/riuff/handle/1/7169.

Santos, João Camilo. "Homens e Bichos: a Questão do 'Humano' em alguns Contos de Miguel Torga." *Sou um Homem de Granito: Miguel Torga e Seu Compromisso*, edited by Francisco Cota Fagundes. Edições Salamandra, 1997.

Schnell, Tatjana. "The Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire (SoMe): Relations to Demographics and Well-Being." *Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 6, 2009, pp. 483–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760903271074.

---. "An Empirical Approach to Existential Psychology: Meaning in Life Operationalized." *Conceptions of Meaning*, edited by Shulamith Kreitler and Tomás Urbánek, Nova Science, 2014.

---. *The Psychology of Meaning in Life*. Routledge, 2021.

Silva, Sara Reis. "Os Bichos são Homens e os Homens são Bichos: Leituras de 'Bichos', de Miguel Torga." *Revista Portuguesa de Humanidades — Estudos Literários*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 193–200.

Soares, Maria Luísa de Castro. "Os 'Bichos' de Miguel Torga: um Dicionário da Terra." *Negrilho: Homenagem a Miguel Torga*, edited by Maria da Assunção Anes, Alecrim and Alfazema, 2015.

Soler, Elena Losada. "De 'Bichos' y Otros Animales (en la Literatura Catalana)." *Actas do Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga — AAVV, Aqui, Neste Lugar e Nesta Hora*, edited by Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga, Fernando Pessoa UP, 1994.

Sequeira, Maria do Carmo C. B. V. "Essa Estranha Condição de Poeta: '*Bichos*' de Miguel Torga" *Actas do Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga — AAVV, Aqui, Neste Lugar e Nesta Hora*, edited by Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga, Fernando Pessoa UP, 1994.

Steger, Michael F. "Experiencing Meaning in Life: Optimal Functioning at the Nexus of Spirituality, Psychopathology, and Wellbeing." *The Human Quest for Meaning. Theories, Research, and Applications*, edited by Paul T. P. Wong, Routledge, 2012.

Sommer, Kristen L., et al. "The Construction of Meaning from Life Events: Empirical Studies of Personal Narratives." *The Human Quest for Meaning. Theories, Research, and Applications*, edited by Paul T. P. Wong, Routledge, 2012.

Tomer, Adrian. "Meaning and Death Attitudes." *The Human Quest for Meaning. Theories, Research, and Applications*, edited by Paul T. P. Wong, Routledge, 2012.

Torga, Miguel. "Bichos." *Farrusco the Blackbird and Other Stories from the Portuguese.* Translated by Gregorio Prieto, George Allen and Unwin, 1950.

---. *Diário XII – XVI*. Dom Quixote, 2011.

---. "Um Reino Maravilhoso (Trás-os-Montes)." *Portugal*. Dom Quixote, 2018, pp. 23–33.

Torga, Miguel, editor. *Bichos*. 1995.

---. *Diário V a VIII*. 1951.

---. *Diário VII*. 1983.

---. *Diário XV*. 1990.

SMRT SAMOG SEBE I SMISAO ŽIVOTA U PRIČI „NERO" MIGUELA TORGE

Sažetak

Maria Luísa de Castro Soares
University of Trás-os-Montes and Alto Douro
Department of Letters, Arts and Communication
School of Human and Social Sciences
Center for Studies on Letters (CEL)
Quinta dos Prados, 5000 801 Vila Real, Portugal
lsoares@utad.pt

Maria João de Castro Soares
University of Coimbra
Faculty of Letters
Center for Humanistic and Classical Studies (CECH)
Largo da Porta Férrea, 3004 531 Coimbra, Portugal
msoares@fmed.uc.pt

Rad ima za cilj analizirati priču „Nero" iz djela *Bichos* Miguela Torge. Naglasak je stavljen na odnose implikacije između čovjeka, okoliša i djela pjesnika koji potječe iz Trás-os-Montesa, koji daje glas *Tellus Mater*, odnosno „Majci Zemlji" (Feijó 167–84; Soares 293–303). Rad je također fokusiran na pitanja konačnosti i smisla života. U obliku analepse, autodijegetički pogled drentskog ptičara Nerona okreće se prema prošlosti i u trenutku smrti prisjeća se glavnih događaja svog postojanja, prepoznavajući da su bili vrijedni življenja. Napisana 1940. godine – točnije, u kontekstu portugalske diktature Nove države – priča „Nero" upozorava čitatelja na vrijednost života, ali i na njegovu konačnost i na važnost izgradnje smislene egzistencije, koja se prenosi kroz odgovornost, slobodu, definiranje ciljeva i osobne izbore.

Ključne riječi: Miguel Torga, „Nero", *Tellus Mater*, konačnost, analepsa, autodijegetska perspektiva, osobni prioriteti