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Título: The Narratives of Machado de Assis – an experience in vertigo.

Dispositivo: Mesas Simultáneas de Trabajos Libres

It was night, 1850, as the bachelor Duarte tied the knot in his tie before going to the dance to meet again the blond hair and blue eyes of Cecilia - his new girl friend met only a week ago.

“ His heart, lost between two waltzes, whispered to his eyes – which were brown – a declaration of love that they would promptly transmit to the girl ten minutes before the supper and get back a favorable reply soon after the cocoa. Three days later, the first letter would be dispatched and by the way they were getting along, it would be surprising if they both were not heading for the church by the yearend “

However, just at this moment an interruption - it was the Major (a friend of his deceased father) arriving with a wad of papers, “a drama” that he had written and wanted to read to Duarte.

Half nine, Duarte noted sadly. The drama had seven chapters and, except for the author’s handwriting, contained nothing new – one poisoning, two disguises, more poison, a girl kidnapped, death, a will stolen and so on. Eleven o’clock, time flying by, the second chapter scarcely finished, Duarte seething with impatience, midnight, the dance was lost... Suddenly, the Major leaves in a huff and shortly afterward a police officer bursts in and accuses Duarte of the theft of a blue Turkish slipper, a delicate piece. Duarte has no time even to say a word but is piled into a car, which takes off at speed. And then comes the unexpected - “Aha” says the man in the car. “How dare you think that you can with impunity, steal Turkish slippers, make up to blond girls, maybe even marry them.. and on top of all this, laugh at the whole human race”

A turn¹ in the narrative

Blindfolded, arriving at a house with bronzes, mirrors, carpets... Duarte, disoriented, tries to think of a new and definitive explanation. The slipper is a metaphor (it was Cecilia's heart he planned to steal) this must be some kind of punishment. A priest, an old man, a master-of-ceremony is waiting for him - the slipper was not stolen – it is brought in – and the old man explains to the younger: you will marry your Lady, write a will (with her as inheritor) and then drink an Eastern drug.

- *“Poison!”* Interrupts Duarte.

- *“That is the vulgar name; I suggest a different one - a **passport to Heaven**”*.

The girl appears, divine, ethereal, blue eyes like Cecilia “I don't want to! I will not marry!” Jumps out of the window, flies over walls, in vertiginous flight until, injured and breathless, she drags herself into the last house she comes to and sinks into a chair. There a man reads the Jornal newspaper of which the pages all at once get smaller and she recognizes him - it is the Major, who says to her “Angel of Heaven, you are revenged! End of the last scene” Duarte rubs his eyes, lost. Where is he? The Major asks his opinion. Excellent, says the youth. Strong passions, eh? says the Major. Very strong indeed – what time is it? Two o'clock in the morning. The Major leaves and Duarte thinks: “unquiet and fertile ghost, you have saved me from a bad drama with an original dream, substituting tedium by nightmare; not altogether a bad exchange. (...) you have demonstrated once again that the best drama is in the spectator and not on the stage”

Turkish Slipper (“A chinela turca” of Machado de Assis) is surprised by the effect, by the mistake. We lost the ground under our feet, in the reading, it was a dream, a chimera, was it just playing with the elements of the Major's drama? The story line is well laid out, in the drama, by the passing of the hours and Duarte's despair – melancholy, rage, abandonment. But there is another timeline in the drama that is not of the same order, which works nearer to the nerve, to the crux of the

¹. We considered whether this Portuguese word should be spelled *“torsão”* or *“torção”* in the original. . According to Houaiss, *“torsão”* is derived from the Medieval Latin *“torsio”* meaning bending or reversal while *“torção”* is from the Latin verb *“torque”* indicating return, curve, bending force. We decided on *“torsão”* because it seems to convey better the idea of reversal, of backwards which is important for the proposed development. In this translation, however, the English Words *“Turn”* or *“Twist”* are used.

narrative - the rapidity with which Duarte “sees” his courtship of Cecilia evolve, his desire requited, but, at the same time, how disturbing this is in fact. Here there is a crucial twist in the plot that is not at all evident – it must be read between the lines. Between two waltzes to see his relationship develop like lightning into marriage before the end of the year may be all that Duarte could desire for possession of Cecilia, but what Machado de Assis reveals in the story with his “writer’s knowledge” is that this perspective of direct access to the object of love and desire may also be a troubling jointure. From fascination to disquiet, an inversion, poison and death. Nothing could be more ingenious than to say simply ‘*a passport to Heaven*’. Ironical.

And this becomes the lodestar for my work – the inversion that emerges in the machadian narrative and strikes the reader as hesitation, loss of the ground under foot, “the vertiginous effect”. I think of it as a singular effect that alerts one to the stress in the structure and which, I suggest, constitutes a principal of composition of the stories that typify the author’s style of writing.²

Effect of Vertigo – when reading the stories one forms the hypothesis of a kind of dizziness at these turning points considered as places in Machado’s fiction that raise questions about that which in life is related to what is delinquent, by structure. The enigmas, the cracks, the discontinuous territories, with no summarizing explanations, but with which we have to make do.

Machado builds vertigo into the narrative line of his story, and these moments of inversion or ‘doubling’ that upset the reader, very often operate also as operators of passage.

Passages where the writer collects the phantasmal elements of subjectivity that inhabit the social imagination and inserts them into the fiction.

Passages where he puts that which is of the order of discontinuities, of the enigmas that question each one of us – origin/death and the encounters with the other sex. Exactly the subjective enigmas that were also great questions for Freud.

² I found these in a group of narratives that could well have been larger and in which many others could have been included. Those that I selected came from the “*Papeis Avulsos*” contemporary of the alteration of style in Machado’s writing, with *Brás Cubas* as romance.

This for me constitutes something of genius in the course of these stories that seems to me to "register" with Machado's style – as if the effect of vertigo appears close-in every time something comes into play of these enigmas, indices of discontinuities and of dealing with change. This also displaces the work in time and imparts a profound actuality.

Furthermore there is a third passage zone – the time and context of Machado's writings in a Brazil struggling with modernity (here Benjamim's work helps) with all the changes and contradiction that this entails. (for example, see the Chapter on the hats).

Vertigo as an operator of transition

Vertigo may be thought of as a simultaneity (and also a passage) between fascination and perturbation. Like the play of continuous/discontinuous. When, for example, one is at a great height and approaches the edge to see the drop, the sight of the empty space below often acts on us as does a magnet on iron and the empty space seems to attract us and induce a state near to fainting. For this is the moment when something of the horror is revealed – the horror of the drop itself. This is the play between the continuous and the discontinuous, the two faces of vertigo – fascination and perturbation. The reality that interrupts the fascination as a troubling face upsets our thoughts.

Roger Caillois, in one of his anthropological studies, says that in the situation of vertigo what is involved is "letting oneself desire the void". It is an experience of loss, but of loss in consent, "an abandonment controlled by the fascination that alienates". He also further develops this theme, as well as the rites of passage in traditional societies, where the figures of the player that cannot resist the "green cloth" - even when it leads to ruin - or the man swept away by the figure of the fatal woman (whose fatality does not depend so much on the object – herself – as on the inclination, on the attraction).

But the most interesting thing that he points out is that, if the bird cannot take its eyes off the serpent, or the moth abandon the attraction of the deadly light, man is the only one that (as well as many other things) creates, has the imagination to

visualize objects of vertigo where the reality does not exist or has little to do with the visualization.

Following on with Hitchcock's vertigo (*A falling body*) – the vertigo that Freud examines in his splendid article on Gradiva – in Jensen's fiction. Here, a young archeologist falls in love with a sculpture executed in low relief and displayed in a Roman museum. It is the figure of a woman who walks in a peculiar manner and the detail of the position of her foot leaves him completely hypnotized. He, who up until that moment, had been a researcher with eyes only for science, changed to "research" on a subtle approach to women by a scientific investigation of the position of that foot. Dreaming a vertiginous dream, in delirium, he imagines that that Greek/Roman woman actually passed him in the street, that she was a ghost from Pompeii, until he discovers, helped out of the cloud by the woman herself, that she is in fact his neighbor and a childhood sweetheart long lost to mind and, like the statue, buried.

The question there is whether we can make progress on the postulate that the Real emerges for the young archeologist from a Detail, as with Gradiva's delicate foot (that walks), or as in Machado with the Slipper/Cecelia.

Therefore, the vertiginous effect, in the literature, comes from the turn in the narrative that is made evident by these details, the torsion movement gains ground and moves our interest in the direction of the structural question.

The Argentinean writer, Ricardo Piglia, works on the hypothesis of formal construction in stories, observing the architecture of the works of the great storytellers. In the book *Formas Breves*, he proposes two theses about tales:

1) A story always tells two tales. 2) The story is a tale that incorporates a secret history. He gives a simple example taken from Chekov "A man from Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, goes home and kills himself". According to Piglia, the format of the story is condensed in that phrase, the exact contrary of what would be thought normal – gamble, win suicide. The anecdote separates two story lines – that about the gambling is one, the suicide is another coming from the opposite side - the story works by describing the stress and the plot between the two.

At the same time as he postulates this two-sidedness, Piglia stresses the intersection points, in the stories, in the details, that articulate the passages between the two tales and induce them to act simultaneously. As in the "passport to Heaven" in the Turkish Slipper - and here I make a considerable jump – Lacan works on the structure of the subject with the topological figure known as a Moebius Strip where we have an enigmatic and paradoxical surface which is apparently a tape with two faces, one inside and the other outside, effectively a "Head and Tails". However, the Moebius Strip has a twist that radically alters its structure and eliminates the separation between inside and outside. The front and the back, now continuous, appear as if the one were contained in the other. The formulation made by Richardo Piglia – each story tells two tales – permits us to state the duality, but the emphasis that gives to the intersection points may allow us to take a further step – to place these elements in the structure of the tale as of those in a twist – as in the Moebius Strip. The "passport to Heaven", like the turn itself in Machado's stories, gets very close to the essential operation of the subject structure. Ultra-passing the duality, the irony gains ground – is it not by irony that Machado limes his passages when he writes of an "*oblique look*" through which something of the truth may cross?

The irony of Machado de Assis is thus characterized – it is the place of passage, it cuts the ground from under our feet, it transports the vertigo (in the details) and is a kind of obliquity (a certain twisting or turning) in the writing. Leaving duality behind and inserting a count of 3 into the game (the "mistaken" points that serve both sides) we get near to the so-called quips, the joke, in Freud that is one of the formations of the unconscious. When the joke is sprung, one cuts, "reads" and what was there coded in the midst of what was written can appear, the joke, the supposition, the desire that circulates in the midst of the scene, and in the structure

And in this Machado shares his mirth with the reader, transmitting with the one movement some hard truths and some difficult enigmas about the human condition. The meeting with the Other, sex, the origin and the death, the alterity, are all questions that continue querying us and constituting our fictions.