

The disenchanting magician or Murilo's metamorphoses¹

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"A discovery which in no way frightened me, any more than it astonished me to take the owner of the restaurant out of my pocket".

Murilo Rubião, "The Ex-Magician from the Minhota Tavern".

The stage of the magic

Still today, little can be added to the critical appreciation formulated by Álvaro Lins, in 1948, Murilo Rubião's debut. In a rigorous and accurate reading, the critic recognized the talent and originality of this Minas Gerais story writer in Brazilian literature, but also pointed out the imperfections that undermined the writer's full realization.

From the point of view of originality, judgment is easily verifiable. Thought against the general picture of a fiction based on observation and document, scarce in games of imagination, Murilo's fantastic narrative appears doubly unusual. Contrary to what happened, for example, in Hispanic-American literature, where the fantastic narrative of Borges, Cortázar, Felisberto Hernández and many others, found a strong tradition of the genre, from the works of Horacio Quiroga and Leopoldo Lugones or even before, in Brazil it was always rare. It's counted on one's hand examples such as "Demônios", by Aluísio de Azevedo, or of "Assombramento", by Afonso Arinos, or also of the very strange tale, such as the "Bugio Moqueado", by Monteiro Lobato. And they are all a long way from the modern conception of the fantastic. The imaginative flight of Modernism turned in other directions, as seen in *Macunaíma* and Oswald's radical prose. Only with Guimarães Rosa the exploration of the imaginary is thickened, but also here in a different dimension, so that, in fact, one is faced with an almost complete absence of Brazilian antecedents for the case of Murilo's fiction, which gives him the position of precursor, in our midst, of the super-real exploration.

But, as Álvaro Lins also observed, regardless of any direct influence, Murilo's unusual creation maintains, outside our limits, a close kinship with Kafka's fictional world, sharing with him at least the logical construction of the absurd. In an essay in *Situations, I*, in which he elaborates on a theory of the fantastic, Sartre shows the disadvantage it takes, even a writer like Maurice Blanchot, when compared to Kafka. Without making crushing comparisons it is, however, precisely from the parallel with Kafka that Álvaro Lins begins to make objections to Murilo's art. These objections can be translated into what would be a kind of impotence of the magic of our artist, who cannot fully realize the transfigurative alchemy of the real. Or, according to the critic himself: "Between the two worlds, the real and the super-real, there was always, in *O Ex-Mágico*, something disturbing the emotional state of fiction, so that we remain dissatisfied with the results, which, in this case, should not only be literary, also psychological and human, in general."

In the short story "The Ex-Magician from the Minhota Tavern", one of the central thematic aspects is exactly this: that of the feeling of helplessness that experiences a

¹ ARRIGUCCI, Davi. O mágico desencantado ou as metamorfoses de Murilo. In: RUBIÃO, Murilo. *O pirotécnico Zacarias*. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1974.

magician disenchanted by "not having realized a whole magical world", before having his powers stuck by bureaucracy. The objection of the critic is contained in the text itself; is the subject of the narrative. This can then be read as a discourse also focused on the problem of its own structuring, making a lucid awareness of difficulties and, at the limit, about its own impotence to be completely made real. Tales such as "Marina, the Intangible" or "The Edifice" demonstrate that it is frequent in Murilo this clear view of the margins of creative aspiration and, therefore, when he risks the leap, measuring the fall, touches, with the discretion of his language, one of the dimensions of literary modernity. This critical vigilance in a land where the story writers, without any magic and without realizing it, multiply like rabbits, so often so sterilely, guards, beyond the deficiencies, a deeper originality, which deserves analysis. Perhaps here is the starting point for a rereading of Murilo Rubião and something to add to the vision of the critic who knew how to see him so early and with the acute eye of master of the craft.

The multiplication of rabbits

Álvaro Lins's criticism showed the tenacious character of Murilo's imperfections, which continued to challenge even a fierce search for perfection, as it seemed to be from that author who had unceasingly rewritten his short stories, before filling them up in the first book.

Since then, the story writer published little: *A Estrela Vermelha*, in 1953; *Os Dragões e Outros Contos*, in 1965; some sparse narratives, in literary supplements. And has announced a new collection: *O Convidado*. In the whole of this short production, one always perceives the tendency to insistent rework of the same short stories, which go back and forth in several books. In a way, Murilo continues to remake himself, as if, for him, writing was fundamentally rewriting. The stylistic variants of this invariant come-and-go could be of immediate interest, if it were not more important here the very act of modifying, with which it identifies the operation of styling. Scarce and critically watched, the work grinds over itself, multiplying, at the same time, moderating itself: in short, changing, in the strict sense of the term, which implies alteration and limit. Murilo's method of composition seems to involve a paradox: it extends the text to restrict it; enlarges it to focus it. Thus, his narrative discourse changes tenaciously, without inventing anything substantially new, regarding the starting point. In the extreme, sterility threatens to gnaw its modifications.

A quick look at his short stories will reveal that the modification, that means, the metamorphosis, is also one of the obsessive themes of this always dissatisfied story writer. Actually, it is, here, a kind of thematic matrix where the different transgressions characteristic of fantastic literature are developed: the ruptures of the principle of causality, of time, of space, of the duality between subject and object, of the being itself. Thus, in "Teleco, the Rabbit", it is vertiginous and pathetic: the little animal turns into everything, even takes grotesque and terrible forms, but can only fulfill his desire to become a man, by eventually becoming a dead child. The child is the unsatisfactory multiplication of women and disenchantments in a well-realized story like "Three Names for Godofredo". It is "Alfredo", the beast, the pig, the dromedary, the brother of the tender eyes and rough tongue that accompanies the come-and-go of a tired narrator. It is also the polychrome transmutation of "Zacarias, the Pyrotechnist". It seems to be implied even in the omnivorousness of "Barbara", which desires everything and incorporates everything, turning, grotesquely, into a monstrous fat person. The examples also multiply.

In the short story "The Edifice", the metaphorical, latent identification in other texts between the narrative structuring process and metamorphosis becomes almost ostentatious. The endless construction of an "absurd skyscraper", to which it is always

possible to add new blocks, can also be understood as an allegory of the very fictional construction that is being read. The development of the building is, to some extent (of the building and the story), threatened by the risks of the work shutdown, which, implicitly, still represents a threat of holding the report, which accompanies the transformation of its object, to the point of being constructed by the union of small unit fragments of text. After the moment of danger for the indefinite continuation of construction, there is a fantastic and ironic rebellion of the means against the ends (in which Sartre sees the basis of the fantastic contemporary): the engineer-builder himself, overcome by boredom, can no longer stop the process; the workers refuse to interrupt the work and even accelerate it, listening to the beautiful images of the speeches made to discourage them. The fictional discourse is also in line with the edifice's building principle: the story, where it seems to echo the myth of the sorcerer's apprentice, remains ironically open for an unfinished telling as long as the edifice is built up. The fantastic invention creates, thus, an uninterrupted movement; on the other hand, this movement is a necessary condition of the story (of any narrative): if they stop the works, if the edifice doesn't change... The modification bends the deadlock.

Now, the modifier par excellence is the sorcerer, or even, in his circus version, the magician, lord of the power to metamorphose the world. The magician does not move, like the wizard himself, by a longing for possession and mastery of reality; he is, first of all, a skilled maneuverer of illusion, the degraded wizard to the stage of spectacles, powerful enough to dodge the attentive eyes and delight men. But effectively, his art is still surrounded by fantastic and fascinating resonances. It deludes the eyes and breaks the repetitive banality of existence: from the hat, suddenly, the rabbits and the astonishment. The analog process that, in Murilo's fiction, links the structuring of the narrative to the fantastic transformation, seems to culminate in this figure of the generator of astonishment. Through metaphor – literary metamorphosis par excellence –, the magician becomes the very artist's image.

If, however, as seen in "The Ex-Magician from the Minhota Tavern", the magic is compulsive, the unusual turns, in the artist's eyes, into the banal. The fantastic, if becomes a rule, also tires: for the magician, unto dislike, to continuously take rabbits out of the pocket is boredom. As the engineer-builder of "The Edifice", he can no longer stop the movement he generated himself, and what is left to him is to get bored. Who, in appearance, has powers to change the world, just does not have the power to leave it: not having, mysteriously, origin like the others, nor has end: it is pure come-and-go, innocuous transformation in the circus of oneself. His routine is as absurd as the senseless of the other, symbolized in the petrification of bureaucracy. Always moving in the inner circle of the extraordinary, unable to create in fact a whole magical world, this disenchanted magician has lost exactly the ability to feel what he should create: amazement.

The frozen amazement

As in Kafka, what may first amaze Murilo's reader is that his main characters, like the ex-magician, were never amazed, despite the unusual character of the events they live or witness. The natural consideration of supernatural facts, this kind of paralyzing the surprise, will certainly find an opposite echo in those who read unprepared: the fright and, therefore, the suspicion of being the object of fraud, victim of the magician's illusionism. Or, the astonishment will be, as always, the beginning of the search for meaning.

The first impulse, facilitated by the almost journalistic transparency of language, will be, as in "The Edifice", for an allegorical reading, an unfolding of the text into an underlying content, which will transform it into a parabolic message, stimulated by the

constant biblical epigraphs. But this path will not be the only one of the paths, or it will lead only to boredom, as the magician for whom the unusual has become routine. The insistence on it will precisely eliminate the stimulus of the journey, the defiant presence of the fantastic, an imaginary that does not allow itself to be translated, demanding, by its ambiguity, the inquisitive and renewed displacement of the gaze.

It is necessary to read literally, accept the rules of the game, fixing the attention on the very construction of the plot. And, since it starts at the amazement and at Aristotle, pay attention to the *mythos* itself, the fable plotted in a coherent and significant totality, whose connection with the mythical archetypes is explained by the biblical epigraphs. What function will the fantastic have in the constitution of the fables of a magician gnawed by the routine of disenchantment?

The fantastic, like everything else, becomes routine. But without it, how to invent? How, without breaking the treadmill with the unexpected modification, to make the fable flow? The art of the magician seems to be to conjure the meaningless sterility of the world and allow the germination of the story. His speech, in which desire seems to have free passage, overcome the obstacles by fantastic modifications, makes an abstract trajectory and disconnected from the obligations of realistic verisimilitude. Close to the myth, its constant transformation establishes the unusual realm where anything can happen, even the most absurd things. In "Marina, the Intangible", the writer, after closing the Bible, inexhaustible repertoire of all arguments, finds himself paralyzed before the blank sheet. And then: "In order to vanquish my sterility somehow, I attacked the page before me, disposed to write any sort of story, even the most chaotic and absurd." The absurd story that ends up being read becomes the following of another, which remains intangible. The fantastic modifications become strategic adventures, juggleries, legerdemains, in short, astonishment for the reader. The story, through pyrotechnics, is rescued from the paralysis of the blank: it unfolds in the daydream of the rainbow. It's ready to be rewritten.