The self-neglecting society

Luiz Costa Lima

Tradução de George Gould

The almost total lack of cultural supplements in the Brazilian press today helps explain why so many books are published without the knowledge of the reader, and why, on a much smaller scale, others must make do with a single review, whether good, informative, or simply bad, or with the transcript of a small fragment.

Those responsible for informing the public about culture justify their restrictions saying they are obeying orders. Some may remember how after the end of Word War II the judges at the Nuremberg trials condemned many war criminals who tried to justify their crimes in precisely these terms. But, even if they remember this, they aren’t concerned. After all, they are not exterminating people, they are merely silencing texts. (But don’t let’s take this reasoning any further – to the interested reader is left the suggestion that he or she save the imperative to obey orders for the final discussion here on the character of today’s society.)

This brief appraisal was prompted by what happened to Sérgio Sant’Anna’s latest book, *O Homem-Mulher* [The Man-Woman] (Companhia das Letras, 2015). A well known figure, Sérgio Sant’Anna is a writer of the post-Clarice Lispector generation who has not had the critical appreciation he deserves. This recent collection of short stories, *O Homem-Mulher*, ran the gamut of the country’s few literary competitions, but never made any short-lists. Although I find it strange, I do not understand the reason for his refusal. I merely thought to myself that, having had the opportunity of writing for *Eutomia*, I needn’t worry about being telegraphic.
O Homem-Mulher opens and closes the collection with the same character, presented in two different phases of his life. Adamastor, Fred Wilson, or Zezé, is someone who, without knowing exactly what it is he does, tries to create a fictional identity for himself. Though not a homosexual, he has acquired the habit of dressing up in his sister’s clothes, and, taking advantage of a local custom, takes part in a carnival parade dressed as a woman. The experience is a positive one, and in a few pages combining an ether-based drug [lança-perfume, commonly used during carnival in the second half of the 20th century], a cemetery, and a willing teenage girl, Sant’Anna creates an erotic carnival adventure which, though exciting, is not pornographic – this last a hallmark of so many stories by writers trying to reach a wider audience.

As it stands, the tale would be merely incidental if it ended there and the character, tired of life in a small town in the north of the country, didn’t decide to emigrate, insisting on his fictional identity somewhere in the Lapa district of Rio de Janeiro. Content with a bohemian existence made possible by his near-tramp status, and with his aptitude for friendliness and seduction, by degrees he manages to gather a number of people together to form a drama group. The group is made up of a maricón exiled from Cuba, who receives a small exile’s allowance, a girl who hates her father and receives a small stipend from her mother, and a man who is out of work but is ready for anything. It is with them that Adamastor or Zezé hopes to make his dream of becoming a playwright and theatre director come true. Who would write what? The Man-Woman himself, who, with no idea of what writing is or the theatre, improvises stories with the others, based on their own lives.

Without really knowing what they are doing, they engage in behaviour that today would be called “performatic". It would have been strange if they had been successful. Not that the group lacked initiative. Naming their improvisational piece “The Desperate”, the writer-director manages to take advantage – and this is Sant’Anna’s first explosive piece of satire – of a government incentive and, with no further explanation, is granted a whole season to perform in a well known Rio theatre. Though the incentive itself does not provide them with much money, the girl in the group, Veronica, helps temporarily to solve this problem by going out with rich old men.

Even so, the group’s situation remains precarious at best. Audiences are tiny, money is in short supply, and there are no notices in the press. Zezé takes the initiative and publishes a long piece denouncing this neglect, also mentioning his plan to write about the little lives of his companions.
This proposal has an effect. The city’s only theatre critic, writing for its only newspaper – and it wasn’t by chance that the theatre was in Rio de Janeiro – turns up one day to watch the performance. His review couldn’t be worse. The group is in shock, and even strong-minded Zezé is left reeling. But the season is drawing to a close and so they struggle on. At this point the story takes a leap. The director was in the habit of using a handgun as a prop, pointing it now at himself, now at the other players, and sometimes even at the audience. As the gun was never loaded, this didn’t scare anybody. But, during the penultimate performance, Zezé does something different. Towards the end of the play he points the gun at himself and fires.

The sound of the shot is clear indication that he has killed himself. The wheel of fortune has turned. But it has not done so all at once. The arrival of the police and fire brigade and the verdict of suicide signal the end of the ephemeral drama group. But this final change will only come into effect through the agency of a so-called anti-critic. He studies Zezé’s life story and his attempt to stage his own play. The resulting text itself provides a definition of the essence of performance: “(...) Let’s not forget that he was not only an actor playing a role, but that he was the role itself, the character.” This is something the anti-critic sees as suitable to a revolutionary aesthetic. As such, Zezé’s sacrifice opens a new scene in the history of the theatre. Its repercussion is widespread, reaching beyond the city where it took place. The play “The Desperate” becomes news, and is staged abroad; the dead man’s sisters even start to earn some money. Sant’Anna doesn’t need to make his mockery explicit. It’s clear enough as it is. If the Brazilian media doesn’t have any room for literature, it’s because like the international media it’s hungry for shocking facts.

This closing tale in The Man-Woman deserves a closer reading because it conveys so well the feel of the entire collection, but there are other stories that express more poignantly the book’s ironic take on the current situation. “Os Lencinhos” (literally, “The Little Handkerchiefs”), is without doubt one of the best short stories ever written in this country. In it, the exploration of the erotic follows an unprecedented trail, and were there an equivalent critical trail to be followed, it would no doubt go against the grain of traditional concepts of romantic love. It is the story of how a dentist and her patient, with no premeditation on either part, transform an appointment into a torrid love scene. It’s only good while it lasts, however. When the appointment is over, Eros returns to his chambers; the dentist coolly declares that she will be going on her honeymoon in a few days and the patient, ordering her present from a seamstress, makes preparations to marry the latter. For the dentist, who takes the initiative, either psychoanalysis did not yet exist or it had already become a bedtime story. The story unfolds.
without uproar or commotion. Everything has the appearance of a second-rate Hollywood production. Without descending into the pragmatic-mercantile banalities of the cheap movie, erotic attraction and mutual affection are seen as totally distinct territories. As the writer is not a philosopher and the short story leaves no room for prolonged meditation, it is only to be expected that the former know how to separate wine from water, or, in this case, how to convert a dentist’s chair into a pleasure bed.

Equally as interesting are the stories “O rigor formal” [Formal rigour] and “As antenas da raça” [The antennae of the race]. In the first, a writer’s wife takes her revenge on her husband not so much because he has been unfaithful to her – she is guilty of the same crime – but rather for the excessive scrupulousness with which he accepts to have his work adapted for television. The implicit accusation is less over the writer’s sham demands and the media’s attitude to the transaction than over a society that has renounced all its values in favour of making a fast buck. Even taking into account the short story’s limitations as a form, it is not an overstatement to say that here we have one of current society’s most caustic indictments. With its values reduced in every instance to the dictum “how much money can be made?“, it follows that if one dig even slightly below the surface one will find cynicism and hypocrisy.

In the second of these stories, “As antenas da raça” [The antennae of the race], the irony of the title is immediately apparent. The phrase’s implication is obviously one of ethnic pride, if not outright racism. In the story this is left in the background, however. In the story the antennae have to do with the wings of an Asian cockroach that, having come into the country in the luggage of an ambassador, suddenly makes its appearance at a formal dinner party, ending up in the ambassador’s wife’s soup. In an effort to hide the insect from her guests, the ambassador’s wife promptly swallows it. But the cockroach manages to survive and, moving about inside her stomach, drives her to despair. She drinks a huge quantity of whisky and throws herself out of her building. But the author does not extract a “moral” from this. Sarcastic, mocking, Sant’Anna observes his world through a telescopic lens. If the reader draws closer to the material, however, what has been hidden from view will suddenly be made clear. (But it seems unlikely that the reader will go to all this trouble: being a deep text diver isn’t a great job.)
Luiz Costa Lima is Emeritus Professor at PUC (Rio de Janeiro). His Os Eixos da linguagem: Blumenberg e a questão da metáfora was published recently (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 2015); his upcoming Melancolia. Literatura, due out in 2017, will be published by UNESP.

George Gould, BA Hons, MPhil (University of Cambridge)
george123gould@gmail.com