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**EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT SYMBOLIC WORLDS: A REFLECTION
ON POTENTIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF JOSÉ CARDOSO PIRES,
BALLAD OF DOGS' BEACH (1982)**

The semantic contents of the complementary terms 'fact' and 'fiction' have been shifting in various directions in the last hundred years. Nowadays, nobody will be inclined to defend the easy positivist division which linked 'fact' to knowledge based on observation by the senses and 'fiction' to the world of storytelling and literature. Or is the positivist view also more complicated than we usually recall? In his essay «Le roman expérimental» (1880) Zola argues that observation provides the material for experiments with human beings supervised by the writer. However, since his experiments, his «observations provoquées», include emotional and other psychological aspects, Zola, too, cannot simply rely on observation and is bound to make inferences which imply an element of conjecture.

Ever since the postmodernists attempt to erase the realist and the modernist ways of distinguishing between fact and fiction, we have become accustomed, on the one hand, to the inclusion of facts in literary narrative, often in a less than reliable way, and, on the other hand, to extending the notion of fiction and narrative to the so-called real world of advertising, journalism, politics, and historiography. The idea of national identity, a product of the ideology of nationalism, cannot do without a story which usually at least in part is a fiction. The Armenians, the Tartars, the Kurds, the various ethnic groups of former Yugoslavia, each have their partly fictional stories of a glorious past. In Canada, Robert Kroetsch argued that his country's identity is in need of a fiction: «In a sense we haven't got an identity until someone tells our story. The fiction makes us real» (quoted by Heath, 1980: 71).

In politics, the U.S. Vice-President Quayle provided us recently with another example of taking fiction seriously. On May 19, 1992, while campaigning in San Francisco, Quayle expressed his disapproval of Murphy Brown, a character in a TV situation comedy of the same name, portraying an intelligent, highly paid, professional woman, who decides bearing and educating a child alone instead of marrying the father (*The New York Times*, May 20, 1992). We understand that a writer, such as Robert Kroetsch, may say: «the fiction makes us real». But why should a politician attack a fictional character and use her as a negative example when discussing a «poverty of values», supposedly one of the main causes of the Los Angeles riots?

The world, which now celebrates the end of ideologies, is still in need of fictions, which aim at making sense and, by doing so, create consensus among groups of people. One such fiction is the Portuguese novel *Balada da Praia dos Cães* (1982), translated into English as *Ballad of Dogs' Beach*, by José Cardoso Pires.

In view of the theme of this conference, which is concerned with fact and fiction, this novel is an appropriate one to discuss, because it is a story about an investigator looking for facts. Superficially it is a whodunit, a mystery story. The unprepared reader may assume that the story is a fiction, but is it a fiction?

If the investigation and reconstruction of the murder of major Dantas Castro would be a fiction, then the facts the investigator is looking for would be embedded in that fiction and therefore possibly partly or wholly also be fictive. But there is no doubt that the description of the investigation is close to historical reality. There is an appendix to the novel in which the author explains his sources. He acknowledges that he has seen the dossiers of both the criminal and the secret police (PIDE) about the murder case, which took place in the spring of 1960, and that he has interviewed one of the offenders, the architect Fontenova, in the summer of 1980. (The name Fontenova, as well as his profession, however, are inventions of the author.) As said, the novel was published in Portugal in 1982, the same year as *Memorial do Convento* by José Saramago; both books were candidates for the «Grande Prémio do Romance e Novela» of the Portuguese Writers' Association, but the important prize went to Cardoso Pires.

In a concluding note Cardoso Pires writes that, through the intermediary of a political refugee in the Brazilian embassy in Lisbon, he already in 1961 received a report of 22 pages written by a young man sentenced to penal servitude for complicity in the murder which provided material for his novel. In view of Cardoso Pires' use of this report as well as of the police dossiers, his work can be placed in the category of documentary literature, such as written by Norman Mailer and Truman Capote.

However, it is not so easy to classify *Ballad of Dogs' Beach*. This also appears from the reception of the book in Portugal, where immediately after publication it triggered off a great number of reactions, which, among other things, extensively focused on the historical background material. I have limited knowledge of the Portuguese reception and therefore can refer to it only in passing. However, as Óscar Lopes (1986) has argued, it would be wrong to disconnect the *Ballad* from earlier fiction and essays written by Cardoso Pires. In his early days Cardoso Pires had been a journalist, but throughout his fictional work we see a continuity of themes which also may guide our interpretation of the novel.

Before continuing my analysis it is necessary to recapitulate briefly the main threads of the intrigue. I could give a synopsis of the story by summarizing the one but last chapter, with the title «The Reconstruction», but the reconstruction of the crime says very little of the story as it unfolds to the reader. Therefore, I will rather

present the story in the order in which it is told; I will give the *sjuzhet*, rather than the *fabula*.

The text opens with an autopsy report of a corpse which was found on the beach on April 3, 1960. Nearby there was a solitary pole with a poster of Air Portugal: «Portugal, Europe's Best Kept Secret, Fly TAP». Remember the year is 1960. Salazar was still in power, trying to keep the Portuguese empire in Africa, Asia and Europe together. The Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974, was still fourteen years away.

Elias Santana, with the nickname Graveyard («Covas»), is the police inspector who leads the investigation, and it is mainly through what he gradually discovers that the reader can reconstruct the murder.

First the victim is being identified: it is a former army major, Luís Dantas Castro, 47 years old, who had escaped from jail in the night of December 31, 1959, where he was awaiting sentence for participating in an abortive military coup, directed against the Salazar regime. Elias reads the news of the identification in a newspaper, and since there is a political aspect to the matter, he is afraid that the secret police for state security (PIDE) will try to take things out of his hands. The rivalry between the two police organizations is a continuous theme throughout the book. The newspaper Elias is reading also discloses the names of three suspects: a young woman, Filomena, the corporal Barroca, and a conscript officer Fontenova Sarmiento, in civilian life an architect. The latter two, Barroca and Fontenova, both in their twenties, had escaped together with the major and the three escapees had been helped by Filomena. During his flight the major was dressed as a priest. Filomena had been his girl friend, and as soon as they reached the house where they would hide for several months, they embraced each other. However, the reader learns this only from the exhausting interrogation of Filomena after her arrest (on April 10) and through her exhaustive confession. Other details are provided by people with whom she has been in contact, her landlady for instance, who has much to complain about her.

The remarkable thing is that the reader's sympathy initially is with major Dantas Castro, the resistance hero who managed to escape from jail. At this stage, the reader, at least I as a reader, was not inclined to believe that the architect, the corporal or Filomena could have killed the major. Gradually, however, an atmosphere of plotting and suspicion is being built up which makes almost everyone a suspect; first of all, of course, the secret police, which may have had an interest in killing Dantas Castro and in putting the blame on one of his three collaborators.

Just over halfway in the book, I as a reader realized that I must reassess my opinion about the various characters, not in the simple way of changing my opinion of them in the reverse, but of accepting that each of them was living in his or her own universe, having his or her own norms. Most readers, probably, will find Elias Santana, the investigator, disgusting. And they will find both the criminal police and the secret police repulsive. They will detest the political regime which needed the secret police to maintain itself. But when doubts are increasing about the role of the

resistance hero Dantas Castro and his three collaborators, the possibility of feeling sympathy for any of the characters is greatly reduced. Perhaps Filomena, who confesses without hesitation but having a strong character never sacrifices her mental independence, and the architect Fontenova, who resists the intimidation by the major, will at the end still attract some degree of sympathy or pity, but, by then, these feelings may also go towards Elias Santana, the miserable investigator of the crime.

The values which at first sight seem to hold are gradually undermined and reversed. The three escapees and Filomena live in their hideout, which they cannot leave and which therefore gradually turns into a prison. The corporal and the architect are being tyrannized by the major. The four start lying to each other. They live in a house *à huis clos*, and cannot expect any help from outside. When Filomena returns from one of her attempts to establish contact with other members of the resistance movement, Dantas Castro discovers that she has lied to him and he begins to torture her, just as he is constantly humiliating the corporal and testing the loyalty of the architect. This little group of four becomes a miniature replica of the Portuguese dictatorship they were fighting. They thought they were free, but they are trapped in the condition of a new sort of captivity.

On the other hand, Elias Santana, the investigator, and his colleagues are also prisoners of the regime. Everyone seems to be at the mercy of guards and in the grip of terror. No one is completely free; there are only shades of freedom and confinement. One of the last metaphors of the story confirms this interpretation. Walking through Lisbon at night, Elias Santana sees three railed circus-vans, with no animals, which slowly pass. In them, there are only the keepers, with their faces between bars and their legs stuck out.

By describing Elias Santana as an almost normal human being, under the spell of Filomena's charm and candid confession, he may share in our sympathy perhaps as much as Filomena herself. The oppressor and the oppressed are both captives of the regime. This is one point which makes the book an important instrument in the processing of the totalitarian past; it has a function in the Portuguese *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. The moral judgement of any of the characters is a qualified one. The resistance movement is not to blame, of course, but these resistance people are so much in the grip of terror that they begin to imitate the methods of the police.

Let us turn from the various shades of morality to the various qualifications of truth. The novel demonstrates that there are no clean facts and that there is no pure fiction. In a final note to the *Ballad of Dogs' Beach*, Cardoso Pires writes: «Thus fact and fiction, at every step, divide and come together, independent when parallel, conflicting when they meet; and no resemblance between truth and conjecture is purely coincidental» (Cardoso Pires, 1986: 181)¹. In order to discuss this quotation properly we must distinguish between the correspondence dimension and the coherence dimension of truth. Of course, Elias Santana, as a detective, is strongly interested in the correspondence dimension of truth: When did what indeed hap-

pen? Who did what? On the other hand, he also wants to know why things were happening as they did and how they are connected. Even the slightest detail must fit.

Here the question may be raised whether Cardoso Pires propounds a post-modern concept of truth. Is there more than perfection in his investigation? Or are there signs of paranoia in Filomena's behavior? Has Cardoso Pires learned from Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)?

I would judge that Elias Santana's investigation is both tiring and exhaustive, but not postmodern. Let us remind ourselves that the book has numerous references to a real crime and that the offenders, both in historical reality and in the fictional account, are arrested and confess. At the end, no single question remains unanswered. Let me mention two details. In an annex to the autopsy report printed at the very beginning of the book it is mentioned that the shoes of the dead man were reversed, that is, the right shoe was on the left foot, the left shoe on the right foot. Journalists, the novel reports, are guessing that «the reversing of the shoes is to be noted as a ritual employed by clandestine groups at the execution of their traitors» (Cardoso Pires, 1986: 8). It remains a question for Elias Santana why the shoes were worn in the wrong way, until Filomena can persuade him to believe that they wanted the dead Dantas Castro to wear shoes and that they just by mistake took the left shoe for the right one. They had indeed wondered why it was so difficult to put his shoes on.

Another, more interesting haunting question is, in what order the architect, the corporal and Filomena had read a particular book, *The Sea Wolf* by Jack London in Portuguese translation. The novel was found by Elias Santana and his men, and it has attracted attention because there are underlined sentences, such as: «We're dead men, I know it» (33), «He led a lost cause, and he was not afraid of God's thunderbolts» (33), «He is living deep and high. I doubt if he has ever lived so swiftly and keenly before» (94), «I wandered all these years among a world of women, seeking you» (132), «It would be a most moral act to rid the world of such a monster» (168). (All quotations are from Cardoso Pires, 1986.)

These sentences fit exactly the behavior and role of Dantas Castro. It is known that the corporal was reading the book, but Elias Santana assumes that he lacked the intelligence to have underlined these well-selected sentences. At the end of the book, even after the reconstruction of the crime, Elias Santana comes to the conclusion that it is Filomena who has made the underlinings in order to suggest to the corporal that the major must be liquidated.

Of course, one may remark in passing that this is a nice example of intertextuality, and indeed it is. But these are motivated references to another text; it is an intertextuality that has a function in the plot.

The investigation is thorough and complete, the facts are established as well as the motivations — which I have not yet mentioned in full. The precise, coherent and oppressive picture which results from this can be interpreted as a metaphor for the

totalitarian regime of Salazar. This brings me to my main thesis: *the distinction of fact and fiction will vary with the perspective or framework which we choose.*

In the book there are many facts at the level of the particular crime that has been described which correspond to historical reality. However, if the story is being interpreted as a metaphor referring to Portugal (Europe's Best Kept Secret) and the suffocating atmosphere under the regime of Salazar, we are talking of another level. This metaphorical interpretation may take certain facts as a starting point, but as an interpretation it is rather a product of the imagination, it is rather a fiction than a factual construct.

And if we go one step further, we may read the story as a metaphor for the predatory world we all live in. Its topic, then, is not Portugal under Salazar, but any society *à huis clos*, in which all oppressors are the captives of the people they oppress. In this interpretation, the tight logic of the investigation is also operative outside the world of crime and outside totalitarian regimes. Now, the idea of being responsible and of being watched applies to every human situation. The notion that to some extent everyone is an accomplice, in one way or another, of some sort of totalitarianism makes the book transcend the boundaries of a mystery story, as well as the boundaries of Portugal.

The latter interpretation pertains to a general human condition. It finds support in the nonpolitical aspects of the novel, in particular the emphasis on sexual relations. Major Dantas Castro and Filomena are lovers, but he is twice her age and is gradually confronted with his own impotence. This makes him into a tyrant and a sadist. There are political reasons for the architect and the corporal to kill the major, as they are afraid that he will betray them, as well as a number of other members of the resistance movement. But Filomena, too, is afraid of Dantas Castro and has good reason to believe that in the end he will kill her. The only way to escape his torturing her is to turn against him and to side with the architect and the corporal. This non-political aspect of the plot enhances the general significance of the novel. If we are interested in the novel as a statement on the human condition, the distinction between fact and fiction does not apply at all. Now we have arrived at a level of making sense which is far removed from facts and which is almost completely a mental construct, a fiction.

In his seminal book, *Fictional Worlds*, Thomas Pavel has advanced a pair of felicitous terms which also apply to our interpretations of *Ballad of Dogs' Beach*. Pavel writes: «Reference in fiction rests on two fundamental principles that, while shared by fiction and other activities, have for a long time constituted the privileged core of the fictional order: the *principle of distance* and the *principle of relevance*» (Pavel, 1986: 145). The «principle of distance», which seems related to the Formalists' device of defamiliarization, is certainly operative in the novel. In his concluding note the author writes explicitly: «My 'architect Fontenova' is a literary creation. So is the major. Mena and the corporal are literary creations. They are

imaginary: that is, they are distilled, imaginatively, from real people» (Cardoso Pires, 1986: 181).

But apart from setting up an imaginary world, away from our daily experiences, for readers outside Portugal and rather ignorant of Salazar's dictatorship the novel also is at a geographical (in addition to historical) distance. The story does not interfere with the personal memory and experience of readers living abroad. Therefore, foreign readers will be less interested in the factual aspects of the novel, and more in its general significance, its relevance for other than historical reasons. Portuguese readers may see this general significance as well, and the author certainly has wanted to emphasize it, but they have been interested in the accuracy of the historical detail also.

Let me repeat: the distinction of fact and fiction will vary with the perspective or framework which we choose. Geographical distance will make a difference. So will the genre on which we focus. Are we reading the book as the reconstruction of a crime, as a rewriting of official history? Then a keen attention for the distinction of facts and fiction can be expected. However, if we interpret the text as an erotic novel bordering on pornography, its setting in a particular time and space is much less important. And if the book is read as a characterization of the human condition, indeed as a novel with an existentialist perspective, the distinction of fact and fiction has very little relevance. General symbolic meanings, not restricted to a specific time and place, make the question of the factual occurrence of the events to which these meanings are attached superfluous. Cardoso Pires writes in his concluding note: «Some elements in some lives — in all lives, I would say — will raise the individual to general significance» (1986: 181). This statement does not encourage research into the factual background of the plot. The more we are prepared to distance ourselves from the historical facts, the more we may see coherence and sense. In order to see general significance we must sacrifice the particular.

Finally a word on the first part of the title of this presentation; I promised to raise empirical questions about the symbolic worlds I discussed. How can we establish that an interpretation strengthens or corrects a particular symbolic world, the framework of the mental orientation of a reader?

My hypothesis is that certain interpretations have focussed more on the factuality than on the fictionality of the novel. The emphasis on the general significance of the novel may be equally strong in the Portuguese and in the foreign reception, but the interest in the factual background was certainly stronger in Portugal than abroad. An explanation of this difference would be that foreign readers did not feel threatened by reading a truthful account of Salazar's totalitarianism, nor by possible distortions in such an account. Detailed research of reception documents, mainly reviews of the novel², can refute or corroborate these hypotheses. Such research can be called empirical insofar as it relies on, in the words of Siegfried J. Schmidt (1992), «controlled second order observation».

At least two parameters can be used: the geographic whereabouts of the recipient (Portugal versus abroad), and the selection of a specific genre (mystery story, rewriting of official history versus erotic novel, novel about the human condition). The prediction is that the Portuguese reception favors attributing the text to the genre of mystery story, or rewriting of official history more than the foreign reception does, and that the foreign reception favors the idea of considering the text an erotic novel or novel about the human condition at least equally strong as the Portuguese reception. My first impression of the material is that both assertions can be corroborated.

What does this mean? It means that the distinction of particular historical fact and sense making fiction, as well as their relative emphasis, will vary with our geographical and cultural position, a position which also may change over time. We may anticipate that the factual references to Salazar's regime will gradually lose its significance in the decades to come, and that concurrently the fictional aspects of the novel will be enhanced by future readers.

Notes

- ¹ The original text is somewhat more elaborate and runs as follows:
«De modo que entre o facto e a ficção há distanciamentos e aproximações a cada passo, e tudo se pretende num paralelismo autónomo e numa confluência conflituosa, numa verdade e numa dúvida que não são pura coincidência.». Quoted from Cardoso Pires, 1982: 256.
- ² I wish to thank João Carneiro and Matthias Langendorff for helping me to collect some of these reviews in six different languages.

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