

## “The Feminine Livedead Condition in *o remorso de baltazarserapião*”

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**Abstract:**-This paper examines the feminine *livedead* condition in valterhugomãe’s work *the remorse of baltazarserapião* from the standpoint of baltazar, the main character who, through a process of physical and emotional brutalization of his wife, gives voice to a cultural (de)constitution of the feminine.

**Keywords:** *Interdisciplinarity, literature, culture, anthropology, Valter Hugo Mãe.*

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### INTRODUCTION

This paper is connected to a longer research project focused on representations of the feminine in literature, and aims to analyze the construction of the feminine and its liminal condition between life and death in *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, by valterhugomãe, from the standpoint of baltazar, the main character who, through a process of physical and emotional annulment of his wife, gives voice to a cultural (de)constitution of the feminine. Therefore, this work will have as main theoretical reference *The Invention of Culture*, by Roy Wagner, the *Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard, and the concept of intertextuality as proposed by Laurent Jenny. Understanding culture as an anthropological construction, and anthropology as a discipline in which, according to Roy Wagner, “the author is obliged to distil his own tradition and his own consensus”, we may establish a relationship between the work of a literary writer and the work of an anthropologist, who “invents the culture he believes himself to be studying” (Wagner, 1981, p. 6). In the same way, the literary writer constantly manipulates cultural codes through the “invention” of poetic images which, due to their psychological appeal, will inevitably not only present some dimension of that culture but also provoke new perceptions about it. And as “all meaningful symbolizations compel the innovative and expressive force of tropes, or metaphors” (Wagner, 1981, p. 7), the constitution of the feminine as a cultural invention in mãe’s work becomes even sharper as, from the first line, through strong, sometimes hyperbolic images the narrator’s voice (baltazar’s) becomes a reflection of what Wagner calls “collective aspect of symbolization”, which is dialectically identified with the moral, or ethical, mode of culture (1981, p. 8): baltazar learned from his father that women should be kept silent, for they were “stupid and dangerous”, their voice came from “the deep craters where only the devil and people to perish had destiny”. In this literary process, there is an intertwining between the role of the literary writer and the anthropologist, once both have to distill their own tradition and consensus. The re-configuration of the concept of intertextuality in literary criticism – as Laurent Jenny states, the concept of “presence in the absence” – and the consequent melting of the literary frontiers have opened space for an inventive-critical discourse. In his discursive practice, the critic reaches a state of freedom and invention which before was an exclusive attribute of the author. Today, according to Leyla Perrone-Moysés, something has happened: by questioning the subject-creator, occurred a fluctuation of the Truth, and consequently the fall of hierarchies. The critic who was always the second, the inferior one, with their critic-writing rises to a condition of equality towards the writer; they are not anymore, in George Poulet’s words, the one who steals the poetry from the poet, the one who takes for a day or a hour the king’s place. The critic’s task is not anymore to simply didactically inform, they can and need to take a revolutionary practice of the poetic language, becoming a developer of ambiguities (Jenny, 1979, p. 5. Print).

As one of the peculiarities of mãe’s writing is the refusal to use capital letters even for his name, this textual aspect will be maintained in all quotations of the book: according to the author, in an interview to the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* in 2011, by not making use of capital letters he approximates the written text to the oral language flow. And, once his work hasn’t been translated into English yet, all quotations referring to the novel in this article are mine.

In *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, we are presented with a strong cultural construction based on the opposition between the silencing of the feminine and the empowerment of the masculine. The father figure, as a historical representation of knowledge, wisdom and power, who “teaches everything to everyone” (emph. mine), reigns absolutely until the last pages of the narrative, where we will encounter a slightly new baltazar, a man in crisis who, despite not having been able to be and act differently, for a moment considers to put all his *a priori* knowledge in parenthesis, digging from his hard and dried cultural ground the possibility of re-symbolizing his

own culture, turning a world of unquestionable values and codes into an instable and disturbing ground. What before represented certainty, security, in the end becomes discomfort and regret. As it happens in the field of the anthropologist, in mãe’s fictional world Culture is presented as a kind of illusion, “a foil (and a kind of false objective)” (Wagner, 1981, p. 6) to aid the narrator/reader in arranging their experiences and understandings about the feminine as a cultural construction and thus limited by time and space. In this way, we may say that the work of the literary writer, intertwined with the narrator and reader figures, also approaches human phenomena from an “outside perspective” which, according to Wagner (1981, p. 6) is as readily created as our most reliable “inside” ones. Between past and present, inner and outer perspectives, arises an in-between space where baltazar’s conflicts lay: led by his “inside” knowledge, i.e., what he had learned from his isolated family world, especially from his father, and in contrast with the outside social and cultural context of the small community where they wish to belong, at first the narrator lives his life without questioning or arguing about the ways life presents itself to them. He would spend his days dreaming and hoping for the day he would be “married in church” with his beautiful fiancée, ermesinda. Then, he would finally be “authorized to have her for himself only and to educate her according to his fantasies, as it should be, as a family father should do, served of wife, providing for everything, in charge of everything” (mãe, 2010, p. 22) (trans. mine).

When the narrator speaks about his future with ermesinda, we encounter the writer, through his linguistic choices, especially verb tenses varying from conditional to future tenses. baltazar says: “I would have spirit to protect my wife and put her brakes. she would feel love for me, as all women ought to, and she would live in this illusion, deceived in her head so to guarantee me the property of her body. I will invade her soul, I thought, like something from other world to possess her in the ideas so she doesn’t deviate from me by will or instinct, loving me completely without hesitation or revulsion. and so she will serve me the whole life, happy and convinced of the truth” (mãe, 2010, p. 23). (new paragraph)

baltazar’s dilemma starts when he realizes that his marriage did not bring the peace and social comfort he was expecting. On the contrary, from that moment on, baltazar starts to unveil a sort of discomfort, a level of consciousness different from the other characters. The feminine figure represented by ermesinda, with her exceptional beauty and her silence, will awake in her husband a state of constant torment – the fear of being betrayed and abandoned – which will trigger his paranoid mind, thus activating his cultural repertoire about women. In the narrative, he is the one who transforms into discourse the discomfort of being aware that culture is an illusion and thus a changeable, unstable paradigm.

Another cultural reference in the text is the fact that ermesinda belongs to an upper social class, and once she is given in marriage to baltazar she is completely forgotten by her family. Actually, the family disappears from the story, which is a relevant aspect if we want to analyze the role women play in certain social contexts. From the moment this feminine character appears (ermesinda), comes up in the narrative the “outside” element mentioned by Wagner, “a differentiating symbol that must assimilate or encompass the thing it symbolizes, an effect that always works to deny the distinction between the modes of symbolization to collapse them, or derive one from the other” (Wagner, 1981, p. 8. Web). According to the author, by focusing the attention on that “control” the symbolizer perceives the opposite mode as something very different, a sort of inner “compulsion” or “motivation”. This is what seems to happen with baltazar and all the other men in his family who preceded him, who showed the same compulsion for control and (de)constitution of the “different”; in this case, the feminine, represented as devilish creatures and therefore dangerous, especially for the future of the masculine subject. As the narrator says, “the world that women imagined was obscene and deceitful, they saw things and convinced themselves of stupidity by option” (mãe, 2010, p. 17. Print). ermesinda’s family plays the role of the differentiating symbol, as it embodies a social and cultural condition to which baltazar’s family has no possibility to access. Therefore, it had to be denied, and the most effective way to achieve that is by total erasure from the narrative. ermesinda, on the other hand, is the assimilated element, as baltazar’s family shockingly plays the role of the dominant cultural group and, consequently, their symbolic modality will be the one right to human action. Shockingly not only because baltazar’s family is socially excluded, even rejected, despised by the community, but especially because they were considered animals brought to life by “sarga”, the family’s cow. They were the “different element”, and therefore they should be the ones lacking social power to control any differentiating mode. However, what we see is the opposite.

In a dialectical game between being and not-being, the masculine voices in mãe’s work are haunted, tormented by a social condition which deprives them of the right to carry a person’s name – they were the “sargas” and, in baltazar’s words, “united in family as sinners of the same plague” and “destined to be slowly fully destitute from their little normality” (mãe, 2010, p. 11. Print). What we see is a totally distorted relation with the Other, who doesn’t recognize them in their human condition, even in their human birth: within the small community, baltazar’s family is perceived as “dehumanized beasts”. And, as if it weren’t enough, his father still “dared to be named afonso” (mãe, 2010, p. 13), a king’s name and the landlord’s name to whom they served. And so would the “sargas” go on, “crawling and beating their claws”, carrying the counterweight of a social stigma, of a constituted tradition, trying to exist in that small world, pretending they didn’t listen, they

didn't understand; pretending they belonged. Here, we may say that the author plays the anthropologist, but the narrative strategy twists the anthropological concept, once the “sargas” do not represent the cultural class; on the contrary, they are the exception and therefore should be the ones to be eliminated. However, by doing so the author not only puts that fictional universe beneath strong contrasting lenses but also puts into perspective our world and values, forcing us to question which symbolic modality we truly favor in the real world.

Looking from the outside at this fantastic reality, it is worth questioning what position an individual occupies in society, when he is precluded of using his own name – people's name – as it happens to baltazar's family. How does the symbolic exchange system work in a universe where the acts of communication are established through such discrepant enunciation *loci*? What to expect from an individual who is totally deprived of value and power in regard to the others, once he does not have *a priori* his human condition recognized by the group? It seems that we can expect not only a discourse but also a practice destitute of recognition of the human condition as much as this individual is – someone dislocated, who will try in a smaller arena (the family) to control an interlocutor as fragile and deprived of force as he feels to be; in this case, the feminine subject. And to gain social empowerment and value, this individual will need to evoke his constitutive voices, that is, tradition and all the practices and discourses he inherited. The dislocation we identify in baltazar's voice, from the first pages, makes evident the enunciator's (masculine) position in the context, as much as the social genealogy of the feminine as a powerless subject.

mãe's narrative makes no reference to time or space, but what we see resembles a medieval universe where women aren't only negotiated for all uses, they are silenced, restrained even in their ability to physically move on earth. They suffer a violent process of emotional and physical mutilation mainly from their husbands, and yet that doesn't cause any shock or surprise to any of the characters who are there, naturally watching it happen; there is no conflict, no contrast. Like it would happen to baltazar after his marriage, his father remained busy raising his brother, and dealing with his mother's afflictions – “a woman worse than the others, incapable of completely stabilizing her flaws, so natural to her” (mãe, 2010, p. 25. Print). ermesinda would have the same destiny, the same treatment.

The roughness the literary fiction represents turns it into a stage where many psychic ghosts interplay – the narrator's, the author's, ours. As it happens in dreams and in the theater, the belief that the spectator is protected by fictional/theatrical mechanisms, such as the distance between stage and audience, makes possible for the self to perform various roles with no censorship, experiencing the deepest levels of fear, cruelty and pleasure. Even when working and talking to other characters, baltazar seems to constantly live in a dark basement, where solitude gives him freedom to speak, to dig into his psychic, social and cultural world, locating and dislocating at the same time the ghosts who inhabit him.

As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) states, any social relation is marked by power, and this power is permeated by language. The value of discourse depends on the force relations between the producer and the receiver of that discourse. The way people negotiate social identities, or the way a multilanguage situation is constituted within the community, unveils a cultural paradigm that is consolidated by what is verbalized as much as by the silence of some members of that community, as it happens with the female characters in *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, especially when he describes and justifies the mutilation of his mother or wife: “I entered finger inside ermesinda's tore eye. as I told you, ermesinda, a promise made by heart is a debt unpaid. luckily you will see still, you will see better than I should let you see, but I leave you the other for whenever pleases me. or for pity, I'll keep it for pity, and the other I'll lay in the ground and will cover it to be eaten. [ . . . ] and she put hand and screams in the tore eye, and laid down fainted in the ground” (mãe, 2010, p. 108).

Even when they are being physically abused, de-constituted, women don't speak, sometimes they scream or sigh to soon after faint, and when it happens, it is a phantasmagoric voice, lacking social validation. Those voices haunt baltazar, creating a web of memory and imagination, throwing the reader into a poetic reverie, requiring from them a phenomenological intervention in the text, in order to differentiate the narrator's and their own poly-symbolic intimacy. The house, as the center of baltazar's world, holds a phenomenological value, once it represents what Bachelard calls an “illusion of stability”. Through a vertical image of the house, the author creates a polarity between the attic and the basement, as a representation of rationality and irrationality respectively: the attic, a metaphor for clarity of mind, whereas the basement, on the contrary, is the dark, subterranean and irrational entity of the house. Based on Jung's concept of unconscious, Bachelard states that when a person hears suspicious sounds coming from the basement, they rush to the attic to see what they are, fearing to go down to the basement. baltazar, instead, seems not to fear the basement, the cultural and psychic discomfort seems to be stronger, suffocating to the point that he sees no other choice but to go down into the basement, no matter how dark it may be. The poetic image, the one that has the power to provoke a full concentration of the psyche, as Gaston Bachelard would say (2003, Introduction. Web), becomes a strong instrument to activate our perception and a new critical approach to an old issue such as the feminine condition in a masculine world. In mãe's case, a liminal condition which rises stronger in front of a fragmented male subject. Through a sharp poetic image, and dialectically through a male voice (the author's and narrator's),

we are given a representation of women experiences, not through their use of language but through its absence, defining the female subject, verifying the cultural practices through which this subject presents itself and is presented. We may see baltazar’s attempt to understand culture as some masculine hermeneutics, trying to find answers from the standpoint of a patriarchal tradition, thus incapable to truly accept the discourse of the Other – the marginalized feminine discourse. Consequently, the configuration of the feminine character and the narrative structures, which determine their future, make evident the role of the narrator as enunciator, as the carrier of an ideology. The difference is that, by apparently respecting the traditional modes, which put women in a condition of inferiority and dependence to men, the narrator’s hyperbolic voice sets the contrasting elements which will make evident the violence of some historical and social circumstances. Here again, we can see writer and anthropologist intertwined, if we agree with Wagner when he states that “culture has become a way of talking about man, and about particular instances of man”, or when he says that “the anthropologist uses his own culture to study others, and to study culture in general” (Wagner, 1981, p. 12). What will vary is the strategy used by them: the literary writer studies culture, or talks about man, through poetic images –through metaphor, an instable, non-absolute field of investigation. In that field, he will explore and play with the infinite possibilities to “mediate the existence of symbols and people” (Wagner, 1981, p. 10. Web). The writer, states Bachelard (2003, p. 60. Print), prepares the tempest in long pages, he approaches the absolute, the immensity of the silence with art. And the lack of time and space references in the work highlights even more the poetic image, as we can see in baltazar’s words: “it was because my father twisted her foot, [ . . . ] and then taught her the right ways for good, that she got respect for him for the rest of her life [ . . . ]” (mãe, 2010, p. 47). (new paragraph) “if I gave her the first hand correction on her face it wasn’t because I didn’t love her, and I told her, there is love between us, I took you the way you are by my father’s decision, who wants what is best for me, but it was god’s will that I was this man and you my woman, and then it is in my hands to complete all that in your making is incomplete, and you ought to respect me to be respected” (mãe, 2010, p. 48). (new paragraph) “women are rotten fruits” (mãe, 2010, p. 52).

In *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, we may say that the feminine body is the source of imagination for both author and narrator, once the entire narrative is constructed with and from body images. The way the feminine body is represented, as a central element in the text, makes possible to establish a relationship with the four theoretical models of feminist criticism (biological, linguistic, psychoanalytical, and cultural modes) proposed by Elaine Showalter (1994), especially the biological mode, which emphasizes the anatomic importance of the body as the source of imagination, as the origin of the writing. Showalter states that, despite being mediated by linguistic, social and literary structures, textuality is expressed through the body. In this case, the linguistic choice of not giving women, mainly baltazar’s mother and wife, the right to express language, turns the non-verbal into a powerful literary strategy, which reinforces the role of the feminine in that fictional world, as much as the historical and social context, wherever it is, whenever it is. We may also identify Freud’s ideas regarding the absence of *phallus* in women’s body, as something that defines women’s identity and their connection with language and cultural productions. It is possible to identify the cultural model in the dominant feminine presence in the narrative, expressed through non-expression: through silence, immobility, physical de-constitution, a livedead liminality.

In *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, the revolutionary *locus* of women’s language lies in a non-verbal dimension of the text; it is their immense invasive silence what makes their presence so powerful, turning the narrative upside-down by subverting silence into visibility and voice. Women’s non-voice in mãe’s work becomes polyphonic for it carries the dominant and the dominated discourse, an in-between voice, the one underneath each invented word, the author’s voice. Language in this narrative can be described in the same way Eagleton defines it: “like a sprawling limitless web where there is a constant interchange and circulation of elements where none of the elements is absolutely definable and where everything is caught up and traced through everything else.” (1996, p. 112. Print). We may think of the feminine “un-word” (emph. mine) in the narrative as a dialectical process of inclusion-exclusion. As the language theorist Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out, language works by exclusion, but as the excluded word is not completely eliminated from the linguistic web, it remains surrounding the signifier, as a repressed element, increasing its level of indeterminacy. Through body imagery and language, the narrative reflects what for a long time represented the historical, social and cultural relations of power between genders, in which women had no possibility to escape from the small circle to which they were confined. The social and cultural rules not only kept them inside the house but also out of the working world and then out of the focus of literary interest; consequently, they remained a silent, almost inexistent representation. This relation between gender, language, and space is approached by Jacques Lacan (1978, p. 226. Print) when he states that the subject seems to play the role of a servant to language, and that his experience within the community presents its essential dimension in the discourse founded by tradition, which establishes the elementary structures of culture. And what before was a binary structure of human condition – nature and culture – now becomes a ternary one: nature, society and culture. The latter would be reduced to language, the essential distinction between human and natural society. The power of language, in Lacan’s

perspective, is expressed in the algorithm “S/s”, based on Saussure’s principles, which means “signifier on top of signified”, showing the dominance of the signifier (the empty symbol) over the signified (the literal object in the physical world). By putting the signifier “S” on top of the signified “s”, what Lacan proposes, in fact, is an inversion of Saussure’s formula; whereas for Saussure the bar represented a link, for Lacan it represented repression: every word indicates the absence of what it stands for. The word, like tradition, and we might say like the unconscious, has become a “terrible sign” (emph. mine), the more the signifier doesn’t signify, the more indestructible it becomes. Language and the unconscious mind are both constituted of instability, of ceaseless interplay of meanings, and both are the site of repression and return (Fowler, 2000, p. X. Web).

It is in this interplay of meanings that *valter hugo mãe’s* narrative exceed in force and contrast in the acts of communication, unveiling the dislocations in the processes of social exchange. It is in the linguistic choices, which resound absence of voice, lack of power in the relation with the Other, that the violence against the feminine becomes scandalous, but only to the reader’s eyes. There is a sense of incompleteness and inferiority, which is present in all feminine characters in *the remorse of baltazarserapião*, not only in *ermesinda*, but also in *baltazar’s* mother and sister, *brunilde*. As the narrator says, she would spend a long time being taught by her mother about the “things that regarded women, [. . .] things of their life, of that beautiful but condemned body they carried, [. . .] afflict with cycles of misfortune so natural to them, [. . .] to punish themselves for their inferiority” (*mãe*, 2011, p. 19) (trans. mine). Another example is the feminine character named “*devilishteresa*” – a woman with un-controlling and never fully satisfied needs, who used to spend her days at the town Plaza waiting for any and/or many men who would at the same time calm down her sexual needs (*mãe*, 2011, p. 27). In *baltazar’s* world, if women have voice or movement it is out of control, devilish, animalized. They are not called by the cow’s name because they don’t have its status, and as a consequence they are not recognized as mothers of those subjects who have social voice. This destitution of woman as a mother, from a social position that has historically and culturally belonged to her – her duty of reproduction, her natural vocation to perpetuate the species and the only way to fulfill her physiological destiny (*Zinani*, 2010. Print) – reflects another distortion provoked by the author, as the narrative presents a social division which is typical of the nineteenth century, where not only the father power and figure were emphasized but there was also a strong division between public and private. This social division would lead to a double exclusion: the proletariat and women (*Perrot*, 1992, p. 177. Print). The consequence was a discourse that represented women as creatures by nature imperfect and inferior to men, destined to be submissive to them. The positivist and hygienist ideologies in that time were concerned to keep women within the domestic space, imposing them rules which regulated their behavior.

According to *Perrot* (1992, p. 186. Print), the nineteenth century took task division and sexual segregation of spaces to the highest level, defining in a strict way each one’s place in society. Feminine seduction, sexual pleasure, or even the power to verbally communicate their desires and opinions wasn’t something to be talking about freely in society (*Foucault*, 1987, p. 37. Web). As *baltazar* would say, a woman’s body was beautiful but condemned. In this cultural process, not only sexuality and discourses related to it were confined, but women’s voice as a whole, as if their reproduction function had absorbed their entire social and psychological condition. And as language is the instrument of literature, this cultural invention of the feminine finds in the literary writing a fertile field to provoke, disturb a social subject who, like *baltazar*, is used to simply reproduce his tradition. The linguistic thread generates a disconnected game among sign, signified and signifier, which ends up potentiating a state of derangement amongst the various levels of interlocution with and within the narrative. In such context, the space of the house becomes a stronger metaphor, especially because keeping women inside was one of the main concerns of *baltazar* and his father, who mutilated their wives precisely because they could go too far and forget the way back home and their female duties. Women in *baltazar’s* family carry the counterweight of a tradition which, if and when questioned, it is never enough to change the dynamics of power and voice in the social arena. In *mãe’s* fantastic universe, the tradition evoked in the interrelations between masculine and feminine do not shock; do not surprise, women just distill a culture invented by men. Yet, as *Wagner* (1981, p. 9) states, invention has been a challenging concept to deal with, mainly if we relate the anthropology of symbols to the “black hole” of modern symbolic theory, as proposed by *Sperber* – the “negative symbol”, the trope, which generates (or obliges one to invent) its own referents. And here we may say that there is also certain inevitability to the encounter between the anthropology of symbols and literature, the symbolic field *par excellence*. We may relate *Sperber’s* idea of black hole as an “obscuring dust cloud” (*Sperber* apud *Wagner*, 1981, p. 9. Web) to the narrative space, a place where reference stops, and “knowledge” is forged on a personal level in imitation of a more conventional one, a knowledge achieved in the formation of a metaphor. Like an anthropologist who uses the word “culture” with hope, or even with faith (*Wagner*, 1981, p. 12), *mãe* weaves his metaphoric thread, carefully invented, turning that grotesque social cultural universe into a hyperbolic representation of the supposedly civilized contemporary world. In this case, hopefully, we may see *baltazar* as a representation of a contemporary man in crisis, who finally starts to question himself about the encyclopedic knowledge he has been sustaining and transferring. Not by accident, at a certain moment of the narrative, three of the male characters – *baltazar*, *dagoberto* and *aldegundes* – victimized by a woman’s spell, end

up physically united, glued to each other, otherwise they would die. This condition seems to trigger a deeper level of baltazar’s crisis: “[. . .] and one more night would the three of us spend together and glued, separated only in the inside, always rethought in trusts and meanings attributed to each one, and pursuing a sleep which, in dead position, wouldn’t be eternal” (mãe, 2010, p. 185). Of course, we will have to follow the narrator throughout the text until the last pages when we will be informed of his remorse: “[. . .] and I returned to love, I said, I didn’t kill ermesinda but, unloved of sadness for me, she may have died for not handling the misfortune she felt in her heart, also a woman dies of sadness. [. . .] I suffered for me so lonely, consumed by the wish to return. I laid down in silence and felt the endless need to regain my sold soul, and to regain the right to go back” (mãe, 2010, p. 186). And then one might say: no need to worry, this is just fiction! Yes, this is fiction, a poetically brutal one; a fantastic realism that involves the reader from the first line; an embroidery made of neologisms, verbs turned into adjectives, punctuation, small letters, and a supposedly fantastic immense love, as the one baltazar felt for his wife: “[. . .] ermesinda, so much the same you are to me now, whether you have been only don afonosos’s or all men’s in the world, give me one word only, one word that will commit you to me and to the education I’m supposed to give you. and I just want to give you love, ermesinda, and she nothing, quiet of muteness so much that it was dagoberto who said, to this one you’ve taken the gift of speech, it’s a woman with no voice, but if she came here she must have strong feelings for you, [. . .]” (mãe, 2010, p. 189). (new paragraph)

The “dis-chrony” (Agamben) in *the remorso of baltazarserapião*, through the narrator’s voice, makes evident that this man knows that he irrevocably belongs to his time, that there is no possibility to escape from it. This is his comfort and his fate: they are the “sargas” and will remain in this way in that world and in that time. At this point, baltazar is forced to deal with the fact that Culture, and by consequence tradition, is an ephemeral, intangible matter, he must face his contemporariness and, as Giorgio Agamben points out, shall keep his eye fixed on his time, not to perceive its lights but its darkness:

[. . .] This darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability. In our case, this ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights. (new paragraph)

The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity (Agamben, 2009, p. 63. Web). Once again, we encounter the cultural anthropologist within the literary writer who, in the course of fieldwork (in this case, the narrative), becomes the link between book and reader through his living in both of them. That is the “knowledge” and competence which he draws by describing and, in the writer’s case, unveiling a cultural dimension. In the same way as for the anthropologist, the subject culture becomes “visible”, and then “believable” to the author, “he apprehends it first as a distinct entity, a way of doing things, and then secondly as a way in which he could be doing things” (Wagner, 1981, p. 14. Web). As much as the narrator and the author, the reader must experience a phenomenon known by the anthropologist as “culture shock”: according to Wagner (1981, p. 15. Web), “In it the local ‘culture’ first manifests itself to the anthropologist through his own *inadequacy*; against the backdrop of his new surroundings it is he who has become ‘visible’.” Of course, we can always objectify our poetic experiences as “culture” and thus get distance from the discomfort those images were causing, remembering that as much as culture may be an “invention”, so is literature. The literary thread is permeated by those doings which somewhere or somehow will lead also the reader to a feeling of inadequacy – like the anthropologist-writer, he becomes an outsider who sometimes is forced to test the veracity of his ideals of tolerance and relativity. In mãe’s work, the act of reading will never be just a mechanical one, emotionally detached. Some sort of transformation, disturbance, or discomfort, at some point, will outburst to catapult our comprehension of the world beyond the limitations imposed by our *a priori* knowledge. Reality is depicted through extreme poetic images, a penetrating characterization, a fantastic allegory of the human condition, as a way to introduce differentiation. Contrast does not break plausibility; it turns the characters and the narrative context into something much more than a story: it becomes a key element to unveil the multiple layers of the text. The metaphorical thread, its images, sounds and rhythms, is saturated with ethical issues from which the unaware reader uselessly tries to escape through the fantastic dimension of the work.

In a mix of reality and fiction, in a perfect game between ethics and aesthetics, between form and content, mãe’s work leads the reader to what Eagleton calls “dramatic awareness of language” (2006, p. 3. Web), which has the power to refresh our habitual responses and render objects more “perceptible”: “by having to grapple with language in a more strenuous, self-conscious way than usual, the world which that language contains is vividly renewed”. And vivid is surely an adjective that perfectly suits mãe’s narrative, as it constantly provokes the reader, who uselessly tries to make peace with their own world, their own cultural counterweight discourses, in an attempt to deny any proximity to reality, to any dimension of the contemporary and the actual. And here once more the literary writer intertwines with the anthropologist in the attempt to build an illusion: as Wagner states, “culture is made visible by culture-shock, by subjecting oneself to situations

beyond one’s normal interpersonal competence” (Wagner, 1981, p. 17. Web). As the one capable of using language in a dramatic way, rendering perceptible things which had become invisible, the literary writer turns the narrative into a cultural field where the discrepant character becomes the objectified entity. Like the anthropologist, the writer relates to his research subjects as an “outsider”, trying to learn and penetrate their world. Like an anthropologist, by turning ermesinda into an objectified entity, the author makes use of his “evangelistic” anthropological power, whereas his text carries between the lines the message that it is possible to emancipate oneself from their culture (Wagner, 1981, p. 17. Web). As a closed social and cultural context, baltazar’s world is a one-way society, the dialectical interaction, the decisive acts of differentiation between sacred and secular, between class properties and prerogatives (Wagner, 1981, p. 7. Web.). And as the reader is the one who has access to the narrator’s thoughts, the task of processing the culture and discourses presented in the fictional world will be theirs. It is in the reader’s mind that we can find Foucault’s idea that it is necessary to put into question those finished and unquestioned synthesis, those obscure forces through which we use to connect discourses (Foucault, 1972).

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