

IMPLICATIONS OF MACHADIAN THOUGHT ON EDUCATION: A STUDY OF THE SHORT STORY "TERPSÍCORE"'S TRAGIC ELEMENT

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Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing elements of tragic thought (Nietzsche, Rosset) present in "Terpsícore", a short story by Machado de Assis, and at discussing its implications for the field of education. Although the story is about the daily life of a lower social stratum nineteenth century couple, it conducts a translation of the mythical muse of dance and rescues a pedagogical orientation for a unconditional approval of life, expressed by the affirmation of fortuity, the spectacle, aesthetics, the feast and *amor fati*.

Keywords: tragic philosophy; pedagogy of choice; *amor fati*.

IMPLICAÇÕES DO PENSAMENTO MACHADIANO PARA O CAMPO EDUCACIONAL: UM ESTUDO DO ELEMENTO TRÁGICO NO CONTO "TERPSÍCORE"

Resumo: É objetivo deste estudo analisar elementos do pensamento trágico (Nietzsche, Rosset) presentes no conto "Terpsícore" de Machado de Assis e dimensionar suas implicações para o campo educacional. Conquanto o conto emerge do cotidiano de um casal dos baixos estratos sociais do fim do século XIX, resvala na tradução mítica da musa da dança e resgata uma orientação pedagógica de aprovação incondicional da vida, expressa pela afirmação do acaso, do espetáculo, da estética, da festa e do amor fati.

Palavras-chave: filosofia trágica, pedagogia da escolha, amor fati.

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One can only ask that a writer be responsible, and even here it should be understood: if a writer is responsible for his opinions, that is insignificant; if he accepts with more or less intelligence the ideological implications of his work, that too is of secondary importance; true responsibility for the writer involves tolerating/upholding literature as a failed engagement, like Moses' look upon the Promised Land of the real (is Kafka's responsibility, for example).

Roland Barthes

At the very beginning of his short book on the study of the *Theogony*, the epic poem by Hesiod, Jaa Torrano acknowledges that by facing the task of circumscribing the sacred circle he is pitting himself in the midst of an "unsolvable methodological problem".¹ He says:

A discourse that aims at strictly stating the essence of something that fundamentally cannot be stated (nefarious and/or ineffable), that by definition cannot be fulfilled. If it were applied as a strict discourse, it would have to falsify the presentation of its object and, therefore, to be strict, it would also have to be to be fake.²

In our turn, although we intend to discuss a quite mundane, often flat question, that of educational problems, or rather, of education as a matter to be considered, we share a methodological problem for which a solution is difficult, if not impossible to find.

The point our problem has in common with that of Torrano's is also shared by a mature Nietzsche, who upon introducing self-criticism, or criticism of the the style of *The Birth of Tragedy*: the problem of submitting to the rational

¹ TORRANO, Discurso sobre uma canção numinosa, p. 11.

² *Ibidem*.

process that to which he is oblivious, or even indifferent; in our case, that which is tragic.³

This being the case, we undertake the task of testing: seeking to recognize some forms of the tragic element's active mechanism in Machado de Assis, in such a way that it enables us to jointly find the educational universe from the perspective of a Pedagogy of Choice.

Therefore, we will rely on the company of some thinkers who have dedicated themselves to the study of that which is tragic, specifically around the story *Terpsichore*, which augments the movement of the affirmation of the life, as it develops, in pace with our understanding of the meaning of the tragic element as an affirmation of life even in its more difficult and stranger problems.⁴

The reader can inquire about the tragic element in a story that from the very outset contains a dialogue stuck in a disagreement around the problems specific to modern life in the lower social stratus in the late nineteenth century: a man complaining to his wife about financial problems that almost indisputedly have no solution. Well, so, this is the point, for us, that calls our attention to the perspective of the tragic, as presented by the thinkers who dedicated themselves to this way of thinking and life, which is to unconditionally affirm it, despite the fact that this story begins as it does, with bills to pay and rent many months behind. Our task here will be to take this story and distinguish in it the movement of life's apparent conditional affirmation from its unconditional affirmation, which will be provided at the end. With this in mind, let us start at the beginning.

But let us start at the very beginning of the history of this story, since, lest the reader forget, it starts *in medias res*. Thus, the beginning of this story is not the stage for the discussion, but rather, another one, which occurs in a chance event when Porfírio is walking along rua da Imperatriz (Empress Street) and catches a glimpse of his future wife graciously dancing in a house among other dancing couples, her movements occupying greater and greater space in the room, drawing everyone's attention including, and most ravishingly so, Porfírio's.

³ MACHADO, Assim falou Zaratustra e o pensamento trágico.

⁴ NIETZSCHE, *Ecce homo: como alguém se torna o que é*, p. 63-64.

This is not the only instance in the story of Porfírio's eyes being captured by what he sees: let us remember how he found the house where he would live with Glória. The home he chose was characterized by decoration; that was the attraction, greater than spaciousness, that led him to accept an untenable deal for the house. What these two episodes have in common, through Porfírio's gesture, is the result of a person with aspirations toward being an aesthete, attentive to forms, but not an ascetic, due to his desire to engage performatively with them. Regarding the shape of Glória's body, it was while she was dancing, at his first sight of her; furthermore, similarly, that of her body, given that what was seen was her movement, her belonging to the ensemble. In terms of the house, it was what everyone could see, like Glória movements, that led him to acquire it, as he did with his other possessions and expensive things. Moreover, he made a point to hold a sumptuous and opulent ceremony for their wedding, and he even resorted to the number combinations on the lottery tickets he would buy because he found them pretty!

In addition to his hospitality for beauty, Porfírio practices it for meetings brought about by chance. However, nothing other than chance takes place and thus has no principle or basis other than the very lack thereof, an explosion by the irrational and the inconsequential.⁵ In other words, the character of Porfírio allows himself to be swayed by these encounters, being transformed by them as soon as they occur and not because he approached any of them with such an intention. In the same way that upon suddenly seeing Glória dancing he decides that he needs to learn how to dance, at the unexpected temptation of the lottery ticket salesman he yields and turns his choice of lottery tickets into a necessity.

Such mannerisms end up setting the story's tone, its/his festive and agonistic content/ways. It is from them that the story's narrative produces its own sense of being. Let's not be feckless about its title, which, more than at any other moment in the story, is, inherently, its true beginning. Given that it is the name of one of the nine muses in Greek mythology, Terpsichore is the name of the Muse of dance, which, besides the noun *dance*, also contains the verb *delight*.

We could effectively bring the beginning of this story back to pre-Hesiod times; but we will not go so far, just a bit before: since the name of the protagonist does not seem to be by chance, if we remember the eponymous

⁵ ALMEIDA, O trágico em Machado de Assis: análise do conto "Singular ocorrência", p. 277.

thinker of classical antiquity, known for his praise of paganism and, as an opponent of Christianity, author of a work titled *Against the Christians*. (Before continuing, by way of this short presentation over the course of our work, let us observe: it's not about our concern with inventorying the references used in the story. We shall work, which seems to be a little different, by making use of a short biography of the philosopher Porphyry in this very study – because, as will soon be seen, we also did not mention him spontaneously.)

One of Porfírio's tickets won the lottery. But we don't want this just to be just a story about reciprocated luck or hope.

When Glória is awarded the great prize, two fundamentally opposing ideas appear before the reader: one of moderation and another of extravagance that borders on extasy. Glória, concerned about a less arid future, insists more than once that the sum of the outstanding pay-outs be deposited in a savings account, whereas Porfírio, imbued with the divine, rekindles that desire for a thunderous party that has already become familiar throughout the story.

The tragic fact that emerges from this love story is justly the victory of the second idea in relation to the first. The imminence of a life blessed by the idea of a more prosperous future than the one suggested at the beginning of the story, without a doubt, rent in arrears, simple meals, the couple chooses – because Glória lets herself be imbued by the divine along with her husband – by a prosperous present, scattering her wealth in a single grand episode, a large party.

At the end of the party and of the story, we do not know whether they will return to the life of yore, greased with the butter of worry. Some indication of this possibility appears subtly in the scene where, walking in the street while mulling the problems that inhabit his ideas, Porfírio meets the closed doors of the large houses, without hatred, for he *still* does not hate wealth.⁶ What interests us here is that, facing the possibility of a rich present, of an attainable lavish here and now, the problems already experienced emerge, or submerge, such as elements in the midst of so many other elements that should constitute the experience of a lifetime. The fact that problems re-emerge is no longer a problem, since they must be part of life, just as is enjoyment. We go back to the hospitality principle in Porfírio's gesture as we also approach the Nietzschean (or Dionysian) idea of the eternal return.

⁶ ASSIS, Terpsícore, p. 404.

In this case, the indifference to putting money in the savings bank is the same indifference to the fact that there are problems; in other words, there is no refusal of life's suffering in this story: with and in spite of it, life is simply lived. Such a fact is what makes the story's first scene so important for our study: by not making a point to save money, the couple ends up not making a point to avoid misfortune, making themselves as receptive to it as to its antipode, fortune. Let us note that, at no point, is there remorse or guilt for the situation in which the couple was in at the imminence of the eviction – there is no Christian ethic in Glória or Porfírio's conduct, that is, the tragedy is not justified by sin so that sin can justify their suffering.⁷ There is no pleasure in the suffering, but rather an affirmative behavior, even in the face of the worst suffering.

Well, so, the couple who star in the story lend themselves to the celebrations in public and with the public: they are characters in the show. When Porfírio arrives home with an auspicious hunch, without telling his wife, he tells her that she is withdrawn at home, never has fun, as if this did not match them, her. What can be said about Glória, whose name is that of glitter and fame? Although she is endowed with the marks of a normal education (which does not necessarily mean schooling: society educates) for the values of providence, conspicuously Christian values, as would be any polite values, at least in the West, values that guide the gaze's perspective in relation to life, which will always be considered in terms of sin and guilt, and, at the limit, the denial of life, Glória sets these same values aside when life explodes on her: she falls into the rhythm of every party, into a total approval of life as a tragic choice.⁸

Both in Dionysus and in Christ, the martyr is the same and the passion is the same. The phenomenon is the same, but the two meanings are opposite. On the one hand, life justifies suffering, affirms suffering; on the other hand, suffering accuses life, testifies against it, which makes of life something that must be justified. The fact that there is suffering in life, to Christianity, means that life is not fair, that it is even in essence unjust, which pays by suffering an essential injustice essential: it is blamed provided that it suffers. This also means that it must be justified, in other

⁷ ROSSET, *La filosofia trágica*, p. 29.

⁸ ALMEIDA, *Educação Contemporânea: a sociedade autolimpante, o sujeito obsoleto e a aposta na escolha*.

words, rescued from its injustice or saved, saved by the suffering that it is accused of: it must suffer to the extent that it is guilty.⁹

The winners of the battle waged in the story between the pagan gods and the Christian God are the former, those whose interest in man at some point resulted in our acquiring the right to think.¹⁰ And what way of life would pique divine tempers more than the one which positions itself as an agonist?

Not in vain, in the story, when Porfirio is seduced by Glória's dancing, he fixes her with the "eyes of a satyr",¹¹ which refers to both Machado's infatuation with the gaze, as noted by Bosi¹² – a gaze that shares a symbolic isomorphism with the spectacular images that obsess him, in the theory of the imaginary's perspective¹³– and to the the beings, the satyrs, directly linked to the Dionysiac cult.

It is why we shall not forget that term tragic itself can be interpreted as the "song of the goats", in reference to the satyrs, which "are the configuration of the forces of growth and transformation and, as such, are paramount to man. Imitating them in mime dancing, wearing their masks, amounts to ensuring oneself the beneficial forces contained in them".¹⁴

Machado de Assis is a translator. As Alcides Villaça noted,¹⁵ Machado operates by seeking parallels that relativize the values of the sublime and the vulgar. In his analysis of the short story, *A Cartomante* [The Fortune-teller], the precision of translator's gesture:

An expressive illustration of this process of elimination of the differences is found in reference to the "old carriage of the square" that is "worth Apollo's charriot" to the young couples that squeeze in there. Consequently: Rita "is worth" Hamlet, a common greeting "is worth" a sublime message, the same explanation "is worth" different words. From value to value, translation to translation, vulgar versions are worth their originals, the prosaic is worth

⁹ DELEUZE, O trágico, p. 24-25.

¹⁰ NIETZSCHE, *Genealogia da moral: uma polêmica*.

¹¹ ASSIS, *Terpsicore*, p. 403.

¹² BOSI, *Machado de Assis: o enigma do olhar*.

¹³ DURAND, *As estruturas antropológicas do imaginário*.

¹⁴ LESKY, *A tragédia grega*, p. 66.

¹⁵ VILLAÇA, Machado de Assis, tradutor de si mesmo, p. 14.

the mythological, curiosity is worth metaphysics, fortune-telling is worth knowledge.¹⁶

The grammar of the translations undertaken by Machado equates Porfírio the joiner to the philosopher who wrote *Against the Christians* in defense of paganism; Glória is the embodiment of the muse Terpsichore herself; and life is itself a party before death:

Approval itself is not the smile of death, but rather, the party before it. Tragic philosophy does not begin when men have learned to laugh at their corpses, but before the mysterious day, belatedly recognized by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where the Greeks, in a single party, mistook the cult of the dead, from which tragedy was born, for the cult of the god that symbolized wine and drunkenness: the *Great Dionysia*, which on that same day were simultaneously celebrating the games of life, death and chance.¹⁷

The opposite of the prudent, thoughtful and frugal is not the rash, misfit, and profligate, as is imagined by providence, the Promethean imagination that anticipates, foresees, plans and designs in search of an extension of time, albeit by sacrificing the present. In the story, the opposite of providence is affirmation, the intense adherence to the present, to everything that has misfortune and joy. The party is not a *fight* with finitude, but rather an *intensification* of life before death.

Keeping this scenario as a horizon, it is possible to question education's paths in terms of a pedagogy of choice. We believe that, being imbued with the tragic imagination that the story portrays, we can formulate a problem within the field of education along in the following terms.

All school knowledge emerges in such a way that, in its name, we are put to the test as subjects of education, and it has reached such a point, that such knowledge is amalgamated with life, guiding our life plans; in turn, the same knowledge is safeguarded from being put to the test as the convention that it is, by school subject. And yet we live with the fact that this same knowledge guides itself through a fundamentally anti-tragic matrix, since even its teaching is found to be based on need, or rather, on the needs of yesterday: we need them to

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 6.

¹⁷ ROSSET, *Lógica do pior*, p. 198.

get a job, to read a bus sign, to keep the books on life's expenses, to plan our future, to conquer better living conditions, to wish for a good old age, etc.

In a divergence, we see Porfirio filling a "gap in his education" by voluntarily devoting himself to the most useless of disciplines, an aesthetic kind, and not one that lends itself to perfecting for the world of work. He also does not seem to be concerned with notions such as providence – our school education is extremely expensive and it primes us for an afterlife, life after school, life after completing report cards, life after finishing high school – unless you care about saving money in the ubiquitous Caixa (federal savings bank).

In short, the education's privileged position is a basic assumption for living a life. Far from this being the point that we are referring to, what we consider to be a problem is when internalization of the school plan occurs, leaving no opening for doing in life that which is really the product of personally taking responsibility for one's own chosen path.

This is not about pointing to the lives of the couple in *Terpsichore* as a model to be followed. The scope of a pedagogy of choice is not to defend a way of life, be it that of festive spectacle or prudent discretion, in the registry of moral politics. The emphasis is on choice, on the paths whose condition for possibility is also a bit of a retreat. At most, singling out any way of life as a model on its own goes against the tragic design, which does not have templates in advance, but rather, only the simple formula of contentment with life lived in any way: "*Tragic* designates the aesthetic form of joy, not a medical form, not a moral solution for pain, fear or mercy. What is tragic is joy".¹⁸

In Porfirio's choice there is less of a criticism of providence, with which he settles, than an affirmation of life and the fact that it is transient, fleeting and perishable. "Approving of life is to approve of what is tragic: consenting to an intangibility of life in general, insofar as the notions of chance, artifice, facticity and non-duration describe, each at their own conceptual level."¹⁹

Choosing the unconditional affirmation of life existence equates to "not wanting anything otherwise, neither in the future nor in the past, not in all eternity. Not merely tolerating what is necessary, much less passing it off [...], but loving it...".²⁰ This is about total joy that does not want anything other than

¹⁸ DELEUZE, O trágico, p. 29.

¹⁹ ROSSET, *A antinatureza*: elementos para uma filosofia trágica, p. 299.

²⁰ NIETZSCHE, *Obras incompletas*, p. 374.

what it is. It has nothing to do with the desire for permanence, with the pendulum swinging toward the side of caution, rather, with love for what is eternal: "not a permanence of the world, but an insistence on love",²¹ which Nietzsche evokes in *amor fati*, the approval of destiny, of *fatum*, of fate, of what comes, of what occurs, of all of life, with its pain and joy.

In the scope of school, the problem from this perspective is the absence of prescriptions that teach how to live with joy. This is because it is not actually about scientific knowledge, but rather, about tragic wisdom. Joy is a complement to the practice of life similar to the notions of grace, talent, giftedness, something impenetrable

to its benefactor's own eyes. Since deep down, nothing has really changed for the benefactor, and there is no new accumulation of knowledge: there is no argument at all to invoke in favor of his/her life. The benefactor continues living completely unable to say why and for what he/she lives – and on the other hand thinks, henceforth, that life is eternally and outright desirable.²²

However, if teaching joy is impossible, then questioning the burden of the beliefs that come with the hope in progress becomes viable, just as the eighteenth century Enlightenment discussed with suspicion, a widespread practice in modernity, through which the infinite vector of scientific progress would exterminate human evils in a pedagogical version that makes happiness transcend the unpredictability of life.

The dominant pedagogy still in schools today is a result of Enlightenment educational initiatives: "Developing knowledge can, so the belief goes, solve the ills humanity suffers from, if not eradicate them. It is the spirit of the Encyclopedia itself: the hope for a radical change in the human condition".²³

Furthermore, the pedagogy of choice would advocate an

education that would not forget the ephemeral nature of all things, the fact that nothing is durable, the fact that reality itself appears stripped of all meaning and all purpose. Such a concept was championed by the

²¹ ROSSET, *Alegria: a força maior*, p. 90.

²² *Idem*, p. 27.

²³ ROSSET apud KECHIKIAN, *Os filósofos e a educação*, p. 64.

Renaissance humanism [...]. It's not about living better, what the mad project of a radical change to life implies, on the contrary, is to live as best as possible.²⁴

The joy of living in alliance with the tragic knowledge of the world through the suspension of belief and of the aesthetic exercise matters to the pedagogy of choice. How can one expect an action from the current school for teaching the behavior of choice, if its plan is to produce precisely "minds in conformity with the goals of this very world which learners will enter"?²⁵ On the other hand, how would things be if the objective of schools was effectively another one, if schools were responsible for and if they carried out the simple and elegant task of destabilizing the unilateralism of knowledge, to reveal its fallibility, transience, its mechanisms for appearance and functioning, briefly stated, the contingency of knowledge presented by itself, without, however, denying them and, finally, unmasking its own contingency, given that, it is also the result of the production of this knowledge?

Thus, the pedagogy of choice has two main goals:

1) highlighting reality (it tragic, insignificant condition, the chance of existence), that is, making it talk and giving it expressiveness that is poetic, philosophical, tautological, literary, symbolic, imaginary, etc. and 2) enjoying the happiness of reality's unconditional approval, that is, celebrating life, even in its most painful, unpleasant and indigestible aspects, not because there's some sort of pleasure in pain but because the condition itself of unconditional approval, that is, to affirm life, to affirm it completely, including its cruelty, ephemerality and mortality.²⁶

In conclusion, the short story *Terpsichore* brings to light a tragic alternative to the imagination of providence, that is, without denying it, making the pendulum swing toward choosing chance, superficiality, show, aesthetics and parties, elements that reinforce the unconditional approval of life. Life is then intensified by Glória's beauty (the woman and the splendor), the silk dress, the beauty of numbers on the lottery ticket, narrative elements which refer to an

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 63.

²⁵ ALMEIDA, Educação Contemporânea, p. 58.

²⁶ *Idem*, *O imaginário trágico de Machado de Assis: elementos para uma pedagogia da escolha*, p. 203.

aesthetic dimension that can justify existence, but which on their own are unjustifiable, because of their ineffable nature. Going back to Torrano's methodological problem²⁷ which led the main thrust of this article's opening, we hope not to have missed the discursive rigor by talking about the force of experience, even though we make concessions in terms of the risks of falsification (as in popperian epistemology), since the essence of life, even when narrated, remains unutterable.

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²⁷ TORRANO, Discurso sobre uma canção numinosa.

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