

THE POLYSEMIC SPACE: A READING OF THE NARRATIVE “RETÁBULO DE SANTA JOANA”, BY OSMAN LINS

O ESPAÇO POLISSÊMICO:
UMA LEITURA DA NARRATIVA “RETÁBULO DE SANTA JOANA”, DE OSMAN LINS

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Abstract: Osman Lins, heir of Flaubertian formal austerity, weaves destabilizing narratives, whose senses break with the expectations of the reader, offering a multiplicity of voices within internalized spaces that assume a semantic value in the constitution of the social beings that are in it. “*Retábulo de Santa Joana*”, one of the most intriguing narratives of *Nove, novena*, presents physical and symbolic spaces that merge and intertwine in function of a polysemy of meanings that induces us to delve into this emblematic montage of voices that situate their conflicts, assigning them a cosmic dimension. For theoretical support, we will follow the Bakhtinian studies, those developed by Borges Filho and those of Osman Lins himself.

Keywords: Osman Lins; space; Retábulo de Santa Joana

Resumo: Osman Lins, herdeiro da austeridade formal flaubertiana, tece narrativas desestabilizantes, cujos sentidos rompem com as expectativas do leitor, oferecendo uma multiplicidade de vozes dentro de espaços internalizados que assumem um valor semântico na constituição dos seres sociais que nele se localizam. “*Retábulo de Santa Joana*”, uma das mais intrigantes narrativas de **Nove, novena**, apresenta espaços físicos e simbólicos que se enlaçam e se entrelaçam em função de uma polissemia de sentidos que nos induz a mergulhar nessa montagem emblemática de vozes que situam seus conflitos, atribuindo-lhes uma dimensão cósmica. Para suporte teórico, seguiremos os estudos bakhtinianos, os desenvolvidos por Borges Filho e os do próprio Osman Lins.

Palavras-chave: Osman Lins; espaço; Retábulo de Santa Joana.

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INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Osman Lins, a legatee of Flaubert's formal rigidity, has enigmatic narratives, whose senses break with the reader's expectations, offering a multiplicity of voices within internalized spaces that assume a semantic value in the constitution of the social beings that are in it. It is undeniable, therefore, that the category of space in the Osmani work is engendered in an instigating way, weaving the threads that bind time, character and action in the tangle of literary plot. In *Nove, novena*, this fiction writer has carried out literary experiments that show the transformations that would occur in his literary trajectory and recorded in each story enigmatic spaces that now overlap, sometimes juxtapose or complement each other. The fact is that they appear immersed in subjective impressions by the relation they present with the characters that constitute it, generating relations that amplify the meanings of the narrated history. Therefore, spaces become elastic and give consistency to the drama of the characters, allowing new reflections to the context. "Retábulo de Santa Joana" the most enigmatic narrative of the work mentioned, presents physical and symbolic spaces that intertwine in function of a polysemy of meanings that impel us to delve into this emblematic montage of voices that situate their conflicts, assigning them a cosmic dimension. Starting from such assumptions, this work intends to traverse the semantic trails of space in the narrative "Retábulo de Santa Joana", belonging to Osman Lins' *Nove, novena* in order to construct a possible reading of the fictional universe by sewing between its plot and the condensation of the senses promoted by real and symbolic space.

According to the author himself, who investigated the romanescos space in the work of Lima Barreto:

The man moves and remembers the past. None of this pacifies him before space and time, unique and mysterious entities, constant challenges to his capacity to think. Accessible to immediate experience and elusive to the interrogations of the spirit, they suggest - space and time - multiple versions, as if they were fabulous monsters (LINS, 1976, page 63).

It is in this memory of the past that we find the narrative voices in "Retábulo de Santa Joana", gathering space and time, so that the student dares to the fabulous monsters of Osman's fiction and, in this "chronotope", glimpse in the construction of

the altarpiece and its mysteries the senses that emerge from the spaces through which the characters, especially Joana Carolina, move.

Nove, novena integrates a unique moment in the Osmanian literature in relation to the works *O fiel e a pedra*, *O visitante* and *Os gestos*. These are texts whose poetic elaboration inscribed and written in a linear structure, endowed with a unilateral narrative voice, won the support of many readers. When the author publishes *Avalovara*, *Nove, novena* and *A Rainha dos Cárceres da Grécia*, one perceives a certain resistance of the public, and the author happens to be seen as hermetic, difficult, dense. This reaction is justified by Osman Lins' escape to a pattern of writing that appealed to more conservative readers.

In prefacing the second edition of *Nove, novena*, João Alexandre Barbosa baptized the text of "Nove, Novena, Novidade": "It is that between the perception of the world, projected by language, and the assimilation of reading, the author forces us to a decisive encounter with all the elements of execution that configure the construction of the text. He does not *tell*¹; he writes" (2007, p.8). And corroborating the critic's position, Osman (1979: 46) says that "to do a work is to construct a building. There it is. Whatever they say, whatever they do, there it is, planted in the world, with its doors open."

When it comes to *Nove, novena*, especially, the short story "Retábulo de Santa Joana" we are faced with the construction of a building in permanent dialogue with other arts: the architecture of the altarpiece and the mysteries. The altarpiece consists of an ornamental structure in stone or carved wood that rises in the back part of an altar; now "Mysteries", refers to a theatrical genre typical of the Middle Ages, intended to put religious matters on the scene.

Once the text resembles an altarpiece, the narrative is suspended in the passage from one Mystery to another, with a suppression of time to be complemented by the readers. One possible answer to these gaps is the fact that the text is constructed by the narrators' memory: the Black added to the family; the second Treasurer of the Brotherhood of Souls; Jerônimo José, the husband of Joana Carolina; Álvaro, the son; Altarpiece of St. Joan, the mother; the owner of Engenho Serra Grande; Laura, the daughter; the fugitive lovers, Miguel and Cristina; six narrative

¹ Author's emphasis.

voices identified only by signs and numbers; the priest who gives the protagonist extreme unction and the people accompanying the burial.

The reader is surprised by the 17 voices that tell the tale. These 17 narrators are indicated by symbols and are the remembrances of them that compose the profile of Joana Carolina, to which the reader is called to give "wholeness," articulating the narrative fragments in his own memory. Through the multiplicity of narrative focuses, the text or the "building" rise. All that comes to the reader about Joana comes from the fragmented accounts, from the scenes that the narrators' gaze filters and from their lines that select meaningful aspects to tell, creating the image of northeastern saint.

Despite the fallibility of recollection, the narrators can gain the reader's support both because they have lived together, witnessed, met Joana Carolina and because the character who imposes herself on the story of firmness, resistance, meekness and the "miracles" she performs.

I have, being ignorant, a sense of graced, certain that in this young woman illuminated three times - by the afternoon sun, by the flames of the candles, by my ecstasy - and in whom the illness, more than punishment, was a design to protect it until it emerged, from the entrails of time, this minute resides the fortunes of life, and that by attaching myself to it, I am seized of greatness which I will not understand and which I do not even guess. Arrayed in my depths by her gaze, I offer myself with the utmost candor, imagining that this brio suddenly generated in my spirit can buy peace and joy "(LINS, 2007, pp. 92-3).

This voice that springs abundantly from the mouth of the future husband, almost in the form of prayer, when Joana, in the procession, paid a promise, already connotes an inner transformation brought about only by Joana's vision.

1.1 How is an altarpiece done?

For Weisgerber (2016, 93), "the world of narrative constitutes, like the world we live in, a spatio-temporal ensemble where places and moments interpenetrate." The world in which Joana lives, in fact, does not differ from the world in which the northeasterners live. These are houses, mills, schools improvised in houses, roads almost unreachable and moments that also remind us of common situations: birth of children, wakes, murders, couples running away. "Literary space is impregnated with axiologies, no place represented in the literary text is neutral, they all have meanings,

which are constantly re-signified, since the characters live / exist in it and with it" (BORGES FILHO, 2015, 18-19). In *Retábulo de Santa Joana*, there is a profusion of spaces, as can be seen in the table below:

First Mystery	Birth of Joana Carolina, in the room of her mother's house, altarpiece of Santa Joana.
Second Mystery	Joana Carolina at the age of eleven. Brotherhood of Souls.
Third Mystery	Joana Carolina in adolescence. Religious procession
Fourth Mystery	Joana, the husband and the five children in Engenho Serra Grande.
Fifth Mystery	Jerônimo José proposes to Joana Carolina. Life of the protagonist at home and the works of the husband. Death of the husband. The house, the hotel, the railway, Belém.
Sixth Mystery	Temptation and moves of the son of the Lord of Engenho Serra Grande over the widow Joana Carolina and her resistance. The work of a teacher in the lands of Engenho.
Seventh Mystery	The adverse working conditions of the teacher and the problems with family health. The enthusiasm of the children with the visits of the grandmother. Engenho Serra Grande
Eighth Mystery	Death of the altarpiece of Santa Joana, attacked by a bull from the lands of Engenho.
Ninth Mystery	Escape of couple Miguel and Ana Cristina, persecuted by gunmen contracted by the father of the girl, Antônio Dias, who opposes to the marriage. Joana Carolina welcomes the couple and, through the word, saves the fugitives. Engenho Queimadas.
Tenth Mystery	Joana Carolina helps Jonas, a disabled child, a son of Floripes and grandson of Senhora do Engenho Queimadas. The boy is saved from the shots of an assassin. Engenho Queimadas.
Eleventh Mystery	Joana in agony receives from the priest the anointing of the sick. Moment of transfiguration.
Twelfth Mystery	Burial of Joana Carolina

All these spaces are rich in values, since it is in them that the characters experience their experiences, they shape or construct their subjectivity so that once mentioned the space, we come to visualize them inserted in it. In addition to the recurring places, such as the mill, there are several other places referred to in the text called ornaments, which precede the Mysteries, such as the house, the square, and dialogue with what will be told. "Ornament is important, it binds things together and thus enriches the world. I make an ornamental literature, but these ornaments are not free, there is a reason they are there " (Ibidem, p. 207).

The ornaments open the retable frames and are called "mysteries". The first of them brings an overview of the universe, announces a zodiacal sign through the word

"scale". The twelve mysteries are presided over by astrology that will mark the trajectory of twelve months in the life of Joana Carolina:

The falling stars and those that remain, meteorites, comets that cross space like reptiles, great nebulae, rivers of fire and magnitude, ordered agglomerations, unfolded space, the expanses reflected in the mirrors of Time, the Sun and the planets, our Moon and its four phases, all measured by the invisible scale, with the pollen on one plate, on the other the constellations, and which regulates, with the same certainty, distance, vertigo, weight and numbers (*Ibidem*, p. 87).

This introductory mystery is almost a profession of faith adopted by Osman Lins (1979: 223) in assuming that:

[...] "The narrative for me is a cosmogony. This is what I think: there is the world, there are words, there is our experience of the world and our experience of words. And all of this is ordered, it is a cosmos.

In this cosmos, one of the narrative voices announces to the mother Altarpiece of Santa Joana the arrival of Joana to the world. The character is born under the sign of libra, represented by the scale. Astrological signs are sometimes easily perceived, but at other times in the text, they are more covert. In the first ornament, for example, we infer that is about libra by the mention of the word "scale." From the other adornments or the narrative attached to them, it is perceived that the time beyond chronological will also be astrological. It is this time attached to the subjectivity of the characters, experienced within the spaces of the narrative that is transforming Joana into a saint.

In the first Mystery, the narrator, midwife, introduces the brothers of Joana to the reader: Suzana, João, Filomena and Lucina, "all gathered by me from the prodigal entrails of the Altarpiece of St. Joana ..." (LINS: 2007, 73). The midwife traces a personality to the children of Totonia, predicting events three decades away from the moment she brings Joan to the world.

"Suzana will come to old age biting with jealousy, seeing in every woman, even in her mother, the eye of covetousness in her husband ..." ... João, man of not taking any insult ... will cultivate all forms of greed, unable to offer anyone a glass of water. [...] Lucina will become an enemy of the Altarpiece of St. Joana, she will deny her hand and her word. Neither Filomena nor she nor Suzana will offer the sister any help. Joana Carolina, in spite of poverty, will be her support: the old woman will die in her house, thirty-six years from now, in Engenho Serra Grande (*Ibidem*, p. 73)

These very similar traits among Joan's brothers do not contaminate her. Even referring to predictability; therefore fallible, the reader begins to perceive a differential in Joan. She stands above the four brothers for having behavior and values opposite to theirs.

In all the mysteries, one can perceive the virtuous superiority of Joana in relation to the other characters. In the ninth Mystery, for example, Joana becomes a giant to receive a fugitive couple and face the bravery of the girl's father:

[...] we were guided to the only person in the world with the merit of saving us (LINS: 2007, 104). Joana made the chief dismount, enter, pondered energetically: (...) I can see this young woman forced to flee, not possessing goods that fit even in the shell of the hand, behind of fervor, just because the father does not want to hear her? Is that being a father? I know money has value. But greater is mercy. What good is it for a man to have cattle and crops, if he can not draw from his own heart some greatness? (Ibidem, p. 104)

For the daughter and son-in-law of Antônio Dias, whose behavior is marked by imposition and violence, Joana represents the dialogue that disarms him. In the face of Joana's argumentation, interspersed with questions that directly affect the lord of the mill, he surrenders to her discursive courage and promises protection to the couple. The mob, who had come to annihilate the bride and groom, became friends with them. By the power of the word, Joana reverses a situation whose outcome would be tragic.

And, in this way, Joana is "sanctifying" in all spaces and situations, because she is above the more "comfortable", traditional solutions that the other characters would adopt.

For the children of Joana, the resilient attitude of the mother helps them to overcome the afflictions imposed by the social condition and the illness.

Everything was in half. Half an orange, half bread, half a banana, half a glass of milk, half an egg, one shoe in the foot and the other put away. We would only wear the two of them when she took us to the city, to receive her wages, nine miles to go and nine to come back (LINS, 2007, p.89).

It was with this exacerbated economy imposed by the social situation that Joana raised the children with wholeness. In fact, it was only in the visits of the Altarpiece of St. Joana that there was certain "abundance".

Altarpiece of St. Joana, in turn, imagines her daughter Joana in a situation totally adverse to her, since, married to a more fragile man, she would not live in the same

situation as herself: "The one who is polluted, the one who stops the children, the one which transforms into milk her own blood, the fragile one" (LINS, 2007, pp. 96-7), transmuting it into a "reward" or in which "firmness" can be seen in "moments of pain," kept "as a secret. In the wholes of the soul" (Ibidem, p. 98). Joana's boss, overcome by the feeling of intimate malaise, although able to attract women, says: "I look more like the devil than I do with people. *Get behind me*². This is not how women found me" (ibid., P.101) and recognizes that Joan is the bearer of deeper and more transcendent feelings than his own.

In rejecting the proposal of marriage with widower Antônio Dias, Joana grows in admiration, preferring the essence, the soul solace to the stability that could enjoy, contracting new nuptials: "Thus, I am honored by his proposal, kind and generous. It means, if I accepted her, shelter and stability for the rest of my days. But then, what would become of my soul? (Ibidem,p. 105). Moved by an axiological consciousness, Joana disconcerts the other characters.

1.2 The altarpiece almost ready

It is observed that the construction of an altarpiece, in that space, means the need for the characters to overcome their own limits and acts as a catalyst for their frustrations. Therefore, the miracles attributed to St. Joana are, in fact, the character's attitudes that set her apart from others, since she is wise to deal with adversities, while the other characters stumble in their own weaknesses. At the moment of death, the human dimension of the character becomes more evident through the perception of one's own weaknesses and sins. But her wholeness of character is perceived by the priest through her socio-historical relationship with space, for in her trajectory it was presented "rapture and nobility that seemed to defy life and its claws" (Ibidem, p. 132)

By adopting a position that differs from the standards advocated by a society eager for material goods, without reflecting on essential values, Joana moves away from these "degraded values" and establishes herself in "authentic values."

In several situations, Joana stands out for the resistance, the meekness, the astonishment before the other characters. Even as a child, she played naturally with

² *Get behind me, Satan* is a medieval Catholic formula of exorcism, composed in 1415 and found in a Benedictine abbey in Bavaria, whose origin is traditionally associated with Saint Benedict of Nursia.

the scorpions without being stung, "Shouts the President of the Brotherhood that no one can catch a scorpion. Joana Carolina: 'I catch it'. Close them in the palm of the hand, gently. Let them go. 'If the girl does this, with the powers of God I also do'" (*Ibidem*, p. 91).

She remains unscathed throughout her life: she loses children, loses her husband, the mother dies in her house, resists the sordid strategies engendered by the heir of the mill to maintain a conjugal relationship with her.

The house where I moved Joana to, with the school and the children, was a Babylon. It was divided: part was a distillery. Even so, a loose cry in the room would get erased into the kitchen. Wet walls, high roof, oversized rooms, where six double beds and some dressers would fit, and where on certain nights a stove would have to be lit so as not to die of cold. There, at once, her children became ill, all of them, the little girl died. Her mother, who from time to time paid her a visit, died there too. Nothing shook the woman (LINS, 2007, p.87).

The house, for Bachelard (1989, p. 22) corresponds to the place of protection, of coziness, "our corner in the world." But the successive changes provoked by the owner try to destabilize the character in relation to this space, but Joana remains unshakable.

This absence of shock in Joana in the face of so many adversities, and especially those of the heir of the Serra Grande mill, lead him to a reflection. "I ended up thinking that Joana Carolina was my transcendence, my share of astonishment in a life so poor of mysteries" (LINS, 2007, 105).

The tale is closed with the burial of Joan Carolina, transformed into a saint, a miracle worker. These miracles, for the most part, refer to the change in behavior, in the acting of some characters accustomed to victory by the expression of force, but not through the force of expression, like Joan. In the twelfth mystery, the priest anoints Joana:

When I anointed her with the holy oil, this former face had already disappeared, with only its residues remaining, its dust. It was upon the eyes, the mouth, the ears, the curved nose of the old woman, that I invoked the mercy of God (LINS: 2007, 113). Inside me, as I moved away with my head up high, Joana was a flame. *Populus, qui ambulabat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam*³.

This anointing given by the priest, that is, the application of consecrated oil to someone, ratifies Joana's righteous behavior and makes the priest see her as light.

³ Isaiah 9: 2. "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light."

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The above reading allowed us to enter into the labyrinthine writing of Osman Lins, above all, as far as space is concerned. He himself left us a fundamental work on this narrative category: *Lima Barreto e o espaço romanesco*. Owner of an unsettling way of writing, Osman Lins adopts in his fiction the Northeast with its customs, beliefs, its mills of "living fire", its arbitrariness, its miseries and greatness.

In "Retábulo de Santa Joana Carolina", it is possible to accompany the creation of a saint devoid of an ecclesiastical recognition, but canonized in the interior of those with whom she lived in various spaces, making them polysemous. A polysemy arising from the clash between the man and the man, between the man and the nature, between the man and the supernatural. It is at the limit of each character that Joana Carolina excels at finding a "different" way of coping with situations.

It is a saint built by the subjective vision of its peers in relation to the posture adopted by it within the space of their experiences. In spite of the antagonistic space, Joana does not abandon her "authentic values in a world of degraded values" (GOLDMANN, 2000, p.9) "because of the coherence with her convictions and this brings strangeness to her posture, making her "saint".

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