

The return of the unreachable object of desire. A reading of the short story “The Altar of the Dead” by Henry James

O regresso do inatingível objeto de desejo. Leitura do conto de Henry James “O Altar dos Mortos”

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Authors like Freud and Lacan often recurred to fiction in order to illustrate psychopathological structures. Starting from a psychoanalytical perspective, this paper focuses on the main character of the short story ‘The Altar of the Dead’ by Henry James. We argue that the different strategies he displays during his life, as described by the author, are in fact a way to avoid confronting the object of desire and suggest an obsessional structure. For the obsessional subject, all that matters is to assure the object’s subsistence while making it untouchable. Desire is thus conceived as impossible, and this is one of the ways of granting the ex-sistence of the object that arouses it. The idealization of death, the inhibition of sensual love and the ritualization of his existence are the symptoms of a personal struggle that will prove to be absolutely unsolvable.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, obsession, desire, object, symptom

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The clock ticked in the stillness...

The Altar of the Dead. Henry James

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The question of desire is at the core of psychoanalysis. Even if Freud did not take desire as a concept, his models and his theoretical arguments are all based on the existence of a force that tends to discharge an energy with a sexual character, seeking release and looking for satisfaction. The pleasure principle is, according to Freud, the basis of mental functioning. It states that the primary tendency of the psychic system is to reduce its energy to a minimum. However, a simple motor reflex, even if it reduces tension, is not enough to get satisfaction since this needs an external object to be attained. Additionally, the characteristic helplessness of the new-born human requires someone else's presence to reach this object. These three elements, the desire, the object and the other, are dynamically linked to each other. Each one of them is complex and multidimensional. Lacan's introduction of his triad, Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, leads to a far-reaching theoretical development of the former terms. The notion of "object" undergoes a diffraction through the distinction between the object of desire — its aim — and the object cause of desire — a kind of absence arousing desire —, but also between the object of drive, the object of fantasy (fantasme) and the object of love. Also, the notion of "the other" will be split and formalized on the L schema which basically distinguishes the "other" — figure belonging to Imaginary — and "the Other" which is a symbolic function that operates beyond any possible incarnation (Lacan, 1954/1978, Lesson 25 May 1955).

One of the deepest cues of the specific desire's dynamics, which is different for each clinical structure, namely, neurosis, psychosis and perversion, is love through its multiple

manifestations. In most clinical situations, it shows a particular way to face the structural lack of the object of desire and its unavoidable impasses.

This topic, the experience and the struggles of love, will be the cornerstone of our analysis of Henry James' short story *The Altar of the Dead* (James, 1895/1980)¹. It is important to keep in mind that our paper is not the study of a clinical situation. Neither do we aim to examine James' psychology through the content and the structure of his writing — as, for example, in the article of R.A. Hocks, who affirms that “Characters in James productions reflect the inner conflicts of James himself” (Hocks, 1989). Finally, we do not seek either to analyse the use of literature as a defensive manoeuvre, as a narcissistic accomplishment or to reveal a writer-reader dynamic.

We will consider the text as a fragment of someone's history, keeping in mind that incompleteness is the main attribute of any “real” dialogue in therapy, not only on the first interviews with a patient but all through the treatment. So even if for every case the totality is unattainable, it is possible to rigorously elaborate a hypothesis on the basic structure that explains the logic of the subject's dynamics based on a limited set of elements. Therefore, we will not propose an interpretation of the text because, as Shoshana Felman affirms in her article, it may only turn out to be a ‘wild interpretation’ (Felman, 1977), knowing that the accuracy of any interpretation can only be confirmed by the changes it produces in the gravitation of the truth in the patient discourse. }

Before considering the situation, the relations and the particular atmosphere around Stransom, the main character of *The Altar of the Dead*, we will recall some specific notions of psychoanalysis which are crucial for the forthcoming discussion.

Desire, object and psychoanalysis

The expression “object of desire” generally evokes the aim of our desires. In everyday speech it simply designates what we wish, going from a moderate attraction up to a consuming passion. In place of this object, an infinite number of realizations that go from the miniature of the fanatical

¹ In all the ensuing quotations from the text “*The Altar of the Dead*”, for the sake of readability, we will only give the corresponding page of this same edition.

collector to the innamorato of a passionate lover, money or celebrity may also come into play. In psychoanalytical terms, the theoretical grounding of this article, both desire and the object of desire have a precise status and definition because of their place in psychic functioning. Even if Freud has not made a real concept of desire, as we said previously, he wrote about it at different moments. He often associates it to libido and its energetic dimension in order to explain the dynamic aspect of drive or that of transference displacements.

In The interpretation of dreams, while discussing satisfaction, Freud writes:

As a result of the link that has thus been established, next time this need arises a psychical impulse will at once emerge which will seek to re-cathex the "mnemonic image" of the perception and to re-evolve the perception itself, that is to say, to re-establish the situation of the original satisfaction. An impulse of this kind is what we call a wish (...) (Freud, 1910/1953a, p. 995)

4 We can see here how desire is associated with a movement rather than with an object, a psychic motion tending to reproduce a situation of satisfaction. However, this movement is not only assimilated to a simple attraction towards an external object, it is also oriented in time towards the past of the subject. The satisfaction of desire, at first only provided by hallucination, is then simultaneously produced with perception.

Lacan has transformed the desire into a key notion in psychoanalysis by giving it a specific status, or rather many different specific statuses in his successive formalizations: metonymical desire, mother's desire within the framework of the paternal metaphor, impossible or unsatisfied desire, etc.

For Lacan, desire arises from the effect of the demand on the vital need (Lacan, 1957/1998a, p. 91). Actually, desire is the product of a failure between the needs of a living organism – unreachable as an isolated object for every human being – and the answer to these needs that occurs in a symbolic way. It is necessary to add that according to the well-known Lacanian aphorisms, 'desire is the desire of the Other' (Lacan, 1958/1966b, p. 628), meaning both the desire that belongs to the Other, and that desire that aims at the Other as an object (Lacan, 1957/1966a, p. 52). As we stated previously, the Other is a symbolic construct that corresponds to the significant battery, the set of words, grammatical and syntactical rules of language, and is different from the other that instantiates speech and incarnates a possible actualization.

In this way, unlike Freud who, in his early works, defined desire as an internal motion, Lacan has always considered desire in terms of a paradoxical exteriority that he calls extimity (Lacan, 1968/2006, p. 249). It is worth

remembering that in psychoanalysis the object of desire is always defined as a missing object, implying that this absence is structural. In fact, this lack will later be conceptualized by Lacan as the object causing desire, an object which, while remaining elusive, determines the subject, i.e. the a object (Lacan, 1962/2004, p. 341).

Desire, existing in a structural way but without consistency or content, will find its support in fantasy (*fantasme*), a symbolic construction, a grammatical arrangement, an individual axiom, which, referring to an imaginary scene, will associate the fading subject to the object, thereby preventing a potentially unstoppable drift. The subject will then be impelled to seek this very object by conjuring up the Other without ever succeeding. He² will depend on the Other through the demand, made of signifiers, that leaves him captive of a double movement of alienation and separation (Lacan, 1964/1998b). Moreover, the figure of the Other is a function that should be articulated at a structural level according to each clinical structure (Lacan, 1975/2005). The crystallized, all-powerful and complete figure of the Other, for example, may be a determinant factor in psychotic destabilizations. However, the relation to the Other also disturbs the neurotic search for complete satisfaction which is only a late idealization, because it is only by relying on the Other that he may eventually achieve it. As Lacan puts it:

(...) we see, by the way the neurotic acts, that he keeps the *fantasme* far from him, he is busy sustaining the Other's desire by holding him in suspense. (Lacan, 1967/2001, p. 326)

Our article examines obsessional neurosis in relation to desire and to the object, focusing on the structural neurotic arrangement and not on a psychopathological description. Freud conceives the mechanism underlying obsessional neurosis in terms of anal phase, therefore in terms of the retention-expulsion pair and its different substitutes (Freud, 1917/1953c) (Freud, 1913/1953b). In the logical approach of drives promoted by Lacan, this modality responds specifically to the demand considered as coming from

² The masculine gender is used in this article when talking about the Subject or the Other for the sake of readability. Nevertheless, in general, in psychoanalysis, both the Subject and the Other, being an effect of language dynamic, has no gender. Also, when talking about "the obsessional subject" that is in fact short for "the subject corresponding to an obsessional neurotic structure", we will keep using the masculine gender even though this subjective structure may apply both to men and women.

the Other — a symbolic function (Lacan, 1965, Lesson 27 April 1966). By refusing the other (here the lower case) what he asks or what he wants, the obsessional subject actually refuses the object he thinks the other is asking for. He can do it in an aggressive way, hurting him, but also by delaying his gift forever and, as a result, depriving him.

For the obsessional subject all that matters is to assure the object's subsistence while making it untouchable. Desire is thus conceived as impossible, and it is one of the ways of granting the ex-sistence³ of the object. By reducing desire to demand, he gives some consistency, even if it is only a limited one, to the object of desire, cancelling with every step the Other's desire. The obsessional subject mortifies his partners, he compels them to tell him what they want and he next tries to moderate somehow this mortification; he makes an absolute Other exist, to whom he shows his good intentions. Among the many strategies of the obsessional, we find the mental calculus, the control and regulation of the jouissance or altruism. He also develops an imaginary script about what the others expect from him. Thus, by turning the Other's demand into an object — the "thing" that some other asks him to be or to do —, he abolishes his desire, avoiding the question that horrifies him: what does he want from me? Or as Lacan says, appealing to an Italian expression: *Che vuoi ?* (Lacan, 1960/1966c, p. 815).

It is always delicate to undertake a psychoanalytical analysis based on a literary piece of work. It will therefore be necessary to be circumspect and vigilant when advancing hypotheses. In any case, there are several studies on fictional characters in literature by Freud himself and also by Lacan. James's fiction has already been the subject of psychoanalytical readings, especially by André Green (Green, 2009) and, as we shall see below, other authors who have also undertaken this kind of analysis. We have proposed a psychoanalytical reading of another novel by H. James, "The Beast in the Jungle", in a previous paper (Guillén & Pinel, 2012). The present analysis is not only motivated by the magnificence of James' descriptions of the human psyche, but especially by his literary virtuosity which brings forth, through the chiaroscuro of his writing, the unavoidable and ineffable experience at the heart of every human story.

³ This peculiar writing of the word existence is often used by Lacan to point out the fundamentally external character of the object in psychoanalysis which remains always distinct from any possible realization (Lacan, 1958/2013, Lesson 10 December 1958).

Stransom: the elusion of the object of desire as a desiring strategy

The main character of Henry James' short story is a man, George Stransom. At the beginning of the story, we guess he is middle-aged, knowing that the lack of precision accentuates the impression of "timelessness" that the story provides. Stransom is someone who seems to lead an ordinary life, even if we know almost nothing of it. Nevertheless, certain passages suggest that he is a solitary man who has a high social position. The reader follows a man obsessed with death, and death later becomes the object of an unending cult that merely accentuates the poignant sensation of the increasing emptiness in his life. It is impossible to find in Stransom any particular ambition, any feeling of love or passion which could be incarnated.

This last word provides one of the fundamental keys to understanding Stransom's position in psychoanalytical terms, concerning the distinction between the Other and the other. Actually, the impossible incarnation of the Other in someone who loves him is settled from the beginning: Mary Antrim, his fiancée in a distant past, will never reach the altar:

(...) for the girl who was to have been his bride there had been no bridal embrace. She had died of a malignant fever after the wedding day had been fixed. (p. 252)

Still, this event has not cleared the figure of Mary Antrim away. On the contrary, her memory has become an object of veneration associated with a private commemoration that has turned into a true ritual. Her death fixed Stransom's own subjective position:

He had needed no priest and no longer to make him forever widowed. (p. 252)

Speaking of Stransom's life the narrator tells us:

(...) he had never made it anything but a house of which the mistress was eternally absent. (p. 253)

The adverbs used reinforce the idea of fixity, of inevitability: everything is set forever, eternally, no change and no movement will be allowed. This immobility would lead to the obliteration of the conflict underlying the pair retention-expulsion that we mentioned before. It may also be understood as a defense against the unbearable enigma of the Other's desire, implying in its purest version the renouncement to any "real" love.

The remembrance takes the aspect of a computational turn of memory: his dead are registered; he counts them and, in doing so, he performs a first action, he acts for them inside himself.

He had formed little by little the idea of numbering his Dead; it had come to him tolerably early in life that there was something one had to do for them. (p. 253)

In this sentence we can see the articulation of three main elements: first the numbering, second the dead as the object of an action, and third the obligation that emerges. All this is sheltered in Stransom's inner world through a strategy of retention of his objects and through the expulsion of others from his personal universe.

A second episode reinforces the idea of the supremacy of the dead over the living: the unexpected meeting with an old friend, Creston, whose wife, who was his dearest friend, died some time ago. The narrator characterizes it as follows:

Mrs. Creston had been more living for him than any woman but one. (p. 256)

8 Creston is accompanied by an unknown lady who turns out to be his new wife. Stransom, outraged by what he considers an imposture, calls her 'that new woman', a 'hired performer', he even adds: 'she was perhaps a human being'. Later, Stransom makes an apology to the old Mrs. Creston, glorifying the perfection of his friend, her generosity and her devotion, which has only received as a response the ingratitude and betrayal of her husband who soon abandoned her. After a time of 'sharing' his thoughts with Mrs. Creston's ghost, Stransom comes across the news of the death of his former and 'almost adored' friend, Aston Hague. Hague had betrayed him a long time previously and, after a public offense of which the reader will know nothing, they broke up forever. The absence of feelings about the death of this man reveals to Stransom his own insensitivity: "(...) how much he himself could feel like a stone" (p. 258). This mortal petrification is doubled physically by the coldness he feels at this moment: "he went cold, suddenly, and horribly cold, to bed" (p. 258), coldness that reappears at the end of the story.

The next day, wanting to have a rest while walking, Stransom unexpectedly finds a church and his attention is attracted by a woman in mourning, huddled in prayer, whose face he does not see.

By losing himself in the adoration of his dead — he told us that "he floated away on the sea of light" (p. 260) —, he is seized by the idea of

materializing, in one of the unoccupied altars, his mental altar. Some kind of externalization occurs at this moment. He is aware that he will have to contact the authorities of this church, make bureaucratic arrangements and sign documents. Yet this is not an obstacle, since the main intention that moves him remains private:

This was the origin of the rites more public, yet certainly esoteric, that he at last found himself able to establish. (p. 261)

This action reveals another dimension of his obsessional strategy: he is not afraid of getting to the task; it is even better if the task is strenuous. The important thing is that this task should be determined by someone else or — as in this case — by an obligation imposed on him, thereby removing the risk of an act that could, precisely, engage his desire. The narrator tells us explicitly: “even a life load could be easier” (p. 261).

This altar thus becomes a concretization of his private worship: each new candle represents one of his dead, their growing number being a reflection of the time that passes for him. This altar turns out to be at the very heart of his diligence, his concerns. In this way, Stransom comes to sublimate, and even replace, the link with the living:

There were hours at which he almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connection more charming than, as it happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life. (p. 263)

What are the foundations of such a practice? Grief, memory, fidelity? For us, the central function of this practice is rather to hold an assembly and, above all, to make it possible to build a set around an exclusion, as is the case for every set from a logical perspective. There is only one interdiction: “(...) for Acton Hague no flame could ever rise on any altar of his” (p. 263). As Sigi Jöttkandt says: “What is at stake in all of this, as James’s text makes so unusually and refreshingly clear, is quite simply the question of a limit, of the exception that creates the rule” (Jöttkandt, 2005, p. 107). This exclusion will prove tragic at the turning point in the last sections of the story, because the absolute exclusion he seeks is death.

Unexpectedly, the altar, by its own attraction, will offer a refuge to another adorer, a woman, the one that Stransom saw when entering the church the first time. For years they will pray side by side without exchanging a word. In an appealing interpretation, Andrzej Warminsky proposes to read this special configuration in terms of two rhetorical figures, metonymy

and zeugma : 'rather than worshipping side by side in front of an altar in a church, the two of them are in a zeugma, as it were, radically disjunct while indissolubly bound together' (Warminski, 1988, p. 271).

Only afterward, when finding her by chance at a concert, he becomes aware, astonished, of her beauty and of the interest she arouses in him. His interest awakens, but it has the opposite effect from the usually expected one, namely to bring them together. Indeed, this new interest is the reason why Stransom forces himself to keep away from the church if now his visits should obey the almost obscene reason of finding this woman.

They (his Dead) reminded him that he went only for them — for nothing else in the world. (p. 266)

Nevertheless, he returns a few days later and, for the first time, he does not find her at the usual place. Several times, thereafter, she will be absent.

He realizes that, even if he had shared his devotion with this woman so many times, of her, he knows nothing:

His delicacy had kept him from asking any question about her at any time (...) She might in fact have been a divorced duchess, and she might have been an old maid who taught the harp. (pp. 266-267)

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In the words of Stransom the reader finds the key of his relationship to her:

(...) it was not their names that mattered, it was only their perfect practice and their common need. These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they had not the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships (...) They ended one day (they never knew which of them expressed it first) by throwing out the idea that they didn't care for each other. Over this idea they grew quite intimate (...) (p. 268)

The function of this woman is quite clear: she should be the priestess with whom he watches the things to come, and she will add the candle to complete the altar in the end: the candle for Stransom.

The moment comes when she invites him to her home, after her aunt's decease. Once there, the strangeness of the situation becomes unsettling for Stransom:

He had a strange sense of having come for something in particular; strange because, literally, there was nothing particular between them, nothing save that they were at one on their great point, which had long ago become a magnificent matter of course. (p. 271)

Nevertheless, something happens when she ushers him into her room. The reader wonders if eventually they will not get together. Love turns up, not as expected, but through the manifestation of a dead person. Actually, the roles are reversed in this scene: this time it is one of her dead that counts, the only one for whom she has been praying before the common altar: Aston Hague. For Stransom, however, he is the proscribed one, the one whose exclusion founds Stransom's collection in a logical sense, knowing that in Logics an outer element is always required to found a set. This will have a devastating effect on him:

The revelation seemed to smite our friend in the face, and he dropped into a seat and sat silent. (p. 273)

The diverging interpretations of the same object, the arrangement of candles in the altar, shows the contrast of the meaning that two different people could assign to it. As Jöttkandt (2005) says: "(...) if Stransom's system is guaranteed by the single candle that escapes his rule (...) we might say that the woman's is characterized by the fact that there is not one candle on the altar that is not dedicated to Hague" (p. 114).

The most intimate truth, structurally unconscious, is here exhibited; the truth which should have stayed banished from the altar of Stransom bursts out. How can we explain this combination of circumstances? Their meeting was an accident; never a shadow of the traitor-friend was evoked in their conversations. This encounter shows Stransom's mistake at having thought that his own rules were a guarantee to keep the Real afar: the impossible or rather what he thought was impossible ends up happening. The reader is here confronted to the unveiling of Truth, not a transcendent or logical truth, but one of the kind which "testify, however, to an encounter with something that is strictly impossible but generated by the system itself" (Jöttkandt, 2005, p. 129). Several definitions of the Real are suggested by Lacan in his seminar: the Real is the impossible, the Real is inaccessible to symbolic representations or, as Rowe says when analyzing the statements of post-freudian authors, that which is "beneath certain formally coherent meanings" (Rowe, 1984, p. 229)⁴.

⁴ Even if it is not the aim of our paper, it is worth to note that there is also another way to analyze the Real dimension by introducing the notion of mathematical infinity that has been used by Lacan in many occasions through his seminars, namely by studying the theories of Cantor, Dedekind or Gödel. Jöttkandt propose to consider this dimension in her article: "It is to the concept of infinity that we must in fact turn if we are to successfully theorize how such a system might be possible" (Jöttkandt, 2005, pp. 117-122).

Stransom's confrontation, not with his partner, but with the Real itself, is a blow. Everything changes at this moment for him. The fact that his friend asked for nothing at all during all those years, actually reveals her desire, and this desire takes the form of the only demand that Stransom cannot fulfil without giving up on himself: a candle for Hague.

From this moment on, an invisible and yet impervious obstacle settles between them: Acton Hague. Has he forgiven him, can he light a candle for him on his altar?

On this question he is dismissed from his friend's house and, at that very moment, the coldness he once felt seizes him again:

He felt also stricken and more and more cold, and his chill was like an ague in which he had to make an effort not to shake. (p. 277)

They will still meet, but not there, before his altar. A few moments later, she conveys that the spell is broken. Leaving her friend's room, his coldness heightens. Could the reader ignore, while reading this last sentence, the link between the name of his friend-traitor and the icy fever: ague?

12 The emptiness in meaning of all these years stands before him thereafter: "(...) he couldn't rid himself of the sense that he had been the victim of a fraud" (p. 279). The structural failure of the subject that would elevate him to the condition of desiring subject is reduced to an imaginary dam and perceived as a frustration (Lacan, 1956/1994, p. 61).

Later, Stransom visits Mary's flat, but the passion of their old relationship, paradoxically supported by an insurmountable distance between them, the passion for an untouched mystery, has only left the desert of an insipid and gloomy relationship. What was lost because of the revelation has transmuted the swirling hole of their ignorance into an inanimate void.

Stransom questions his motivations to maintain Aston Hague's banishment and, in doing so, he keeps entertaining his presence in his mind. In seeking a reason for this strange attachment to his former friend, he even wonders if he is not in love with Mary:

He challenged himself, denounced himself, asked himself if he were in love with her that he should care so much what adventures she had had. He had never for a moment admitted that he was in love with her, therefore nothing could have surprised him more than to discover that he was jealous. (p. 282)

His own capacities of reasoning and analysis become powerless:

(....) even his faculty of analysis left the irritation standing, and this irritation proved perhaps the greatest misfortune that had ever overtaken him. (p. 284)

And later on:

His irritation took the form of melancholy, and his melancholy that of the conviction that his health had quite failed. His altar, moreover, had ceased to exist; his chapel, in his dreams, was a great dark cavern. All the lights had gone out — all his Dead had died again. (p. 284)

The failure of the intellectual system has an effect on his body and also on his mood which, up to that moment, were “preserved”. His visits to the altar will resume without his friend’s presence. Now meaningless, the arrangement only exists by its spatial organization:

There came a day when, for simple exhaustion, if symmetry should really demand just one more, he was ready to take symmetry into account. Symmetry was harmony, and the idea of harmony began to haunt him, he said to himself that harmony was of course everything. (...) Finally, in this way, he arrived at a conception of the total, the ideal, which left a clear opportunity for just another figure. “Just one more, to round it off; just one more, just one” continued to hum itself in his head. (p. 286)

Who is this other to add? He will not be able to answer:

There was a strange confusion in the thought, for he felt the day to be near when he too should be one of the Others. (p. 287)

Tired and weak, Stransom falls ill. His servants inform him that a woman came to visit him during his illness. Upon learning it, and in spite of his weakness, he rushes to join his chapel where, in a mystical if not hallucinatory episode, the ghost of Mary Antrim, his former fiancée, tells him, in a strange combination of reproach and knowledge, that he must accept his former enemy.

Then, pressed by the need to act, gathering his last strength, he turns to find his friend praying discreetly in the chapel. A dialogue is established and they ask each other to renounce their irrevocable claims: for Mary, a candle for Hague and for Stransom never a candle for his enemy.

Stransom tells her that the Dead are there for her, to give her what she asks for. Horrified, she asks him to hush, but he insists:

Isn't that what you wanted? Yes, one more, one more.
Ah, no more – no more!

she answers, and the confrontation ends with Stransom’s exclamation:

Yes, one more ... just one. (p. 290)

after which he fades away.

Several elements are to be noted in this story. Stransom's life was, after all, only the weaving of a void that he preserved from the intrusion of any affect. This internal weaving finds a first externalization in the materialization of the altar which illustrates the first solipsistic moment when the obsessional subject succeeds in avoiding the Other by causing the cancellation of any other's desire. In fact, there is nothing to cancel here because he is dealing with phantoms. Let us remember that Freud spoke of the link between obsessive neurosis and religious practices; the patient detaches himself from the world and focuses on totally uncertain matters for humankind: the paternal filiation, the duration of life, life after death (Freud, 1909/1953d, p. 2162).

14 This ritual has allowed him to lead a life as the guardian of the Dead, who are the only ones capable of producing his almost mystical raptures but also his complete ruin when they abandon him. The presence of this woman at his side does not represent any risk at first, since she is immediately reduced to the simple role of priestess. This "arrangement" builds up a structure, a system where he can be safe from his own desire and, most important, from the other's desire. It is in fact a topological system to accommodate a hole (such as a torus, a topological figure that Lacan uses to show the relation between demand and desire (Lacan, 1961, Lesson 7 Mars 1962). Warminsky explains this particular system in terms of tropes, calling it a "topological system": "This system of signification by inclusion and exclusion is a topological system — a system of tropes and figures — or, more narrowly, a system of metaphor: one candle stands for one dead, one missing candle for one Hague" (Warminski, 1988, p. 273). Thus, death becomes paradoxically the foundation of a collection that can be counted, a loss is transformed in a positive term, a 0 becomes a 1, and in this way, the whole (1) stands on a hole (0).

Incarnation was presented at the beginning of this article as a key notion to understand Stransom's functioning. Indeed, the fantasme, is a structural way to create an imaginary scene that provides a link between the subject and the object. The experience of an actual love, as a partial realisation of the fantasme, would have been for Stransom a way of keeping the threatening object of desire afar and go on living. Nevertheless, it is precisely by the rejection of any possible incarnation that Stransom settles from the start his subjective position as an eternal widow. This rejection requires the exclusion of his material body that becomes a mere mental entity even if undermined by his great longevity, attested in the story by the progressive death of all his friends. The failure of the logical system that supports him becomes palpable

through the disease that leaves him prostrated, revealing the substance of his decaying body. However, at the end of the story, the immateriality reappears in as much as the conviction of the act to be performed — to let go the object of his hatred — comes from the spectre of his first lover and not from the woman next to him and whose love — a real sensual love — he never considered. Finally loves bursts out when they are able to offer their own incompleteness to each other, except that at this very moment Stransom dies.

James subtly shows us how Stransom had admirably managed the aporia of his desire. The desire of the Other that organizes the world of each and every one was never at stake for him in any accessible other; for this he would have dared to face his own desire and so his own inconsistency. Instead, he simply put forth his own disappearance, by creating the worship of the Others — the use of plural is crucial to distinguish it from the lacanian term — and by being reduced to a ghostly existence. In the end, he managed to bring together the being and the meaning (Lacan, 1964/1998b, p. 211) by finding the right place in the Other, unveiling his hollow nature. He himself would occupy the place of the object, the object that causes desire, this time not by his own mortification or the mortification of those around him, as he has done for so many years, but by his ultimate vanishing, leaving behind him only his souvenir.

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Resumos

(O regresso do inatingível objeto de desejo. Leitura do conto de Henry James “O Altar dos Mortos”

Autores como Freud e Lacan têm usado com frequência a ficção para ilustrar diferentes estruturas psicopatológicas. A partir de uma perspectiva psicanalítica, nosso artigo se concentrará no personagem principal do romance de Henry James “O Altar dos Mortos”. Propomos que as várias estratégias que ele emprega no decorrer de sua vida, conforme descritas pelo autor, servem para evitar o confronto com o objeto de desejo e sugerem uma estrutura de tipo obsessivo. Para o obsessivo, tudo o que importa é garantir a subsistência do objeto, tornando-o intocável. Assim, o desejo é concebido como impossível, uma forma de garantir a existência do objeto que o produz. A idealização da morte, a inibição do amor sensual e a ritualização de sua existência são sintomas de uma luta pessoal, um conflito que se mostra insolúvel.

Palavras-chave: Psicanálise, literatura, obsessão, desejo, sintoma

(Le retour de l'inatteignable objet du désir. Une lecture de la nouvelle “L'Autel de los Muertos” de Henry James)

Des auteurs comme Freud et Lacan ont souvent eu recours à la fiction pour illustrer des structures psychopathologiques. Partant d'une perspective psychanalytique, cet article se concentre sur le personnage principal de la nouvelle “L'autel des morts” d'Henry James. Nous soutenons que les différentes stratégies dont il fait preuve au cours de sa vie, telles que décrites par l'auteur, servent à éviter la confrontation à l'objet du désir et suggèrent une structure obsessionnelle. Pour le sujet obsessionnel, il s'agit d'assurer la subsistance de l'objet tout en le rendant intouchable. Le désir est donc conçu comme impossible, une façon d'assurer l'existence de l'objet qui le produit. L'idéalisation de la mort, l'inhibition de l'amour sensuel et la ritualisation de son existence sont les symptômes d'une lutte personnelle, un conflit qui s'avèrera insoluble.

Mots-clés: Psychanalyse, littérature, obsession, désir, symptôme

(El retorno del objeto del deseo inalcanzable: un análisis del cuento “El Altar de los Muertos” de Henry James)

Freud y Lacan, entre otros autores, han recurrido a la ficción para ilustrar las estructuras psicopatológicas. A partir de la perspectiva psicoanalítica, este artículo se centra en analizar el personaje principal del cuento “El altar de los muertos”, de Henry James. Las diferentes estrategias que emplea a lo largo de su vida, según relata el autor, sirven para evitar la confrontación con el objeto del deseo y sugieren una estructura obsesiva. Para el sujeto obsesivo, lo único que importa es asegurar la subsistencia del objeto haciéndolo intocable. El deseo se concibe como imposible, un modo de garantizar la existencia del objeto que lo suscita. La idealización de la muerte, la inhibición del amor sensual y la ritualización de su existencia son los síntomas de una lucha personal, de un conflicto que se revela irresoluble

Palabras clave: Psicoanálisis, literatura, obsesión, deseo, síntoma