

Literature

Canonical intertext in *Avalovara*¹

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PERHAPS OSMAN Lins was one of the Brazilian writers who reflected the most - or at least explained their thoughts - on the act of writing, and fictionalized the “problematic exercise of literature” resorting, here, to Borges’ words, from the first steps of an inexperienced writer to the achievement of expression in his maturity. *Avalovara* condenses these issues in a meaningful way.

“Writers write in the descent of something, they invent a fictitious world after other novelists who have already invented the world before them,” says Robbe-Grillet (2005, p.10). Osman Lins always disputed the ancestry attributed by critics to his novel *Avalovara*. They put him in the lineage of Joyce, Faulkner, the new French novelists, contemporary Latin American writers, especially Cortázar of *Rayuela*, Lezama Lima of *Paradiso*, and Borges of *Aleph*. However, he insisted on disclosing his sources “located in the farthest literary tradition.” Dante, ‘in the moderation and structure’; Rabelais, ‘in the excess and construction of one or two characters’; Matila C. Ghyka, ‘in the presence of geometry, in nature and in art’, in addition to Pythagoras and alchemists and artists in general.” Although in this particular case it would be appropriate to give credit to these revelations by the author, against the fact that one should always be wary of what the creator says about his work, the path to be trodden to address the dialogue between *Avalovara* and some canonical works will be neither this nor that indicated by the critics.

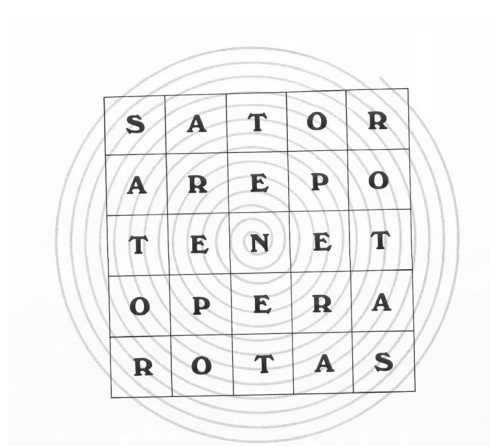
Literature is established in a relationship with the world and in a relationship with itself, with its history and the history of its production, with the long journey of its origins. Ultimately, it carries its own memory, consolidated in the known and controversial theory of intertextuality (Samoyault, 2008). Some of the ancestors of *Avalovara* will be disemboweled from their own interiority, in which Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, one of the sources revealed by the author in interviews, is indirectly explained, as we shall see. But not all ancestors admitted in the realm of fiction were revealed in interviews. Among these are the dialogues established with Goethe’s *Werther*, Melville’s *Moby Dick*, and Butor’s *La modification*.

These works are united around a common experience lived by their characters: the journey and quest for something inapprehensible, or apparently inapprehensible. This experience will also be shared by Abel, the character-writer of

the Brazilian novel, repeatedly announced by its own author as an allegory of the novel. And it is rather significant that *Avalovara*, a novel allegory, establishes a dialogue with canonical works that thematize the journey and quest for something difficult, inapprehensible, the core reasons of epic genre.

Osman Lins mentioned Dante in many interviews as one of the inspiring sources of *Avalovara*, which did not occur with Melville or Goethe. In fact, there is a broad relationship between this novel and *The Divine Comedy*. The resonances of this medieval work in *Avalovara* are found in the structural design of the work, in the symbolic language, in the numerology and in the poetic rhythm of its discourse. In all these cases it is a diffuse dialogue, which does not enable a direct comparison, but indicates Osman Lins' immersion in Dante's literary world and its use in what interests him to create his specific literary discourse in twentieth century Brazil, under the sign of the rational, geometric and symbolic construction of art and poetry that blends reality with fantasy.

The architecture of *Avalovara* is based on the idea of the spiral and the square upon which the famous SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS² palindrome extends in all directions. In the novel this palindrome is invented by Loreius, a slave from Pompeii, to achieve his freedom, as agreed with his master Publius Ubonius. Loreius commits suicide when he realizes that Tyche, the courtesan to whom he had revealed both the invented palindrome and the contract between him and his master, passes the palindrome on to her lover who, in turn, sells it to Publius.



Palindrome

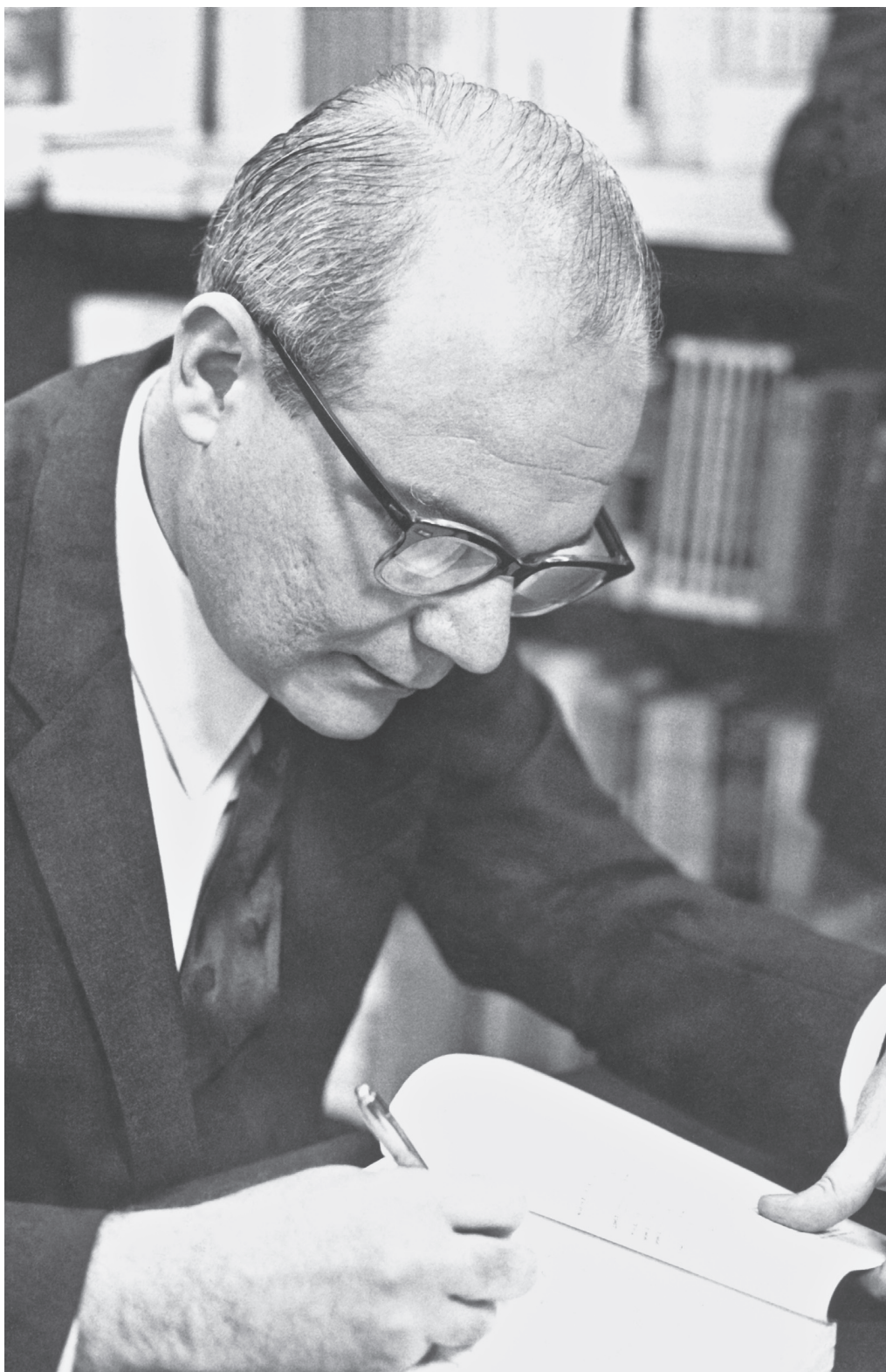
One possible translation for the palindrome is *The creator carefully maintains the world in its orbit*, giving it the character of an allegory of the Creator and the Creation and of the writer who controls the text. So the rigorous plan of *Avalovara* materializes, in its structure and literary language, one of the fundamental points of Osman Lins' ideology: narrative is a cosmogony.

Facing the blank page the writer finds himself before the chaos of the world and the chaos of the word he will organize, operating thus a new transition from chaos to cosmos. The palindromic square is the image of the cosmic space and the page of the book. The figure of a spiral, the symbol of time, overlaps the palindromic square. In its rotary motion it passes by the 25 small squares relating to the letters of the palindrome. Eight themes retaken alternately correspond to the eight different letters, according to a strict progression (10 lines of text in its introduction; 20 lines in the second fragment, etc.). Therefore, *Avalovara* “coalesces smaller narratives, brief thematic units, small birds”³, like any other novel, according to the conception and words of Osman Lins himself. The sequence of topics is governed by the spin of the spiral toward the letter N, the center of the square and end of *Avalovara*.

Under this rigorous architecture and mingling with it, we have the development of the journey of Abel, the young writer from northeastern Brazil, between Paris, Recife and São Paulo, in his relentless search for love, for understanding the mystery of the world and for the act of writing condensed in the pursuit of the Ideal City, concomitantly with his process of awareness of the social, economic and above all political conditions of Brazil at that time.

After his relationship with Roos, the European, made of cities, Abel finds in Recife Cecilia, the androgynous that has human beings in her body. Mindful of the reality of the country and interested in the Peasant Leagues, she awakens the young writer to political problems. He begins to inquire about the need for the artist’s participation and shows his fears about his uselessness in an era of technological merits. But it is with the woman from São Paulo, identified by a graphic sign, extremely carnal while made up of words, that he ends his long journey. This woman, flesh transmuted into verb par excellence, operates the ideal merger of the previous two women. With her Abel reaches the fullness of love and of the act of writing. This brief indication of the unusual process of composition of these characters with a strong visual appeal and of the relationship between them is enough evidence of how they lend themselves to allegorical readings.

The novel is permeated with violence in the different thematic lines corresponding to the various stories of *Avalovara*, from those that refer to meta-language to those that put into play Abel immersed in the world, dealing with his family, his women and characters close to them. The apex of violence occurs when the husband of the unnamed woman finds her with Abel, in the allegorical scene of sexual intercourse on the rug with idyllic motifs, in the apartment in São Paulo, and kills them. Violence becomes present also in the social and political structures that govern the lives of the characters, indicated by the inclusion of newspaper excerpts about events in Brazil under the military dictatorship. This hybrid intertextual expression, with the coexistence of literary and referential discourses reveals the clear commitment of Osman Lins to his time.



The Pernambuco-born writer Osman Lins (1924-1978).

The first reference to *The Divine Comedy* is found in the narrative *Ö e Abel: Encontros, Percursos e Revelações*, segment R/5, when the author describes the lovers' encounter: «A quick meeting under the trees, at nightfall, by the statue of Dante Alighieri. Ö gives me her arm. We slowly skirted the back of the Municipal Library, protected by the branches that dilute and fragment the light from the lamps». (Lins, 1973, p.20- 1).

That mention of Dante, closely related to space, is not exactly what is meant by intertextuality. However, it presents significant density when we realize that it is with this woman that Abel will ascend to heaven and it also with her that he will create the other two storylines of *Avalovara: Ö e Abel: ante o Paraíso* and *Ö e Abel: o Paraíso*.

The term heaven as it appears in *Avalovara* in the title of two of its storylines is the open declaration of the dialogue established with *The Divine Comedy*. Abel ascends to heaven with the woman made of words, the last of the three women who successively marked his quest for the Ideal City and for heaven. The woman made of words is the most carnal of all, and it is with her that Abel will ascend to heaven, that is, achieve absolute love, the understanding of the world and of the act of writing. Beatrice, Dante's muse, the subject of a platonic love, whom the poet will join after death when he arrives in heaven after going through hell and purgatory, is a counterpoint to the woman from São Paulo, the subject of a love that also involves flesh, and who more than a muse is the one who enables Abel's concrete fulfillment as a writer.

At the beginning of Abel's journey with the woman from São Paulo, the unnamed one, heaven appears in a distant horizon, linked to a reference to Dante. When he meets Roos, the first woman, in front of the tombstone of Leonardo da Vinci, he has the sudden vision through her mind of "a city with winding streets, cold and windy, despite flooded by the sun, but with large and white temples covered with marble" and says to himself: "This is Dante's motherland" (ibid, p.52).

This sudden vision of Florence in Roos' mind sparks in Abel thoughts about his quest, which will be lengthy: he will spend years and years "searching for that point where the aloof and the verb reconcile." Immersed in reflections on his quest in that cultural tour, the visit to the grave of the Tuscan genius allows him to extend the lineage of those who are "persecuted by the ambition to break down closed doors, with the advantage that he opens or almost always opens them like the Florentine, whose kicks open Heaven." Here we see a direct link to Dante's journey to heaven (a long search) and Abel's subtle self-insertion in the lineage of those who aspire to "break down closed doors." In other words: to seek new forms in literature, unusual forms that could handle his worldview.

The narrative of "Roos e as Cidades" also contains the intertexts of *Werther* and *Moby Dick*. Actually, it concentrates the largest number of intertextual oc-

currences. Maybe because it corresponds to the first stage of Abel's tormented search, when he was still an inexperienced writer, and his relationship with the German woman, with whom he is unable to fulfill his love. He is still far from that *point where the aloof and the verb reconcile*; he still has much to search before he can *break down closed doors*.

At one point Abel goes to Amsterdam, where Roos had gone to work temporarily. He can barely see her, and as he wanders through the canals, streets and museums, still hopeful that he will be able to achieve what he wants so much, i.e., to meet with Roos, he gets lost in thoughts in which the search for Roos and the search for the City intertwine:

However, it is possible that I will find something in the city - and my attraction to Anneliese Roos, my interest in her, the continuity that has taken over my mind and senses since Sunday, in Amboise, leads me to ask, unsure, if perhaps, by chance, light - or else an object, a being of which light is the very substance or the reverse, could be waiting for me in the City I have been seeking. Because light is Roos' signature brand. A light that does not help to see and that perhaps even obfuscates. Still, Roos, this city, strikes me for its opposition to the shadows. I wonder: it crosses the world with the duty of not allowing night to prevail. In the light with which that Rembrandt signs his paintings or in the reflection of the flames on a piece of metal, on a bottle, on a face, I am inclined to see, it is irresistible, resonances of Roos. Something like that impels Captain Melville. Would he yield to such an obstinate search if the whale that gets him to ceaselessly rummage the ocean were bluish like other cetaceans - and not white? (ibid , p.92)

In both cases, that is, Abel and Ahab, it is an obstinate search. Intertextuality thickens even more because the object of each search also has something in common: light (Roos) and whiteness (the whale). Both are elusive, with the difference that "cities are bigger than whales and do not swim as fast", in which Abel "has an advantage over Melville's unfortunate hero," in the words of Lins' character, in a second dialogical link between *Avalovara* and *Moby Dick* (ibid, p.99).

After the meeting between Roos and Abel in Milan, she returns to Paris and he continues his journey through Italy. He visits many cities, in a journey without respite, covering over two thousand kilometers, in a frantic quest from Milan to Verona, from Verona to Padua, from Padua to Venice, from Venice to Ravenna, from Ravenna to Ferrara, from Ferrara to Florence, from Florence to Pisa, from Pisa to Rome, from Rome to Naples, from Naples to Assisi, from Assisi to Arezzo, and from Arezzo to Milan.

In reflecting on the foolishness of his itinerary, he decides to no longer listen to the inner voices that show him the scarcity of his possessions. He will continue to search:

I convince myself that the City, regardless of how little it identifies itself - and it was not its emergence that has imposed this belief developed through reasoning, but rather the evocation of some previous events and the examination of similes - emits a prestigious light. Ahab, to mention just one example, would take on the duty that destroys him, would accept the demand of his long chase, if Moby Dick were anything but an enormous being and in which “everything that removes the leeward side of things” is embodied? This principle, to some extent unquestionable, applies to me. (ibid, p.179).

In this intertextual occurrence, the spotlight is once again on the relationship between the nature of the search and the uniqueness of its object, whose main attributes are hugeness and destructive force. In a sense, by invoking Ahab’s experience, Abel projects himself in Ahab. “The evocation of some previous events and the examination of similes” – in the words of Lins’ character, - leave no doubt as to his option to establish sound relations of affinity with Melville’s stubborn character, thus announcing through this bias his own fate. His search will be as long as his. Like Ahab was destroyed by the whale, Abel will also die when he reaches the Ideal City, which intertwines with total fulfillment in love, in the understanding of the world and in the act of writing. He will not be killed by the woman from São Paulo (who embodies the object of his quest), but because of her and with her, when the betrayed husband finds them in the apartment.

Evoking the example of Ahab appeases Abel’s anxiety. Just like Ahab was no longer interested in hunting the whales that crossed his path, despite the economic losses, because he wanted to focus his efforts on the search for Moby Dick, Abel no longer feels tempted to get off in every city he passes through. He chooses to visit those that are of some interest to him; his gaze becomes more *analytical, sharp* and *cautious*. He no longer considers these days to have been wasted. All he has seen, codices and incunabula and artistic achievements, gives him instructions about the book he secretly intends to write and “whose central theme would be how things, having crossed a threshold, rise through new relationships to the level of fiction.”

At that moment, when he realizes that the quest is lengthy, the text of *Avalovara* already clearly indicates the explanation of one of the facets of the object of his quest, the book he intends to write from his own experience. This experience also includes the contact with codices, incunabula and artistic achievements that the journey has provided him, as well as everything that is still to come in his relationship with his wife Cecilia and with the woman from São Paulo.

Between their failed meeting in Amsterdam and their meeting in Milan, Abel and Roos meet in a cafe in Paris:

We sat face to face, under the awning of the cafe. All lights are on in the square. Vehicles pass by almost constantly and I cannot always hear Roos' voice, who guides the conversation in a direction at the same time neutral and personal. Many birds in Brazil? If I have read Goethe's Werther? What I think about the final scene between the hero and his beloved. What I am I looking for in the world ... (ibid, p.127).

The reference to Werther, unlike previous intertextual occurrences, always in Abel's voice, is made by Roos. As it is known, Werther killed himself with the pistol he had borrowed from Alberto, on the pretext of a trip he was supposedly going to take. At the request of her husband, the gun is handed to Werther's servant by Charlotte herself, with whom Goethe's hero is madly in love.

The day before Werther visited Charlotte, whose husband, and a friend of his, had traveled on business. This is this scene Roos is referring to. At this meeting, in a tense atmosphere, the physical contact between the two materializes in a passionate kiss, followed by an immediate distancing initiated by Charlotte, concerned about being faithful to her husband .

This intertextual outburst conveys subtly and discretely the anticipation of Roos' final response to Abel's appeals for affection and love. This explicit manifestation is preceded also by another, implicit, which reinforces very subtly the tenor of Roos' slippery and icy feelings for Abel. This is the episode in which the ferruginous bird comes close to Roos' hand, as if it were a drinking fountain, in a reference to the scene in which, during Werther's visit to Charlotte a canary, which she feeds, rests on her shoulders. It happens that, when Charlotte feeds the little animal, it kisses her lips. And she gets the bird to kiss Werther's lips as well. Representing a moment of closer contact, this scene gives rise to a dialogue between the two and prepares, along with other events, the kiss of their last meeting.

Unlike in *Avalovara*, the bird will not lead to a connection between Abel and Roos. When the bird comes close to Roos' hands, Abel claps, the little animal flutters, flees, she gets up and walks away. This happens shortly after Abel himself, inclined to reading in things representations of his life, as the narrator tells us, had said to himself: "let the bird rest on this foreigner's hand and I am forever entangled in a noose" (ibid., p.56).

These two intertextual occurrences reiterate the direction of the relationship between Abel and Roos, anticipating its end, in which each follows their destiny. She asks Abel about the last meeting between Charlotte and Werther and goes on with her speech. Maybe she is not even interested in finding out what he thinks about that scene. Drawing on the literary reference, she obliquely informs him that their relationship will never materialize. At that time, he still did not know that Roos was married. Anyway, this situation would not be another insurmountable obstacle, in the twentieth century context, to the union of people who are in love. Unlike Charlotte, who has a strong affective inclina-

tion towards Werther, Roos does not love Abel. She does not project herself in Charlotte, but in a way announces that Abel will die a tragic death because of his uncontrollable love for a married woman. This interpretation of *Werther's* intertext makes sense if we think the woman from São Paulo embodies the two women that preceded her. If the reference to Werther's fate in the dialogue between Abel and Roos can lead to the interpretation that the relationship between them will not materialize, similarly to what occurs with Werther and Charlotte, it also implicitly announces Abel's tragic fate, as he will be killed together with the woman from São Paulo by Olavo Hayano, the betrayed husband. Werther and Abel become equals in their tragic fates in the name of absolute love. Tragic fates with different shades, in line with the trajectory and the time of each one: Werther, disturbed and unfulfilled, commits suicide, like a romantic hero. Abel, a Brazilian character-writer from the 1970s, conscious and completely fulfilled, is murdered together with his beloved and with her ascends to heaven. He will not meet her in heaven after death, as happened with Dante and Beatrice. Heaven is concretely represented in the allegorical scene of sexual intercourse on the rug with idyllic motifs.

By "intertextualizing" *The Divine Comedy*, *Werther* and *Moby Dick*, Osman Lins gives life, for the readers of *Avalovara*, to these works of literary memory, through explicit dialogues, which are available to any attentive reader. As for Butor's novel, the movement is different. Its literary memory will only be perceived by the reader who has read *La modification*.

The dialogue between these novels is consubstantiated in echoes of one work in the other, allowing a comparative reading in various situations, but always under the sign of reminiscence. Osman Lins chooses to not make the dialogue with his contemporary explicit. Perhaps this can be explained by the proximity and even by the fact that he interviewed Michel Butor in Paris in the early 1960s when, besides proving to be an attentive and critical reader of *La modification* and other books by Butor, he interviewed him as his peer, establishing with him a dialogue between writers.

The structure of *Avalovara* refers to the content of the conversation between Osman Lins and Michel Butor about the immobility of artwork. In the interview it is clear that both agree on the need to engage in poetics that could cope with the changing new world in which they live. *Avalovara* is based on a tension between the changeable and the unchangeable, from which results the appearance of an open structure, allowing the reader to penetrate it in various ways, but which is ultimately rigorously engineered by a omnipresent constructor, perfectly in line with the idea that narrative is a cosmogony.

La modification coincides, to summarize it in a nutshell, with Léon Delmont's soul-searching, closed in a third class couchette: he dreams, meditates on his past, on the present and on his future projects during the 22-hour train trip between Paris and Rome. As a representative in Paris of the typewriter company

Scabelli, he travels frequently to Rome. But this is a special trip because it is tied to a big decision he intends to make: leave his family to be with his lover Cécile, for whom he had got a job in Paris.

In this novel, the idea of traveling implies the literal sense of shifting from one place to another and of the movement of the spirit. A special trip from Paris to Rome merges with Delmont's inner journey, to which the reader has access through the narrative focus, set in a "here" and "now", expressed in the second person which, in fact, corresponds to the first.

Rome, the eternal city, where one finds everything one wants, represents heaven for Léon. But the city is also fatal to him: entering Rome means to seek what is mistaken, from the psychological point of view, for a descent into hell, leading him to a shock of awareness. The City of Light will bring the enlightenment he needs to find himself, but he will endure the pains of someone damned to hell, before coming out renewed.⁴

The trip, in its interiority, leads Léon Delmont to realize the meaning of Cécile in his life: her rejuvenating contribution is linked to the fact that she lives in Rome, a mythical city to him. Moving her to Paris and living the everyday life with her, away from Rome, will only bring him the life he is already living with Henriette, his wife. Instead of replacing one with the other, which would mean a deep change in his life, the primary objective of this special trip from Paris to Rome, he eventually chooses to maintain the current status of his love life, as a result of his inner journey. The solution presented to him is the act of writing. Both women are replaced by the desire to produce literature, in his quest for rejuvenation and wholeness. In the end, readers realize that they have just read the book "written" by Léon Delmont. The novel intertwines, therefore, with the book written by the character, as it intertwines with his special trip to Rome and his descent into hell.

Contrary to the relationship between Léon Delmont with Henriette and Cécile, the women with whom Abel relates are not replaced by the act of writing, but are closely linked to it and so also there is no substitution between them either. The object of Abel's quest merges love, the act of writing and the understanding of the mystery of the world, which intertwine with the Ideal City.

Themes related to the act of writing pass by the intertwined narrative segments and cut through the romance, mingling with its love stories. It is impossible to dissociate the semantic contents of the object of Abel's quest, a young writer from northeast Brazil in the 1960s. Abel's quest is motivated by concerns of a philosophical nature and by his desire to find his identity as a writer, which necessarily involves the process of becoming aware of the social and political context in Brazil at that time, while Léon Delmont's quest is driven by personal discontent with his mediocre life as a Parisian bourgeois in the post-war period of the mid-twentieth century.

Among the various comparative aspects between the two novels, I em-

phasize the association of Roos with light, which enables connecting her with Cécile, who is always related to the city of lights; Anneliese's meeting with Abel in Milan, which represents a (fleeting) moment toward a positive response to Abel's demand for love, precisely in a city in Italy, although it is not Léon's mythical Rome; the unusual composition of Roos, who is made of Cities, as opposed to the link established between Henriette and Paris on the one hand and Cécile and Rome on the other; the search for the Ideal City by Abel and for the Mythical City Delmont; the constant references to Abel, an avid reader, as opposed to Delmont, who never read the book purchased at the station just before boarding the train; the references to Abel's attempts, still an inexperienced writer, as opposed to the safety and consistency with which Léon creates in his mind fictions involving his fellow train travelers; the intersection between the quest for love, the Ideal City and the act of writing in *Avalovara*, as opposed to the replacement of one by the other in *La modification*.

The way to reach the ideal City is embedded, from the very beginning, in Abel's trip to France and in his trips through Europe. Abel introduces himself to Roos as a writer. In this sense, contrary to a change of plans, as occurs with Delmont, Abel persists to the very end: his route is defined based on the achievement of what he aspires. Hence the obstinate quest and the explicit dialogue with *The Divine Comedy*, *Werther* and *Moby Dick*.

Unlike Leon, Abel achieves the absolute unity after an obstinate quest, without making any concession to the mediocrity of bourgeois life (as a bank employee), to the narrow-minded and exploitative mentality of his family environment, to the risk he was taking by relating to women, especially the one from São Paulo. Unlike Dante, he ascends to heaven and finds his beloved woman in a concrete way before his death. Unlike Werther, the suicide who is unfulfilled in love, Abel is murdered during passionate lovemaking. Unlike Ahab, Abel is not killed by the object of his quest; rather, he dies with the woman he loves.

Like Dante, Werther and Ahab, Abel, imbedded in his time and space, treads a difficult path in his search for the absolute. Like his predecessors he dies, indicating that, even having reached, still in his lifetime, the Ideal City, this no longer fits into our world. In this sense, his implicit interlocutor, Léon, who aligns with all these similes in the quest for the absolute, strays from them: he chooses a path that distinguishes him from the average man, but does not bring him closer to those who overcome their own limits in their obstinate quest. Hence, perhaps, only the echoes of a dialogue that is not textually expressed in *Avalovara*.

Notes

- 1 Article originally published in the book *Tramos y tramas II*, entitled “La búsqueda de lo absoluto diálogo de *Avalovara* con algunas obras canónicas”, Rosario, Universidad Nacional de Rosario, 2008 (org. by Graciela Cariello, Graciela Ortiz and Marcela Ristorto), with minor changes.
- 2 Included in the first edition of *Avalovara* with text explaining the structure of the novel and the meanings of the palindrome, signed by the poet José Paulo Paes.
- 3 Interview to Esdras do Nascimento, *O Estado de S. Paulo newspaper*, 12.5.74, reproduced in Lins (1979, p.175-81).
- 4 Formulation inspired by the reading of Van Rossum-Guyon (1970) and Struebig (1994).

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ABSTRACT – The canonical intertext of *Avalovara* materializes in this article from the dialogue between Osman Lins’s novel and *The Divine Comedy*, by Dante, *Werther*, by Goethe, *Moby Dick*, by Melville, and *La Modification*, by Butor. These works are joined around a common experience of their protagonists: the journey and the quest for something inapprehensible, nuclear reasons of epic genre.

KEYWORDS: Intertext, Travel, Epic genre, Comparative literature.

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