

# THE FORTUNE TELLER: MACHADIAN VERTIGO

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**Abstract:** This work develops a reading of The "Fortune Teller", by Machado de Assis, based on the hypothesis that the Machadian short story, along with the reader, devises a vertigo effect, disturbing destabilization in the reading process, cut with deceptive linearity that is connected to the structure of the narrative. Passage operators with paradoxical effects are what is implied in life and in fiction: the work of Machadian irony, obliquity, and style.

**Keywords:** "The Fortune Teller"; vertigo effect; Moebius; irony

## "A CARTOMANTE": VERTIGEM MACHADIANA

*Resumo: Este ensaio desenvolve uma leitura de "A cartomante", de Machado de Assis, a partir da hipótese de que o conto machadiano trama, junto ao leitor, um "efeito de vertigem", desestabilização inquietante na leitura, corte com uma pretensa linearidade, que vem ligado à estrutura da narrativa. São operadores de passagens com efeitos paradoxais que estão implicados na vida e na ficção: trabalho do estilo, das obliquidades e ironias machadianas.*

*Palavras-chave: "A cartomante"; efeito de vertigem; Moebius; ironia*

Camilo teases Rita because she visited a fortune teller the night before.<sup>1</sup> She says that the fortune teller knew everything: she guessed the purpose of the visit before Rita even told her. She'd hardly begun to lay out the cards when she said to me, "You're fond of someone..." I confessed I was and she went on laying out the cards [...].<sup>2</sup> The fortune teller allays Rita's fear that Camilo would forget her. Camilo swears that he loves her very much, that if she had something to dread he would be the best fortune teller for her

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note: Translator's paraphrasing of the narration systematically referred to Dr. John Gledson's excellent translation of "The Fortune Teller" in *A Chapter of Hats*.

<sup>2</sup> ASSIS, The Fortune Teller, *A Chapter of Hats: Selected Stories*. Trans. John Gledson. p. 153.

and that what was imprudent was for her to be seen around those houses lest Vilela find out about it...

Rita tells him how careful she had been upon going to the fortune teller's house on Rua da Guarda Velha and that no one saw her enter. Camilo wants to know if Rita actually believes in such things:

That was when, without knowing she was translating Hamlet into common speech, she told him that there are lots of mysterious things in this world that are true. If he didn't believe her, fine; but the truth is that the fortune teller had divined everything. What more did he want? The proof is that now she was calm and contented.<sup>3</sup>

Camilo did not want to shatter her illusions; in childhood he had also been quite superstitious, and even later in his life, according to the narrator who sets up the story. "He'd had a whole arsenal of absurd beliefs impressed on him by his mother, which disappeared when he was twenty."<sup>4</sup> When "this parasitic vegetation fell away, leaving only the the trunk of religion," Camilo, since his mother had taught him both, "wrapped them up in the same doubt, and soon afterwards in a single total denial. Camilo believed in nothing."<sup>5</sup> But the narrator observes the subtlety: by limiting himself to denying everything Camilo did not affirm disbelief. Rather, he simply shrugged his shoulders at the mystery. At the same time, he felt flattered by Rita's seeking an opinion from a fortune teller about his love.

Vilela and Rita made the couple; with Camilo, the triangle. The two men were very good friends: when Vilela arrived in Rio de Janeiro from the provinces, now with a wife, Camilo was the one who welcomed them. And he had a good impression of Rita, graceful, pretty and vivacious in her gestures. The narrator goes back to painting the picture: Vilela, with serious features, seemed older than she. Camilo, on the other hand, was naive about life, both moral and practical. The couple, especially Rita, took care of Camilo when his mother passed away. Before he knew it, he was attached: he did not quite know how they fell in love, but he noticed she looked at him more insistently, that she consulted him before her husband, her cold hands, and, finally, that there was a birthday card she had written to him. The note was jotted down and so simple that its meaning was obvious.

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<sup>3</sup> Idem, p.154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

Camilo sincerely wanted to escape, but he couldn't. Rita, like a serpent, moved closer and closer, wrapped herself round him, made his bones crack in a single spasm, and dropped her venom on his lips. He was stunned and submitted. Embarrassment, fright, desire - he felt them all, each mixed with the other; but the battle was short and the victory ecstatic.<sup>6</sup>

Camilo increased his distance from Vilela's house, giving vague excuses as the affair carried on. However, events quickly unfold: he receives an anonymous letter calling him a treacherous, immoral person and informing him that the adventure is no secret. The restlessness is striking. Camilo receives more letters, Rita says that Vilela looks despondent, the lovers start to worry. They agree not to meet for some time, and tearfully break up. The following day, Camilo receives a card from Vilela: "Come to our house instantly; I need to speak to you without delay."<sup>7</sup>

Camilo imagines the scene - Rita crying, Vilela writing the card, certain Camilo would comply, and waiting ready to kill him. Afraid, Camilo stops by his home to check whether there is any news from Rita; nothing. He thinks that the anonymous accusation made it into Vilela's hands and that he must have associated it with Camilo's infrequent visits; the commotion gradually grows, he considers taking a weapon, the voice inside his head goes on to sound like a constant whisper: "Come to our house instantly..." He gets into a tilbury cab, thinking the sooner the better, he wants to get there at once. The sense of anguish in the story grows.

On the way, an accident blocks the road Camilo takes to get to the Vilelas' home. There is a din, something occurred just up the road, he does not know quite what and he waits. Some minutes go by, which is enough time for him to realize that he is on Rua da Velha Guarda, right in the front of the fortune teller's house. He observes; by this point in the developments, the windows of all the neighboring houses facing the overturned cart in the street are open with people curiously looking on at the scene, except for that one: "You might have said it was the abode of indifferent Destiny itself,"<sup>8</sup> the narrator suggests. Camilo leans back in the tilbury, to see nothing:

He was very agitated, indeed, extraordinarily so, and from the depths of his moral being emerged ghosts of another time, old beliefs, ancient

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<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.157.

<sup>7</sup> Idem, p.158.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, p.160.

superstitions. The cab driver suggested that they go back to the first cross-street, and go by another route; he said no [...] it was the idea of hearing what the fortune-teller had to say, passing by in the distance, far away, with huge grey wings; the idea disappeared, came back again, and once more faded out of his mind; but a little later it flapped its wings again, closer now, sweeping round in concentric circles... In the street the men were shouting, freeing the cart:  
'Right now! Push! Come on, come on!'<sup>9</sup>

And he goes to see her, his heart beating, the curiosity. The fortune teller leads him up a dark and shabby set of stairs, the house has old furniture, an air of poverty. She, her unkempt neglected nails and thin, hands that shuffle the tarnished cards, large, yet acute eyes, "was looking at him, not full in the face, but from under her lids."<sup>10</sup> After placing three cards on the table, she says: 'first, let's see what brings you here. You've had a shock...'<sup>11</sup>

Camilo, astonished, affirms. From that point the narrator makes the mood of fascination and joy explicit. Camilo wants to drink the fortune teller's words one by one. Everything calms down. She says that the couple is in love and not to fear, for nothing bad would happen to him or to his beloved. Camilo pays the fortune teller more than is common; after all, she gave something very valuable: peace of mind.

Upon leaving, everything is different, the street is unblocked, the sky is clear, and he imagines happiness and reconciliation, the terms of Vilela's card were based on intimacy, where did the idea of a threat come from? He wants to restore their friendship, he wants to arrive without delay, how could he explain this delay to his friend? The fortune teller divined everything, the purpose of the consultation, Camilo's state of mind; why should she not divine the rest? "*Ignorance today makes tomorrow worthwhile.*"<sup>12</sup> "Thus it was, slowly and unerringly, that the young man's old beliefs came back to the surface, and mystery gripped him in its nails of steel."<sup>13</sup>

"Off you go, *ragazzo innamorato*,"<sup>14</sup> were the words she used. And off he goes. Vilela meets him, Camilo apologizes for not arriving sooner, and asks him what is the matter. Vilela does not answer, leads him to a room to find

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, p.162.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>12</sup> Translator's note: translated from the Portuguese original: *O presente que se ignora vale o futuro*. Emphasis added by the author.

<sup>13</sup> Idem, p. 164

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem.

Rita, dead and bloody. Vilela grabs him by the throat, and with two shots of his revolver, leaves him dead on the floor.

In "The Fortune Teller," the image that is emphasized by the words "sweeping round in concentric circles," can help us to scrutinize the narrative. Everything oscillates, in one way or another, between love and death, belief and its limits; between the three people who compose the triangle that seems to pivot around the fortune teller; between the contingent and the necessary: chance and fate, where the fortune teller's words operate, in the background, with everything that can encourage the effect of an oracle.

From the very beginning the preordained challenge is introduced when Rita describes the fortune teller to Camilo: she knows everything. Knowledge accumulates with each oscillation; knowledge of the loved woman, plus the enigma entrusted to a fortune teller, plus the knowledge organized by the mother, along with every superstition and religious faith, all stitched together by Machado.

At the same time, the narrative presents the contrast in parallel, thereby imparting a tone of ridicule to this architecture of knowledge and guarantees; we need to look no further than the phrase Rita chooses to support her affirmation that the fortune teller knows everything - the simplest of phrases, her stating the obvious at the beginning of the consultation: "You like somebody..." Based on this, how can anyone believe that Rita was careful? Neither she, nor Camilo is careful at all. Both of them are ready to be captured by what is created by the affair, which includes, in a broader sweep, the reaction itself to the fortune teller's dialogue. It, too, is part of the "parasitic vegetation" that the addressing of love enables with its allure.

"I love the person I assume to have knowledge"<sup>15</sup> says Lacan, from the psychoanalytic perspective, regarding the love that is the basis for addressing every demand in the relationships known as transference. A fortune teller, a psychic, and all variations thereof share something in this demand, or attack, we could say. The Machadian fortune teller underlines this aspect. She is charged with the authority of assuming to know, and thus her words can be understood as originating from a place of truth.

In the story, this is also how the burried superstitions that Camilo leaves behind, repressed, return as if by the same thread, by the voice of these other women "who know." Although Camilo tries to resist (as he laughs he tells Rita, at the beginning of the story, that the fortune teller was wrong), there is an overlapping image of another concentric circle, this time in the figure of the

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<sup>15</sup> LACAN, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, p. 67.

serpent literally wrapping itself around its prey, crushing its bones, dropping poison, is powerful. Mainly because it is included in the pair, in the scene, "hypnotized and hypnotist."

I open a parenthesis here to enunciate the clue to the puzzle of my work of the past two years: the formulation, based on the reading of short stories by Machado de Assis, that he builds a kind of vertigo in his stories, a "vertigo effect," which leads the reader to deal with uncomfortable places, turns in the text, twists in the linear courses taken by the narratives.

Moreover, this establishes the rule of this work: the torsion that appears in the narrative of Machado de Assis, the hesitation, loss of one's footing, "vertigo effect" that occurs in the reader; it is necessary to think about this vertigo as a singular effect that announces the twist in the structure. I suggest that it also constitutes a beginning in the composition of short stories<sup>16</sup> that is present in the style of Machado de Assis.

John Gledson, in "Os contos de Machado de Assis: o machete e o violoncelo," an article where he presents an anthology of short stories by Machado, at two points discusses what he calls the impression of vertigo, an effect the story produces in the reader:

In *The Posthumous Memories*, as Robert Schwarz shows, irony is concentrated in the figure of the narrator, even though it is also found in the initial chapters of the novel, Machado tries, in various ways, to sow confusion in the mind of the reader. In these stories the solutions are just as ingenious, if not more so; all their circumstances are involved in ironies that simply open space for other ironies. This explains the sensation of being on the brink of vertigo that these stories at times provide.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>We find the "vertigo effect" in a set of short stories that can be expanded. The ones that we identified as possessing this status come from *Papéis avulsos* [*Loose Papers*], which are contemporary with the change in Machado's writing style, along with *Brás Cubas* in the novel genre. In this set, we can cite "Umás férias," "A chinela turca" ["The Turkish Slipper"], "Missa do galo" ["Midnight Mass"], "Noite de almirante," "O enfermeiro" ["The Companion"], "Singular ocorrência," ["A Strange Thing"] among others, all of which are detailed in *O conto machadiano: uma experiência de vertigem*.

<sup>17</sup> GLEDSON, *Por um novo Machado de Assis: ensaios*, p. 46. Original citation: *Nas Memórias póstumas, como bem nos mostra Roberto Schwarz, a ironia está concentrada na figura do narrador, embora também nos capítulos iniciais do romance Machado procure semear confusão na cabeça do leitor, de várias maneiras. Nesses contos as soluções são tanto ou mais engenhosas; todas as suas circunstâncias estão envolvidas em ironias, que simplesmente abrem espaço para outras ironias. Isso explica a sensação de quase vertigem que às vezes essas histórias proporcionam.*

The greatest example of the extraordinary force acquired in *Loose Papers* is the initial story, "O alienista" ["The Alienist"]. It continues being one of the most fascinating works by Machado, in which he combines the full sensation of vertigo employed in short stories such as "O espelho" ["The Mirror"] only with a broader variety of topics, allowed for by his expansion.<sup>18</sup>

At its first appearance, vertigo occurs on account of irony, but perhaps this effect could be further developed.

Alcides Villaça considers the narrator in the "The Fortune Teller," emphasizing the path of irony as the author's brand at his age of maturity, in which the narrator freely transports himself as a vertiginous "translator" of traditions relating to cultural heritage; this narrator who, playing with disproportions and equivalences, can attract the reader into his system. Disproportions and equivalences that, we believe, can also contribute to the loss of balance.

The term *vertigo* simultaneously plays with the duality of allure and disturbance. Allure - attraction in the face of the emptiness, when we look down from a great height, something that pulls as if in continuity; the disturbance - with the horror of the hole, as an abyss, a gutter, discontinuity.

This is direction in which I would like to tilt the reading, in a diagonal line, suggesting these turning points in Machadian fiction like places, in his writing, that make an issue of the things in life that have a relationship with what is flawed, by its very structure. The enigmas, the cracks, the disrupted terrain, without totalizing answers, on terms we have to make do and live with.

Machado constructs vertigo in the narrative thread of his stories, and these moments of torsion, or of "folding" which disturb the reader, often function as operators of passages. I highlight two passages in particular, which, in this discussion, interest us more directly: passages where the writer collects the phantasmogorical elements of subjectivity that are in the social imagination and hurls them into fiction; passages where he presents the fundamental discontinuities of the human condition, the enigmas that question everyone - origin/death, and encounters with the sexual. It is precisely the enigmas of subjectivity that had also been the major questions

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<sup>18</sup> Idem, p. 49-50. Original citation: *O maior exemplo da extraordinária força adquirida em Papéis avulsos é o conto inicial, "O alienista". Continua sendo um dos trabalhos mais fascinantes de Machado, que nele combina toda a sensação de vertigem de histórias como "O espelho" com uma variedade maior de assuntos, permitida por sua extensão.*

for Freud, and that in the context at hand enable the transmission and dialogue between Machadian fiction and psychoanalysis.

There are short stories that, to me, seem to "record," to mark out something of the writer's style: it is as if a vertigo effect emerges close to each time the encounter with these enigmas is at play, markers of discontinuities and of dealings with otherness. This also contributes to the work's ability to stand the test of time and highlights the marks that constitute its profound present-day relevance.

Closing the parenthesis here to return to where we left off with Camilo, wrapped by the snake, the poison being dripped on his mouth, blinded by Rita, by the fortune teller, and so on (ending with the mother, knowing the subjective quality that Machado reveals).

We are completely in vertigo territory, or *ilinx*, as Roger Caillois, the anthropologist came to see it in his precise and interesting considerations, by examining rites of passage in traditional societies, or even the ruin of a player before the green cloth of a pool table, or of the man before the so-called *femme fatale*: the power of vertigo is that of consent, an abandonment commanded by the allure that alienates.

The idea of consulting the fortune teller, an idea that flies in circles above him, a grey bird, claws of iron, already foretells the place that awaits him: he will be the carrion, the resultant object of that deadly surrender, "letting himself be sucked into the abyss."

It is like in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*,<sup>19</sup> also guided by what can function to be fatal in connection with a woman, with the concentric images punctuating the entire film - the movement that circles the eyes, zooming in on the pupils, and the most unusual detail, the camera's focus directly on the empty hole in the spiral of Madeleine's hairdo.

And it is so that Camilo sees himself simultaneously pushed and pulled, constituting one of the strongest moments in the vortex, in the irruption of the "ghosts of another time" that mix together and are mistaken for the voices of those trying to push the cart, the "obstacle," to the side of the street to free the passage (the high point of the torsion shape/content, in the story): 'Right now! Push! Come on, come on!<sup>20</sup> The maximum tension shared with the reader, the voice that pushes, as if it were coming from behind (left as fertile ground for the allure in his story), to involve the reader more and more in this spinning while suffering from the force that pulls into the whirlpool - the blindness of

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<sup>19</sup> VERTIGO, um corpo que cai.

<sup>20</sup> ASSIS, cit., p.160.



love, the deceit implied in every love, the "leaning into the emptiness." Machado offers us the fascinated man who has transmuted himself into a cart.

Camilo, believing, paradoxically, that the street was now cleared (and pressured by fear and anguish), belief bursts, he surrenders himself, as did Rita, at the utterance of the fortune teller's first sentence. She was looking at him "from under her lids," again the obliquity of the Machadian gaze, and she divines a shock as the reason for the consultation (at this point, he is also, still, the superstitious boy).

Vilela's words have an imperative function that produce a kind of injunction; the "don't delay, come, come" is heard as a whisper, it comes from the "external" to disturb everything that is "internal" to him (like the whisper in "William Wilson," by Edgar Allan Poe). One more circle is drawn; Camilo's thought is traced by the narrator in the direct relation with the facts: he thinks that he did indeed betray Vilela's trust, he realizes that the precautionary measures Rita took must have been absolutely insufficient and that with the emergence of the accusatory letters, he may be the target of fatal hatred. After that, the curve that expands this whole thought opens up, considering it better to believe in the knowledge that he assumes to belong to the Other, in this case to the fortune teller, as occurs in any relationship assumed to be loving; and, finally, the deceit of that choice.

From the moment Camilo meets this woman, everything in the story suggests his blindness. The fortune teller's tarnished aspects are thrust to the foreground, her dirtiness, her opportunism: betting on the effect of her words, she lets Camilo decide how much the "consultation" was worth - and he pays her five times more, happily, no questions asked, no second thoughts. Doubts, limited to the beginning of the story, were sufficiently established just to remember that the young man had not completed the process of cutting himself off from the superstition constituted by the maternal universe - and thereby evokes belief in maternal knowledge, which is believed to be limitless, the first major belief in life. He simply shrugged his shoulders at the mystery, yet he did not affirm disbelief.

What to make of this moment that breaks open in Camilo like an oasis at the very least, soon after exiting the fortune teller's house and immediately before arriving at his destination? Marked by another imperative, "Off you go, *ragazzo innamorato*," he is nothing but love to Rita, to Vilela, he imagines reconciliation and closer ties, the world is awash with grace. This is when the word of the fortune teller operates an oracle effect, as knowledge of destiny. Additional deceit.

"The abode of indifferent Destiny itself," the story tells us. A word that comes from a place of presumed knowledge can evoke something oracular, should we access the tradition of the Oracle of Delphi in our culture.

The "Fortune Teller" is an extremely elaborate text, we know, and elements that we highlight here dialogue with other readings. Dário F. de Sousa Neto approaches the interference of fate in the story as by positioning Camilo in front of the Temple at Delphi. His relationship, by pointing to the tragicomedy in the story, is initially with tragedy. The character, aware of his fate, goes from the Temple to the place of the catastrophe; but here, the tragedy is disconnected and the outcome is weaved in with the elements of irony.

Michael Wood, in his book *The Road to Delphi, the Life and Afterlife of Oracles*,<sup>21</sup> affirms that the name oracle is not all that survives, citing, for example, one of the most widely used computing systems in the world (Oracle); they are also found in present-day practices that have oracular functions. This can be in the interpellation into a god, and it also appears in the most unusual of places, such as in the economy or in medicine.

What is important to remember, however, is that the relationship with the oracle cannot be, under any circumstances, direct. An oracle suggests a word that needs to be elaborated. The common sense question, in general, is: was the oracle's interpretation accurate or not? What Wood proposes, which to me seemed quite precise: the intentions are neither true nor false when they are pronounced, they await confirmation - they acquire meaning by the positioning of what was said. The predictions have to become stories, narratives that position the oracular words.

Let us dialogue with another fortune teller from Brazilian literature: in *A hora da estrela*, [*The Hour of the Star*]<sup>22</sup> by Clarice Lispector, the young woman receives the word of a fortune teller, from "Madame Carlota," with this oracular effect. She is radiant as she leaves, however, the light that strikes her life is not the glow of a great love in the form of a prince on white horse, the rich foreigner who is destined to her; instead, it is from the headlights of the car that strikes her, captivated (like Camilo) by the mirage. When she falls to the ground, she thinks: the fall was just a push, the prediction has already started to come true (since she saw that it was a luxury car)... my life has now started... She dies, wrapped in the idea that now, at long last, she was born.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Wood is a writer and professor of Literature at Princeton University. WOOD, *The Road to Delphi, the Life and Afterlife of Oracles*.

<sup>22</sup> LISPECTOR, *A hora da estrela*.

However, what is interesting here is precisely the effect: the narrative itself produces the place where the oracle will always have been accurate, always telling the truth. It "plays with" and subverts the idea of the "already written book of fate." Michael Wood suggests: "But strictly oracles don't mean. They play a verbal card, and the card is picked up [...]. When the player picks the wrong name, he hasn't exactly missed the oracle meaning. He has chosen one meaning and ceased to look for others."<sup>23</sup>

Camilo obviously made his choice right away. However, his fortune teller did not produce an outline or an enigma worthy of the place her word originated (the place of truth). What Machado makes clear is that a fortune teller is no oracle.

If Camilo is called by these words from the external/internal, as a whisper, the "don't delay, come, come," if he is pushed like the cart into the hole, astonished by this woman who looks at him from under her lids, if the vertigo effect in the reading is produced by these turns in the narrative that are indicated by minimal traces, details (reality bursts for the subject with just one detail), the reader is called to share these folds, allurements, or these "choices" made by the cards.

Striving to point out the relationships in the Machadian text based on what provokes the vertigo effect, more directly, is also to establish the hypothesis of linking this with what we point out as the encounter with the following: sex, origin, death, otherness. With this in mind, the "navel" of the plot, to recall the Freudian thesis, can be related to a specificity, a nodal point. With the unstable terrain of the dynamics of vertigo, Machado reiterated the operation that presents a subversion of places: meeting and loss (continuity/discontinuity). This is the dynamics of fantasy that works for each one in the subjective processes: what is useful to supposedly dominate, control, in the idea that we can have broad control of our orientations, intentions, desires, pleasure circuits or objects of pleasure, ends up revealing the place from where one is taken, where one "is placed as an object" offered to a certain subjective alienation. The place where one is "lost" precisely for having been constituted, subjectively, in an operation of alienation to the Other (in the story, the "capture" of Camilo - alienation to the maternal Other) that precedes us and that imaginatively and symbolically sustains us over this "hole" of the real for which there is no knowledge.

Considering this, the twisting movement of the narrative gains space and draws our attention to the issue of structure.

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<sup>23</sup> WOOD, cit., p. 53.

The Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia has worked on hypotheses regarding formal operations in stories, based on the examination of the resultant architecture of the production of the great short story writers. In his book *Formas breves* [*Brief Forms*], he proposes two theses about short stories.

First thesis: a short story always tells two stories. Second thesis: the short story is an account that contains a secret story. He presents a minimal example, taken from one of Chekhov's notebooks: "A man in Monte Carlo goes to the casino, wins a million, returns home, commits suicide." According to Piglia, the form of the short story is condensed in this respect, contrary to the predictable: gamble, lose, commit suicide. The anecdote disconnects two intertwined stories: the story about gambling is one, the story about the suicide is another, it comes from another place; the short story would elaborate the tension and the interconnections between the two.

While on the one hand he claims this duplicity, Piglia highlights the interstices between the short stories, details that articulate the pathways between the stories and place them in concurrence. In the "The Fortune Teller," we can identify the interstice as the special moment of tension in the plot, the "Right now! Push! Come on! Come on!," which applies to both the cart and to Camilo. And here, one more step in thinking about structure, the form of the writing, a new dialogue, Piglia and Lacan.

Throughout his work, Lacan elaborated the structure of the subject in its relationship with the formations of the unconscious, and even on the subject and the social, using as a reference a figure that comes from the field of the topology: the Moebius strip.

The Moebius strip is an enigmatic and paradoxical surface: apparently, it is a ribbon with two sides, an inner and an outer, a "head and a tail." But it possesses a twist that radically changes its structure: it disarticulates the dual nature, subverting the separation between external and internal. The front and the back now in a continuum are as if contained by each other.

Ricardo Piglia's formulation - each short story contains two stories - enables us to articulate the duality, but the emphasis he gives to the interstices allows us to take one more step: that of formulating these places in the structure of the short story as those of a twist, just like in the Moebius strip; a twist that, in the narrative of Machado de Assis's short stories, comes very close to the very function of the structure of the subject. Surpassing the duality, irony gains a place: Is it not through irony that Machado traces his passages, writing "an oblique look" through which an element of truth crosses?

What is interesting about irony in the context that concerns us: it passes through an unrest that does not diminish easily. On the topic of irony in the realm of social processes, Hamon<sup>24</sup> stresses that, although for some irony can act as an index of a certain degree of acquired authority or a mark of superiority (of caste or class), it can be, on the other hand, a resource for resisting domination, without leading to a direct attack. This has to do with a certain confrontation, polarization, but it is neither anchored in dominator nor in dominated; irony is not ruled by binary oppositions that would end up discarding the "too much," and the "not so much," the "a little," the "almost no,": the nuances. In other words, irony makes use of binaries, of oppositions, but it does not succumb to them; we could say that irony crosses binaries in a diagonal line. Binaries make no room for nuances - the fundamental elements of irony.

The ironist, in general, breaks up anything that is presented as apt to be totalizing, to be massive. The ironist takes the minimum trace, performs the "dissection of majestic elements," aiming at the fracture; the detail that accompanies the pleasure in disorganizing regularity - the obliquity that creates disorder in everything that appears as inevitable.

Irony in Machado has this quality, it is its point of passage, it cuts the ground, it is the vehicle of vertigo (which appears through details), and is a form of obliquity (a certain twist) in the writing. Exceeding the duality and inserting the count of the three in the play (the "equivocal" points, which benefit either side), we come close to the witty remark, the wisecrack, which is one of the formations of the unconscious.

When addressing the formations of the unconscious, Lacan<sup>25</sup> stresses that witticism goes through three instances, not two (unlike the comical, which would be dual). In witticism there is the message that circulates, but it must pass through the Other, through the place that is not said, yet assumed, where it is funny. Witticism is only produced in this manner, it designates that which is always to one side, and which is seen precisely only by looking elsewhere." Is this not obliquity once again?

[...] for profound reasons that concern the very nature of *Witz*, it is precisely by considering this that we will see most about what is not quite there, what is to one side, which is the unconscious, and which in fact

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<sup>24</sup> HAMON, *L'ironie littéraire*, essays sur les formes de l'écriture oblique.

<sup>25</sup> LACAN, *The Formations of the Unconscious*.

cannot be clarified, does not betray itself, except when you look a little to one side.<sup>26</sup>

And when the witticism occurs, it cuts, what can appear is what was ciphered there in the middle of the saying itself, the witticism, the assumption, the desire that circulates in the middle of the scene, in the structure.

"Right now! Push! Come on! Come on!" And Camilo did so. The fortune teller? She was what she was, tarnished, she said what he wanted to hear so that he paid more. The abode of indifferent (Machadian irony) Destiny itself.

Irony is how Machado shares joy with the reader - in the form by which he allows language to be consumed - transmitting in same gesture several hard truths and a few major enigmas of the human condition, questions that continue to challenge us and to constitute our fictions.

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<sup>26</sup> Idem, p.11

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