

## The syntactical insubordination of Sam Shepard and João Gilberto Noll

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Although ambiguity, indeterminacy, and omission constitute ageless traces inherent to the art of all time, these techniques seem to aim at different artistic intentions in the aesthetic artifacts nowadays. The author and theorist Umberto Eco identifies the indeterminate, ambiguous feature of the contemporary poetics as an overt objective of these works of art, a value to be achieved in detriment of others (1969, p.22-23). Thus, some artistic products in the last decades can take on several forms ranging from concrete poetry to partial, minimalist forms, which contribute to their indeterminacy or “indeterminance”, as defined by Ihab Hassan, to whom this artistic style tends, basically, to promote “a playful plurality of perspectives, and generally shift the grounds of meaning on [the] audiences” (1987, p.72-74).

Some of the pieces collected in *Great Dream of Heaven*, the latest volume of stories by the American author and dramatist Sam Shepard, rely on those strategies of emission and subtle suggestion, but one of the stories that perhaps resists the conventional impulse of the reader to totalize and rationalize the elements of the fictive world is “Tinnitus”. In this particular story, an unnamed narrator struggles to prolong the life of a dying race mare “long enough to save the foal she’s carrying” (2002, p.113).<sup>1</sup> As Stephen J. Bottoms puts it, “Shepard’s work is dominated, and indeed distinguished, by patterns of internal tension and contradiction, by loose ends and uncertainties, which — far from obstructing the [...] creation of meaning — operate to generate a plethora of possible readings” (1998, p.ix).

To begin with, this narrative presents the reader with a surface tension due to the fact that the story is told by an unreliable voice that keeps changing his own personal data and other information concerning his life in a chameleon-like style. Thus, the identity of the narrator does not seem to be unified around a coherent whole, but a fractured mirror which reflects multiple disguises and contexts surrounding each of these fake identities.

The textual structure itself contributes to that sense of fragmentation for it is composed of four messages sent by fax or perhaps left on an answering machine. Although each of these four parts begins with an entry containing the date and the place where the narrator says he is, these diary indications that cover the first three days in February and seem to ground the narrator’s vision in reality are elusive because they lack much information about the situations and the characters involved. In the passage below, the narrator vaguely outlines a woman and, by doing so, he reveals a bit of his intimacy:

All those years ago when I first met Martha. It was right here at Keeneland, 1959. Hard to believe. You remember, Palmer — you were the one who dared me to ask her out for a highball and steak. That was just the beginning. Twenty-two years of pure hell. Actually, I miss her, truth be known. I don’t know why. Maybe too much road (p.115).

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<sup>1</sup> All further references are to this edition.

The events surrounding Martha are expressed in paratactical style and they suggest that the emotional bond between the narrator and his significant other seems to be extremely problematic. But the reader is denied access into their affair because the narrator describes a few surface facts involving this character, but the message is so truncated that it sounds incoherent. Who this woman really is? Was she married to him? What happened to her? Why does he miss her? Did she die or did she leave him? Why does he describe his relationship with her as “pure hell”? Or, most importantly, did he kill her? Because that would explain why the narrator behaves as a fugitive who constantly relies on assumed names and lies. As the evocations of Martha are indeterminate, the reader cannot totalize these fragmentary and subjective elements given the gaping, “porous” structure of the narrative.

The syntactical organization of the Martha-passage contributes to dissolve any conclusive resolutions by employing a paratactical style. Instead of rigorously selecting the aspects of the world in an explicative mode, subordinating information and perceptions into a hierarchy, the use of parataxis, according to Hayden White, favors the insubordination and linear disjunctions (1971, p.69). The extreme tension and emotional vulnerability faced by the character during these three crucial days are represented in the paratactical style because this non-selective mode of expression best conveys “the language of emotion: everything comes at the same time, everything rushes in the spirit and in the mouth of the character” (ARNOULD, 1992, p.3).<sup>2</sup>

In the passage, the narrator seems to embed his narrative in a coherent space-time frame: he first met Martha a long time ago (1959) “here” in Keeneland. However, the next sentence does not follow the same pattern of exactitude. It sounds intriguing because the narrator confesses that it is hard to believe, but what exactly is he referring to? Is it hard to believe how fast time has gone by? Or the narrator has difficulties to believe in the events that took place around that time? Rather than adding extra information to that statement, the next sentence focuses on the addressee, the mysterious Palmer: “You remember, Palmer — you were the one who dared me to ask her out for a highball and steak”. Why did not anybody, except Palmer, encourage the narrator to ask Martha out? Was there something about Martha that the narrator and Palmer seemed to ignore? Instead of explaining what he meant by that, the next sentence reads: “That was just the beginning.” What exactly is being talked about? Was that just the beginning of the “pure hell” he alludes to in the next sentence? Why did the narrator share “twenty-two years of pure hell” with Martha? What did she do to turn their relationship into “pure hell”? Or, most importantly, their life together resembled hell because of the narrator’s tendency to lie? What exactly does he mean by this oxymoron? And if it was “pure hell”, why does he say something like: “Actually, I miss her, truth be known”?

But, in this case, *truth* cannot be known because the reader lacks information to interact with such a message that avoids resolution. Actually, the narrator himself seems to have difficulties to understand his experience with Martha because he confesses that he does not know why he misses her, “maybe too much road”. Although the text is perfectly coherent to the speaker and the addressee, after all, they possess an anterior narrative together, the message sounds emblematic to the reader, who is caught between the short paratactical sentences. The text is arranged in apparently linear sentences, but there’s no syntactical connection between them. Rather than narrative sequences, as

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<sup>2</sup> *La parataxe [...] est le langage de l'émotion: tout arrive en même temps, tout se presse dans l'esprit et dans la bouche du personnage.*

Hayden White puts it, this “paratactical consciousness” presents a “language of linear disjunctions” that tends to avoid a privileged representation (1971, p.69). As a result, the reader is not granted a privileged position of mere voyeur, for his or her active participation is required in the process instead. According to Bottoms, by often ignoring conventions of ultimate resolution, Shepard invites his audience “to fill in the gaps for themselves, to draw their own conclusions” (BOTTOMS, 1998, p.2). And it is precisely this undefined aspect that allows the reader to *feel*, rather than *know*, something that he or she cannot quite put a finger on.

Besides confessing he has become “a professional liar” (p.117), he changes his name several times to the extent that he “lose[s] track [him]self” (p.115) of his own identity: Firstly, he assumes the name of Guy Talmer (p.112), then it is Lyle Maybry and, finally, he registers under the name Filson (p.115), but his actual name and occupation are never mentioned. The narrator is also practiced at the art of deception: besides checking into the motels with fake identities, his car has “phony plates” (p.112), he uses fraudulent credit cards (p.114), and he even lies to the clinic veterinarians: “I told another little fib and claimed I had power of attorney but had left the notary sheet back at the motel” (p.117). Therefore, how can “truth be known” if the narrator, paradoxically, tells “little fibs” all the time and is often reticent regarding the situations experienced?

It is also suggested that the narrator’s suffering from a constant tinnitus, which he believes is “the direct result of all those years of dove shooting” (p.115) is not, actually, a problem in his ears, but a symptom of a brain condition, what would explain his memory loss. But then again, this assertion is based only on speculation. As a result, though he uses plenty of disguises and eventually manages to save the defenseless colt, the narrator remains himself unsaved as he is slowly losing his identity and dying.

Traces of such a dramatic identity crisis can also be noticed in the story “Sangue no Guaíba” (“Blood over Guaíba”), collected in the book *Minimos, múltiplos, comuns* (2002), by the Brazilian author João Gilberto Noll. Lacking rigorous temporal and spatial references, this very condensed story or a “fictive instant” (2003, p.20), as the author designates it, can only provide the conventional reader with vague resemblances of the empirical world. Thus, the consequences are the indeterminacy of the stories and the emblematic way the author gives life and significance to his characters. “Sangue no Guaíba” (“Blood over Guaíba”),<sup>3</sup> can be translated as it follows:

That blood in the hands that I should wash there, in the Guaíba river. Otherwise, they would suspect. Of what, I wasn’t quite sure myself. I remember that, some time before, in a gratuitous occasion, I thought that if I had stayed home I would be in a better situation. It was only then that I saw the hands covered with blood. I looked at the river, trying to evade the circumstance. Despite the water condition, I waded. And all I had to do now was to whistle. The imprecise melody, the mild day, looking unhurt. Little by little the whistle deadened everything. The night would shelter myself soon. Why dreaming? (NOLL, 2003, p.107).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The author of this paper is responsible for all the translations.

<sup>4</sup> *Aquele sangue nas mãos que eu devia lavar ali, no Guaíba. Se não, desconfiariam. Do quê, nem eu mesmo sabia. Lembro que, pouco antes, num lance gratuito, imaginara que se tivesse ficado em casa estaria em melhor situação. Foi só então que vi as mãos cobertas de sangue. Olhei o rio, tentando escapar da circunstância. Apesar do estado das águas, entrei até os joelhos. E agora só restava assobiar. A melodia imprecisa, o dia ameno, parecendo ileso. Pouco a pouco o assobio amortecia tudo. A noite logo mais me acolheria. Para que sonhar?*

Before turning to a closer examination of the translated piece above, it is relevant to mention the fact that Noll initially wrote such a short story to fit into the column he published twice a week in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* from 1998 through 2001. The challenge issued by the newspaper was to write a series of narratives employing less than one-hundred thirty words. Thus, one must take into account the strict material limit his work was subjected to. This story, for example, is composed, in its original form, in Portuguese, of only ninety-three words. But instead of obstructing his creativity, such economy of means seem to have triggered the author's abilities to suggest poetic meanings through his minimalist piece.

Like "Tinnitus", by Sam Shepard, Noll's text employs a paratactic style of composition: the sentences form small pieces of reality, but rather than coalescing into a coherent whole, these poetic fragments represent a variety of perceptions and sensations that resists rational scrutiny. The first sentence brings out an imagistic quality that is not unfamiliar to Noll's earlier work: "That blood in the hands". But whose hands are those and, most significantly, whose blood was shed? The lack of a possessive adjective causes the sentence to sound enigmatic and its undecidability is not quite solved by the following clause. Thus, it is not possible to conclude if both the blood and the hands are the narrator's or somebody else's. But, let us assume for a moment that these hands belong to the "I" who articulates the text. This provisional assumption poses another seemingly impenetrable question: is the narrator a murderer who has just escaped from a crime scene? He himself confesses he has no earthly clue to that.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the narrator of "Tinnitus", this voice cannot be discredited since Noll's text does not provide the reader with any evidences that the narrator is an unreliable source. It is possible to speculate that this particular character is mentally confused, but he is not a "professional liar" like the former.

The narrator states that he should wash his hands in the Guaíba, a river located in the Southern Brazil, in order to avoid *their* suspicion. What does not seem to be clear is what is there to be suspected? Not to mention, who are "they"? The hands covered with blood, one would say. But the text does not specify if this blood belonged to someone else. What if the narrator was assaulted by someone else and, during a violent fight, he was hurt? What if, instead of having murdered somebody in cold blood, the narrator is a convict who has escaped from prison and hurt himself in the process? Though maybe absurd, all these perspectives and others seem to be valid in such a case.

Although the text mentions the Guaíba river, a place that actually exists, like Illinois and Lexington, KY in the Shepard's piece, these spatial references represents less a realist strategy of anchoring the fiction in the empirical world than a poetic area that invites artistic recreation in a whole different realm — the imaginary world. The time references in "Sangue no Guaíba" are even more indistinct since the next sentence, for example, reads: "it was only then that I saw the hands covered with blood". The only words that express temporality in the text are "then" and "now", both adverbs that do not clearly specify when the events have taken place.

The final gestures are even more emblematic: "Despite the water condition, I waded. And all I had to do now was to whistle". This passage suggests discontinuity since the reader is not told before what is the water condition. A few lines later, he says that the "mild day" looks "unhurt", which could suggest that the narrator did not kill

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<sup>5</sup> Although the English translation does not determine the sex of the narrator, the original version does so by employing the Portuguese word "mesmo", which refers to the masculine gender, in such a context.

anybody, he is only hurt and tries to hide (from his oppressors) his wounds in the flowing water. The river, then, would wash away his blood and ease his pain.

By transforming water, river, and blood into images of fluidity and instability, Noll creates a metaphoric density that embodies the impalpable nature of his short fiction. Therefore, this intricate imagery and the complex gestures of the character, as well as the strategies of omission and indeterminacy, serve the artist in order to represent the narrator's own instability and his difficulty to conventionally subordinate and organize his perceptions of the reality into a coherent (or conventional) closure.

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