

Mirrors, identities: Brazil and its reflections

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ABSTRACT. Mirrors have been present in the cultural history of many peoples, and many times they have served to reflect on the identity, religious life or psychological life of these peoples. In Latin American literature, the constant presence of mirrors means that the search for identity, even so many years after the different countries have been established, is still an important issue. Using a statement by Bioy Casares, a character in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", "mirrors and copulation are abominable," as a frame, this discussion presents works by several Brazilian writers who have used the image of the mirror to discuss the identity of the country. Even though each writer, Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Roberto Drummond and Helena Parente Cunha, expresses the specific cultural anxiety of his or her time, it is always clear that the identity of the country is not a fixed recipe.

Key words: Brazilian literature, identify, mirrors, slavery.

RESUMO. Espelhos, identidades: Brasil e seus reflexos. Os espelhos têm sido presença constante na história cultural de muitos povos, e muitas vezes eles servem para refletir sobre a identidade, a vida religiosa, ou a vida psicológica desses povos. Na literatura da América Latina, a presença de espelhos significa que a busca da identidade, mesmo tantos anos depois que os diferentes países foram estabelecidos, ainda é um assunto importante. Usando uma afirmação de Bioy Casares, um personagem no conto "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" de Jorge Luis Borges como uma moldura "os espelhos e a cópula são abomináveis" esta discussão apresenta trabalhos de vários escritores brasileiros que usaram a imagem do espelho para discutir a identidade do país. Embora cada um dos escritores, Machado de Assis, Guimarães Rosa, Roberto Drummond e Helena Parente Cunha--expresse a específica ansiedade cultural de seu tempo, o que fica sempre claro é que a identidade do país não é uma receita fixa.

Palavras-chave: escravidão, espelhos, identidade, literatura brasileira.

"There are many ways to affirm, there is only one way to deny everything."

Machado de Assis: *"The Devil's Church"*

In the first paragraph of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" the narrator says that he, Borges, and his friend Bioy Casares are having a conversation when Casares, upon seeing his image reflected in a mirror, declares that "mirrors and copulation are abominable" (Borges, 1964:3). Casares then tells Borges that he had read these words in the *Anglo-American Cyclopedia*, and they originally appeared in the article on Uqbar. Since Borges has never heard about such a place, he takes up a research on the *Cyclopedia*. Unable to find any mention to Uqbar, he begins conjecturing that "this undocumented country and its anonymous heresiarch were a fiction "devised by Bioy's modesty in order to justify a statement" (Borges, 1964:4). Nevertheless,

intrigued both by Casares's memory of reading the statement and also by the idea of the parallel world of Uqbar, the two men begin searching for the *Cyclopedia*. As a result of this quest, Borges, the character, discovers not only the text, but also the world of Uqbar. It is a totally fictitious world whose laws, history, culture and civilization reflect and mimic the real world; at the same time, it keeps inexorably moving onto the real world and taking control of it. Uqbar is, therefore, exactly what Casares said in the first paragraph of the story: a reflection and an abomination. The mirror, then, is the agent for the discovery, because it was its presence that first prompted Casares to mention Uqbar. Uqbar, or Tlön, is, on its turn, the world which looms on the surface of the mirror, always present and ready to take over that, the real, which it reflects.

This is, of course, not the first time mirrors and their influence appear in Latin American literature,

much less, in world literature. Indeed, as the voluminous scholarship on the subject shows, mirrors present an attraction and fascination for every culture. Its literary presence is nothing more than a reflection of how humans have always reacted to mirrors, endowing them with supernatural powers, and using them sometimes as a way to attract a beloved person or to catch a thief. In Pre-Columbian America, in 1200 B.C., the Olmec civilization already made mirrors out of three different iron oxide ores and used them for religious purposes (Goldberg, 79). In medieval Europe, pilgrims to Aachen took small mirrors to the place where the sacred relics were kept, held the mirrors up to them in order to catch a reflection. The pilgrims would then bring the mirrors back to their villages and show them as physical evidence of the existence of the sacred relics (Goldberg, 1985:138). In literature, from the adventures of innocent Alice getting across the looking glass, to Dorian Gray who de-flected onto his picture all the evil he committed, it is clear that mirrors and their effect play a fundamental role in the formation and constitution of the characters in many masterpieces. And yet, as Marta Gallo writes in her *Reflexiones sobre espejos*, in Latin American literature the presence of mirrors “llega a ser una obsesión” (Gallo, 1993:9). Indeed, as Gallo goes on to demonstrate, the mirror has been used in different times to represent a window to different kinds of knowledge.¹ For Gallo,

*[e]n todo juego de reflejos, el efecto general es el de la repetición (o repeticiones) de un original, presente o ausente; el problema que plantea cualquier repetición remite al de la **identidad**, la semejanza y la diferencia entre original y copia; y como siempre, las diferencias son precisamente las más elocuentes.*” (Gallo, 1993:159-60)

*[In every game of reflections, the general effect is repetition (or repetitions) of a present or absent original; the problem put forth by every repetition is related to **identity**, the difference and similarity between original and copy and, as usual, the differences are precisely the most eloquent.]”* (my emphasis, my translation)

But what, precisely, is **identity**? This question has always been very much present on the Latin American conscience: during the colony, the *criollos*

needed to define themselves vis-a-vis the mother countries Spain and Portugal; later, the newly formed countries, still unsure either of their political and cultural frontiers, fought over it in several battlefields. In the twentieth century, the struggle continues; now the issues are more complex, and again, in the twentieth century, literature has been one of the choice sites where identity has been fought over. But the question remains: what is identity?

One of the best answers to this elusive question appears in the Introduction to Anselm L. Strauss's book, appropriately titled *Mirrors and masks: the search for identity*. Strauss's definition is worth quoting at length:

... whatever else it may be, identity is connected with the fateful appraisals made of oneself--by oneself and by others. Everyone presents himself to the others and to himself and sees himself in the mirrors of their judgments. The masks he then and thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgments. The others present themselves too; they wear their own brands of mask and they get appraised in turn. (Strauss, 1959:9)

Therefore, according to Strauss, this personal, individual need to wear masks in order to influence how others see us is based on a profound need to see *the other's judgment* as enabling of our own understanding of ourselves. That is, the deep, psychological need to be accepted, understood, even loved, requires the reinforcement of the outside in order to be legitimated *from the inside*. If we extrapolate these matters of personal identity onto issues of national or cultural identity, we can say that, indeed, just as the child needs to go through the mirror phase in order to begin a process of individuation, also Latin America seems to have needed to see how it is reflected in a number of mirrors in order to determine its Latin Americanness.

In *Écrits*, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan develops the theory that the psyche has an innate “mirror disposition,” which is a developmental period necessary for the formation of the human ego or self (1-7, 16-22). This “mirror disposition,” according to Lacan, leads to what he calls the “mirror stage,” during which the infant enjoys an undifferentiated visual symbiosis with its mother and environment. It is only when the infant begins acquiring language, and therefore starts making distinctions between the “I” and the world “out there” that it breaks this symbiotic relationship. In his discussion of this passage in Lacan, Eric B. Williams writes that

[b]ecause of this transformation, what Lacan describes as the “deflection of the specular I to the social I” (Écrits, 5), is always, to a certain degree, associated

¹ In this book Gallo discusses specifically the seventeenth century Mexican poet Sor Juana de La Cruz's *El divino narciso*, nineteenth century Venezuelan Manuel Díaz Rodríguez's *Sangre patricia* (published in 1902), and then the work of twentieth century writers Jorge Luis Borges, Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el supremo*, and Carlos Fuentes's *Terra Nostra*. For Gallo, these works reflect “desplazamientos y cambios notables en los actores de la contemplación frente al espejo, en la orientación de la luna especular, y en consecuencia también de sus reflejos” (32). Ultimately, she says, these different uses of the mirror represent “diferentes etapas de la formación de la identidad hispanoamericana” (32).

with trauma, it can produce feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and aggression and even a regressive longing to return to the prelinguistic security of mirror-stage visual identifications with the phenomenal world. (Williams, 1993:9)

The difference between the child and Latin America, however, is that the child goes through this phase once in its lifetime, and Latin America keeps going through this phase over and over again, as if in every generation Latin Americans need to find out not only who they are but also, and mainly, what it means to be who they are in the world where they live. What interests me most in this essay is to investigate the different ways in which Brazilian writers Machado de Assis, João Guimarães Rosa, Helena Parente Cunha and Roberto Drummond have explored mirrors as a way to reflect on the Brazil of their time and on the ways to cope with this elusive identity issue. This essay is both a direct response to Gallo's invitation to other scholars to research different texts and uncover new meanings for the mirror in Latin American literature and an attempt to think in terms of a Brazilianity through the complex terms of Latin Americanity. My main interest is to see how the political and historical circumstances of Brazil in two different centuries have appeared in texts where mirrors play an important role and how the respective writers have negotiated these terms in relation to their times.

A mirror and a uniform

In 1882, sixty years after Brazil's independence from Portugal, Machado de Assis published the short story "The Looking Glass" ("O espelho"). In the core of the story there is a young man who, one day, upon looking at himself in the mirror, does not see anything. The circumstances which led to this bizarre occurrence, as well as the way the young man finds to make his reflected image come back to the surface of the mirror reveal some of the anxieties of the Brazil of his time.

The plot of the story initially resembles Borges's short story "Uqbar, Tlön, Orbis Tertius". It starts thus: "Four or five gentlemen were debating, one night, various questions of a high, transcendental nature" (Assis, 1973:56). One of them, Jacobina, kept silent most of the night, until he suddenly "began to hold forth, not for two or three minutes, but for thirty or forty" (56) on his theory that "every human being is born with two souls: one that looks from the inside out, another that looks from the outside in..." (57). In order to explain the theory, he then tells the story of how, when he was a twenty-five-year-old man this truth was demonstrated to him. At the time, Jacobina was just named second lieutenant of the national guard. The whole family

rejoiced with the honor. His aunt Marcolina, the widow of a captain, invited him to come to her farm to spend some time. There, the aunt proceeded to hug him, call him "lieutenant," say she envied the girl who was to marry him, and insist that there was not a man in the whole province who "could hold a candle" to him (59). The woman's enthusiasm with her nephew's newly acquired position was so great that she had a mirror placed in his bedroom for him to be able to get properly dressed in his uniform. His much flattered image of a lieutenant in his uniform was the first and the last image Jacobina saw every day in the mirror; after some time, the image *became* Jacobina and, the text says, "the lieutenant eliminated the man" (60).

All was well, for the young man was enjoying his time at the farm, due to his aunt's flatteries, and the slaves' attentions. However, one day his aunt had to leave him alone with the slaves in the farm and go to take care of her sick daughter. Taking advantage of the absence of overseers and of the owner, all the slaves ran away and left the young man totally alone in the farm. He could not leave and go after the slaves for fear the farm would be ransacked in his absence; he could not get in touch with any other human being, so he resigned himself to stay put and wait for his aunt or some other person to arrive at the farm. What he initially thought would be just a matter of days became a week. He was totally alone. He began having dreams about being in his uniform, just to wake up and realize the futility of keeping any sort of social obligation, since he was completely alone. The big gilded mirror his aunt had placed in his room no longer had any utility, so he totally ignored it, until one day he inadvertently looked at it. To his surprise and horror, what he saw there was not his image "sharp and complete", but a "vague, misty, diffuse, a shadow" (63) of an image. Frightened, he decided to abandon the farm before he went crazy. However, as he was preparing to leave, he had the idea of putting on his lieutenant's uniform. To his surprise, "the glass now reproduced the complete figure, not a line missing, not a feature awry. It was me, the second lieutenant, who had finally found his exterior soul" (64).

This story has two very important points which constitute the axis of the discussion: first, the origin of the mirror, and second, the disappearance of the slaves. Important as the young lieutenant's reflected or not reflected image is, it is only a mere symptom of a deeper relationship which the mirror and the slaves dramatize. Of course it is of major importance that the mirror has a "blurred" origin pointing to a totally European beginning: it arrived at the house of the lieutenant's hostess through a very tortuous way, since it was given to her by her godmother, who "had inherited it from her mother, who had bought

it from one of the Portuguese noblewomen that came in the retinue of Dom João VI in 1808" (59). It is no insignificant detail that, in spite of the mirror's age, "you could still see the gold, partly eaten away by time" (59). The gold, old and decadent, still marks distinction, especially because it has "dolphins carved in the upper corners of the molding" (59). The figure of the dolphins at once recalls the French monarchy and its family relations with the Portuguese royal family and also ascertains the mirror's aristocratic reflections. In a sense, the point about this mirror is not just what it reflects, but also what frames it.

The second point is the presence of slaves in the story. Their presence, and later their escape, are put in sharp contrast with the mirror and what it represents: the slaves become the necessary counterpoint, or historical anchoring, of the mirror. The history of Brazil has to be told in terms both of the influence of the Portuguese and the presence of slaves in the formation of a "Brazilian soul," or the soul that Machado de Assis refers to in the subtitle of this short story. Indeed, it seems that, for the young man of the story, the disappearance of the slaves from the farm was crucial for his discovery that "every human being is born with two souls: one that looks from the inside out, another that looks from the outside in" (57). The mirror, which did its job of showing Jacobina his exterior soul, could not help failing to show nothing once the "spectators" of this exterior soul were not there. The slaves, integral part of the farm's "body politic," were the critical mass that constituted this soul. Once they are gone, the soul ceases to exist in the surface of the mirror.

But why, then, does the mirror not show the interior soul? Indeed, if, as Jacobina maintains, there are two souls, there should be no reason for it not to show the interior one as well. That is to say, the soul "that looks from inside out" should be as strong as the one "that looks from outside in." Such, however, is not the case with Jacobina: his soul that looks from inside out was taken over by the uniformed "lieutenant" soul. This exterior, "lieutenant" soul, was only possible in a world where human beings were kept as slaves. And, not surprisingly, the Portuguese empire functioned and prospered on the assumption that the African slaves they captured had no soul and therefore could be mercilessly exploited. The Brazilian empire, modeled on the Portuguese, maintained the same premises. As a result, Jacobina, as a metonymy for Brazil, could not see his soul that looks from outside in. If the Africans had no soul and Brazil was the product of the blood and sweat of its African slaves, then this *mestiço* Brazil had no soul either. At least, it did not have a soul which could be seen in a Portuguese mirror. Hence, Bioy Casares's statement that "mirrors and copulation are

abominable" makes sense for Machado's story, but in a different way. In Machado, abominations abound: it is the mirror, a Portuguese symbol, and it is also the frame, a sign of the European aristocracy, and finally, the worst abomination is that which it refuses to reflect: a political system based on slave exploitation.

A mirror and an animal

In the first decades of the twentieth century, João Guimarães Rosa published a story with exactly the same title, "O espelho," as part of a collection entitled *Primeiras Estórias*. The story is told in the monological mode Rosa was to make so famous in his masterpiece *Grande sertão: veredas*. The plot in "O espelho" is as much on the narration of the facts as on the narrator's attempt to explain to his listener, addressed very formally as "o senhor" (sir), that all he is relating is true. In short, the story is the following: a young man happens to see his reflection in a public bathroom mirror. The sight greatly disturbs him, because what he sees is a "disagreeable, repulsive" human face, which gives him "nauseas," "hatred," "horror," and "fright" (Rosa, 1969:73). From this point on, intrigued by the contrast between what he thinks he feels and what appears in that mirror, he starts trying to catch a glimpse of his own interior self. He attempts all kinds of tricks: lights, quick unexpected looks at mirrors, semi-closed eyes. What he finally discovers is that his "look-alike in an inferior scale was the jaguar (onça)" (75). After he realizes this, it is difficult for him not to see exclusively the jaguar anytime he looks at the mirror. But he does not, cannot accept this jaguar soul. His search for his even more interior self continues, until one day, upon looking at himself in the mirror, he does not see anything: "I didn't see my eyes. In the bright and polished nothing, I could not even see my own eyes!" (76). Astonished by this new development, he muses whether "there was in me a central, personal, autonomous existence? Could I be... soulless?" (77). Only years later, "at the end of a time of great suffering" (77), he can see himself again. In the beginning it was only a very tenuous light, which later became his face.

Again, just as in Machado de Assis's story, two details are fundamental: at the time he finally sees himself again in the mirror he is in love, and the image that he sees is the image of a boy, not of a grown man. Here, once more, just as in Machado de Assis's story, the mirror is presented as an object which can reflect more than just the exterior world. For Rosa's character, however, the truth of one's soul is reflected not in just one aristocratic mirror but in every mirror, even a public bathroom mirror. The frame, which in Machado de Assis's story is

totally aristocratic, in Rosa's story has expanded to accommodate all mirrors. And yet, here again the reflection does not agree with what the character believes his true soul to be. For Rosa, the character's connection with the jaguar, as well as the young man's statement that what he saw on the mirror was "unpleasant," relate closely with the highly psychological language of the story: what matters here, unlike what mattered for Jacobina in Machado's story, is not so much the public soul, but the deepest soul of the subject reflected in the mirror. Not coincidentally, Rosa does not mention clothes, or physical appearance, but just the eyes, and the animal. This reflection, therefore, is a more intimate take on Machado de Assis's treatment of the mirror. Rosa's character seems to have to necessarily pass through the phases that the mirror pictures: unpleasantness, animality, blurred images, and finally, when the young man falls in love, he becomes a pure and innocent child who can start over.

In Lacanian terms, however, this character presents a problem. If, as Lacan says, the infant enjoys an "undifferentiated visual symbiosis with its mother and environment," the young man in Rosa's short story definitely does not enjoy this relationship. Rather, he rejects it completely and will only begin accepting it again when the mirror shows a "pure" child on its surface. The story does not make clear, however, if this pure child has already achieved what Lacan calls the "linguistic stage." Or is the text proposing that the child's purity can be assumed to be the result of the absence of language?

If we take Rosa's story as an allegory for the country, we can see that the non-acceptance, even the disgust for that "animal," "brutal", part of the self, are another manifestation of what Machado de Assis discusses in his short story. Unlike Assis's blank mirror surface, Rosa's mirror openly displays that which the young man (and the country) insists on forgetting: its bestial, unpleasant, horrible face. But perhaps the national allegory does not fit Rosa's story; rather, his story might be taken as an indication of an attempt to write a psychological tale of growth and self-knowledge. If we do, however, take Rosa's "O espelho" as a reading of Brazilian identity, we can say that he was an optimist who believed that Brazil could start over, clean and pure, if it would just fall in love.

Mirrors as windows open to reality?

Two other stories about women characters—one written by a woman, and one by a man—solicit my attention. One is the 1983 *Mulher no espelho* [*Woman Between Mirrors*] by Helena Parente Cunha, and the other is the 1977 "Dôia na janela," [Dôia at the

window] by Roberto Drummond. These two stories, published within less than ten years from one another, focus on three of the most important and urgent issues of Brazilian life after the 1960's: political repression, woman's place in society and race relations. In *Woman Between Mirrors*, the main character, a housewife, has a "double" whom she sees in the mirror. At first, this double is, unlike her, a free woman who works outside the home and makes her own decisions. However, as the story progresses, the free woman and the housewife exchange places: one becomes more tied up in guilt and problems, whereas the other manages to free herself from her unhappy marriage and empty relationship with her children. The former housewife then goes in search of her inner self which she finally finds with the Afro-Brazilians. Later, both women discover that their situation mirrors the situation of the Afro-Brazilians who have been "written about" throughout Brazilian history. The psychological tale becomes entangled with the political tale, and finally one of the women knows that she has to disappear. In the end of the novel, the now free and self confident former housewife confronts the presence of the disappeared woman and says: "[m]y face in the mirror is her face. I'm her. She's me. We are one" (Cunha, 1989:132). When a lightning bolt strikes the mirror and shatters it into a thousand pieces, she says, "I see an entire face in a shard of glass. A single face" (132). That is to say, even as the mirror is broken to pieces, she can see herself in the tiny fragments. In *Woman Between Mirrors*, it seems that the big picture, full body picture, is not attainable, or at least not understandable in human terms. The full impact of the tragedy, or the comedy (or both), of being a Brazilian black or a Brazilian woman, can only be recuperated not as a macro narrative, but as a micro-story, as the tale of each individual, each shard of glass, no matter how minute and seemingly insignificant.

Roberto Drummond, in his turn, has a completely different view of the scale of representation. In the story "Dôia na janela," a window functions as the mirror upon which both the character Dôia's psyche and the country's psyche are represented. Dôia is in an asylum. The text does not clarify what her disease is, but it seems that she is mentally ill. When the story begins, she is preparing to have the final interview that will determine whether she is fit to return to society. If the directors agree that she is now sane, she will be released the following day. On the last night in the asylum, Dôia once again looks out her barred window and observes the world outside. What she sees, and later tells the asylum's directors,

determines that she will be kept in the hospital for at least one more year.

The disparity between what Dôia sees outside and what the directors interpret it to be, makes a clear reference to the Brazilian situation at the moment the story was published. It is night and Dôia as usual has waved goodnight to the passengers of a plane going to New York, has stroked the little mouse she calls Salamemingüê and is just looking at the movement of the street. Suddenly, Dôia sees a Jeep arriving at the park. A group of armed men get off the Jeep dragging a young man whose hands are tied. They then proceed to undress the young man and then they crucify him right there in the park. The last image, of a Christ wearing orange underwear, prevents Dôia from sleeping well. The next morning, during the exit interview, the directors listen to her narration of the previous night's event in the park. They ask her several questions about the crucified man's appearance and age, and conclude that what she saw "happened two thousand years ago" (Drummond, 1977:25). As a result of the interview, Dôia has to continue in the asylum for 6 days more. During this time, she kneels in front of the window and looks out every night. Everything seems plain and usual, but she never forgets the Christ in orange underwear.

Clearly, this seemingly very simple story points to very specific dramas in Brazil. What Dôia sees from her window is a reflection of the world outside her asylum. Just as the lieutenant in Machado de Assis's story, or as the young man in Rosa's story, she also does not see herself in the picture; in other words, she is transparent, non-existent, as far as that picture is concerned. However, this is not to say that her role is merely that of a passive spectator. She tells what she saw, and thus tries to influence, if not the outcome of the story, at least the way it exists in the world. But, the story seems to try to remind us, she is a committed woman in a committed country: what she says has to be passed through the filters of other, supposedly more capable, interpreters. The directors' easy interpretation, or maybe the only safe interpretation, is that she had a hallucination. The reader's interpretation, however, is that she did see a man being tortured and killed, and that the directors decided that, precisely because of what she saw, it was safer to keep her in the asylum. And, of course, this story is also a cautionary tale to the readers of a time when the level of repression in the country was so high that the only way to reflect and represent the very country was through stories like this, which not so much reflected the real, but deflected it in several directions.

Conclusion

As these brief presentations of such rich and complex texts show, the anxieties Machado de Assis expressed in the story "The Looking Glass," are part

of the preoccupations of many Brazilian writers. In all these stories, the mirror, its frames, its special structures and reflections have been used as a way to discuss identity. In other words, even though Brazilian society has changed so much since the nineteenth century, identity issues are just as important. In Assis's story, we have a version of the Hegelian master-slave relationship: the master not only cannot exist as master in the absence of the slaves, but he cannot exist at all even in the most basic human level. The fact that Jacobina cannot see himself in the mirror proves that his most immediate existence has been put in a kind of suspended state; he exists **only** as a consciousness that can attest to its non-existence. In the twentieth century, even though slavery has been abolished, the African "problem" continues to be significant. Parente Cunha's novel dramatizes this reality: exploitation and incomprehension towards African Brazilians continue under different guises. And this exploitation, as well as the repression which enables it, deeply affects the "soul" of the country.

Rosa's story, which by its very title suggests his attempt to re-think Machado's story, proposes several possibilities of the constitution of the Brazilian soul. Is this soul an unpleasant young man who transforms himself into a wild animal? Is it a changing entity which sometimes cannot even be captured and thus becomes a vaporous being no one can see? Or is it so horrible that his owner cannot stand its sight? If the horror that this soul inspires can be translated into its political component during the last military dictatorship, then this soul is that which tortures and kills people because of their political beliefs. Dôia, precisely because she does not belong in the "normal" society, can see from her window, even through the thick glass that the repression attempted to place between Brazilians and what was happening to political prisoners in the country. Dôia, the sole witness to the murder of a man by the police in a quiet night somewhere in Brazil, can perhaps be considered the "pure child" that Rosa's text presents as the solution for his character's dilemma of identity. The problem with this possibility is that Dôia, just as the child deprived from language, cannot speak. If she does, she will be considered crazy, and her language denied its value.

But language, as well as liberty, once acquired, once tasted, cannot be forgotten. It is as if, in Lacanian terms, after the mirror phase the child could revert to a previous one. And such a possibility is of course impossible under normal circumstances. But, as many Brazilians know, and our writers have represented, circumstances in Brazil are not always normal, much less acceptable. As Borges's text proposes, there seems to always be the possibility of a "Tlön" lurking right below the surface, ready to take control and begin

undermining the logic of reality, proposing abominations such as the murder of a man by the very police forces that are supposed to protect people.

Once, as Machado de Assis's story makes clear, the abomination was not just the presence of the decadent, senseless Portuguese symbols in Brazil, but especially the existence of slavery itself. Later, in Rosa's story, the abomination is the animality of the young man in the story, which can only be redeemed by his willingness to accept his need to give and receive love. Unfortunately, as the Parente Cunha's and Drummond's texts propose, the exploitation of Black Brazilians continues and brutality against defenseless people is perpetrated by the police. Literature, forever the privileged eye to see and the hand to point, will continue reflecting what happens in Brazil, beyond the official history and the reports sanctioned by whoever happens to be in power at the moment. There is no doubt that the presence of mirrors in Brazilian literature is a way our writers have found to reflect the complex issues of our political identity, while, at the same time, proposing them as ways for the reader to reflect on his or her own personal and cultural identity. Fearing absurd optimism, one can hope for a time when the mirrors our writers will use in the Brazilian literature of the future will no longer reflect abominations. At that moment, slavery, exploitation, disrespect, and political persecution will be as unreal as the idea of Tlön, and kept that way.

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Received 17 December 1996.

Accepted 28 January 1998.