



Performance, humor, discourse of salvation and eternal return in the novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*

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ABSTRACT. This article aims at analyzing the relationship between fiction and salvific discourse in the novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), by Nathanael West, understanding this problematic narrative as a liberating performance of the humor classified as black, from which dogmatic contents are dissociated, with a shift beyond the psychological dimension and religious representations that contents take into account. To do so, we carried out our reading by making use of the myth of Dionysus that allows us to articulate the vertiginous logics that takes place in West's text, leading it to the nonsense that contaminates the religious discourse and deposes it from the sovereign power in this fictional world. Furthermore, our study is grounded on Deleuze's recreation of Nietzsche's eternal return. We also resort to the philosophy of religion to understand Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity and its relation to the myth of Dionysus and eternal return in the analyzed work. The analysis made of such novel points to the insertion of irony and humor in the novel as a constant literary element that causes discursive heterogeneity, pointing the ambivalences and inconsistencies of Christianity conveyed by media in the discourse of messianic metanarrative.

Keywords: black humor, the myth of Dionysus, redemptive metanarrative, the Christ complex.

Performance, humor, discurso de salvação e eterno retorno no romance Miss Lonelyhearts

RESUMO. O texto busca analisar as relações entre a ficção e o discurso salvífico no romance *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), de Nathanael West, entendendo essa problemática narrativa como *performance* liberadora do humor classificado como negro, a partir do qual empreende-se uma dissociação dos conteúdos dogmáticos e provoca-se um deslocamento além do psicológico e das representações propriamente religiosas que estes colocariam. Com esse intento, destacaremos aspectos do mito de Dionísio que nos permitam articular a vertigem lógica que sucede no texto westiano, encaminhando-o para o não senso, que contagia o funcionamento do discurso religioso e o destitui do poder soberano na instância da ficção. Além disso, apoiaremos nosso estudo na leitura que Deleuze empreende do eterno retorno nietzschiano, como também recorreremos à filosofia da religião para compreendermos a crítica nietzschiana ao Cristianismo e sua relação com o mito de Dionísio. A análise que realizamos da referida obra destaca como elemento literário a inserção da ironia e do humor no romance, para provocar a heterogeneidade discursiva, apontando as ambivalências e as incongruências da transmissão midiática do Cristianismo, no discurso da metanarrativa messiânica.

Palavras-chave: humor negro, o mito de Dionísio, metanarrativa redentora, complexo de Cristo.

Introduction

The constitution of the novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*, apparently, revolves around the question of the Christ complex the main character experiences. In psychology, such matter refers to the father complex, comprehending an excessive energy concerning sublimation processes, and manifests a savior complex. The said work is deemed by critics, such as Hanlon (1977) and Boer (2008), as a farce characterized by the black humor. As so, it is possible to state that Nathanael West moves from the paradigm of the representation with psychological characters to that of

the narrative performance, deposed from the 'serious' and messianic nature through a humor that puts body language and social, cultural and artistic representations in tensional relationships.

According to Deleuze (1990, p. 137), humor stands on the excruciating nonsense, on "[...] the abolished significations and the lost denotations". It is because "[...] laugh is not proper of God" (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 8)¹ that laugh is atheological. It is from the

¹ The following quotation was translated by the authors of this article as other ones from works in Portuguese: [...] riso não é próprio de Deus (ALBERTI, 1999, p. 8).

incongruences, ambiguities, dissociations and paradoxes placed in the sphere of Christianity and in the instance of the narrative performance that the novel extracts its efficacy.

Interesting is to observe that the author, Nathaniel West, articulates in two types of 'subgenres', considered by tradition as: black humor and novel, which, for us, seems to constitute an irony and a humor that configure, in his literary thinking, a provocation to the Christian Institution and the infinite misunderstanding of the Christian law. That means, according to Deleuze (1993) that there has always been only one way of thinking the law, by means of the comicality of the thought, made of irony and humor. The philosopher quotes Kafka as one of the exponent of the modern values of humor and laugh and narrates that, when Kafka read *The process*, the listeners guffawed, and so did Kafka. The author of *Metamorphosis* has equally used referred genres, black humor and novel, in order to subject the literary law itself to its own destruction, building a new language, a minor literature, under the conditions of a major or standard literature (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1977).

Starting by the title, the novel disarranges the language by identifying the protagonist with a female pseudonym, attributing to him the formal treatment 'Miss', putting into operation its mockery machine, producing an incision in the English language, incurring on it the figures of humor before the vicissitudes of the situation of unbalance that excess and ridiculousness encircle.

The world where *Miss Lonelyhearts* takes place is permeated by marks of the decay that distinguish black humor from grotesqueness. Each correspondent of the newspaper column in *Miss Lonelyhearts* has an existence marked by lack or exaggeration. The novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* deals, in this way, with that which is invasive, non-accountable, with the logic vertigo and the idea of death. In this scenario, where affirmative human drives are negated, the Christ complex of the main character sounds as a mockery and a laughter that borders on shedding of tears. In his column as a correspondent, *Miss Lonelyhearts* can only vent, under his masks, his life drives to borrow the teleological model of Christ as a salvific subterfuge in the company he adopted as his and that had started with the definition of a journalistic text.

In this sense, he seems to adopt a distorted paternal right, with no moderation, towards his correspondent, signing his letter as a writing by death he orchestrates as a raver, under a condition of reversion from the religious to the mythical

dimension, searching for the Dionysian signs. God, who presides life but is regarded as the god of death as well, is used in his journalistic credulity project.

'Dionysus against the crucified one' and the eternal return, seen from the mockery perspective

The Dionysian perspective of the world, in Modernity, brings on its trail the Nietzschean distinction between the barbarian Dionysus and the Dionysus of the Greek, Apollonian civilization. The myth, at times, opposes that of Apollo; at times, it conciliates. To Nietzsche, according to Dias (2004, p. 200), "[...] the Dionysian and the Apollonian are both equally positive". From this perspective, "Dionysus is a god of life, who is also a destroyer god [...] He is a feminine, fascinating, sensual and pure god, tied to the earth, but inclined to eternity as well" (DIAS, 2004, p. 201-202).

From this viewpoint, he is related to the virtuality of nature, always in motion on a cosmic level. He is linked to the power of transformation by the will of nature, and, in the Hellenic civilization, to the artistic characterization of music, of dance (the dance of people possessed by Dionysus), which contrasts with the absence of will, replaced for smoothness in the Christian civilization. The Dionysian myth is, ultimately, a story that tells how "[...] the most intimate thought of nature [...]" (DIAS, 2004, p. 208) breaks out in the Apollonian Greece, causing the irruption of the party, of the will and of the creator energy, wellspring that the Christian world attempted to suppress.

That myth, as any other, is a way of comprehending the cosmos, also considered a story that expresses "[...] collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity and existence" (BALDICK, 1990, p. 163). It is always returning in a way or another to express the pace that is proper of nature, being nothing less nothing more than the affirmation of its existence in a continuous process of changes.

Thus, Dionysus is the god of life affirmation, the being that affirms himself even before pain, negation. For this reason, among other interpretations that link him to the Apollonian, he is viewed as "[...] the promoter of civilization, and a lawgiver and lover of peace", not only representing "[...] the intoxicating power of wine, but its social and beneficent influences likewise" (BULFINCH, 2006, p. 48).

In this way, the Dionysian is seen as

[...] the approach of spring when the nature is pervaded by lust for life [...] all nature's artistic power reveals itself here, amidst shivers of

intoxication, to the highest, most blissful satisfaction of the primordial unity (NIETZSCHE, 1999, p. 17-18).

That is, a mental state that causes vertigo in the logics and an escape from itself, transportation, and exaltation. He, for some mythologists, is gestation of mother and father, mother earth and father divinity, the mortal Semele and the immortal king of Olympus, Zeus (POUZADOUX, 2001). His existence is marked by the eternal born-live-die. He is also called *Dithyrambus*, that is, born twice; first, he is born from the leg of his father Zeus and, after being torn apart by the titans on demand of Hera, he is born from Persephone's belly, wife of the god of darkness and shadow (MERCANTE; DOW, 2009). From this last interpretation, the Dithyramb emerges, a form of the Greek choral song, originally in honor of Dionysus.

Dionysus is the myth that brings, in Nietzsche, the creation of the eternal return as will to Power, the transvaluation of values rooted by the Western society and founded on a Christian moral of platonic order. In other words, the Dionysian confronts the Christian thinking and tradition, in which the "[...] traditional moral and the metaphysics are 'nihilist movements', because they are tendencies of life that aim at nothing" (ZILLES, 2008, p. 174). To Nietzsche (2007, p. 65), the eternal return as a way of thinking is "[...] the highest attainable formula of affirmation" that can ever be attained, and, in the Dionysian symbol, the ultimate limit of affirmation is reached.

However, it does not configure the eternal return of the Same, of the Whole or of the One, as in metaphysics, in the Greek tradition and in the Christian tradition modeled that way. Nevertheless, it brings an affirmative power that is not attached to any type of negative morality of the being. Moreover, as meaning of sign, repetition with difference does not separate from simulation. Now, simulation is its secret: "[...] the *vicus of recirculation* cannot affect and cause a 'chaosmos'" (DELEUZE, 1990, p. 264).

According to Deleuze (1993, p. 41):

The selective character of eternal return appears clearly in Nietzsche's idea: it is not the Whole, the Same or the prior identity in general which returns. Nor is it the small or the large, either as parts of the whole or as elements of the same. Only the extreme forms return – those which, large or small, are deployed within the limit and extend to the limit of their power, transforming themselves and changing one into another. Only the extreme, the excessive, returns; that which passes into something else and becomes identical.

Still considering the statements by Deleuze (1990), the eternal return produces an irony, because that which returns acts to make room for new forms. We could affirm that the thought that links Nietzsche to Dionysus suggests the fissure that opens there. Nietzsche/Dionysus ironizes our beliefs in the Same, for the impossibility of fixation of the repetition. They do so by creating the art of the difference in the repetition, and the art of the masks. Deleuze (1990) would say that what takes the time of the ironist is the care he applies in adorning himself with precision, in accordance with the poetic role assumed by his fantasy.

The humor as Dionysian art of the intensive amounts uses the individual and individualizing factors, in this irony game. It is what makes room for the vivid science and the love of life, also as an insertion of cruelty as one of "[...] the oldest festive pleasures of humankind" (NIETZSCHE, 2011, p. 18). But not the enjoyment of an imponderable suffering. Making and letting oneself suffer, torturing oneself with or without pleasure are sadism and masochism aspects, to which irony and humor are linked, according to Deleuze (1991, p. 125): "Irony is in fact the operation of an overbearing superego, the art of expelling or negating the ego, with all its sadistic consequences". Whilst humor is the triumph of the man against the superego, but both, in literature, will consist on the wicked writing.

Both one, irony, and the other, humor, are stories that tell "[...] how the superego was destroyed and by whom, and what was the sequel to this destruction"; or "[...] how the ego, in an entirely different context and in a different struggle, is beaten and expelled" (DELEUZE, 1991, p. 130). Masochism is the

[...] story begun by Cain with the aid of Eve, continued by Christ with the aid of the Virgin Mary, and revived by Sabbatai Zwi with the help of Miriam, and such is the masochistic visionary, with his prodigious vision of the 'death of God' [...] Sadism likewise tells a story. It relates [...] how the unrestrained superego assumes an exclusive role, modeled on an inflated conception of the father's role – the mother and the ego becoming its choice victims (DELEUZE, 1991, p. 131).

It is in this gap that we can situate the issue of Dionysus and of the crucified one from the epigraphic place of the title of the novel by Nathanael West, with his "black" humor. And, in addition to that one, what is projected from these relations in *Miss Lonelyhearts* is proposed as a Dionysian power of simulation, in which humor will take the empty place of the fourth person of the

singular (DELEUZE, 1990). The sky above the head of Miss Lonelyhearts and the mockery in the endless fall of the character/actor.

The Christ complex and the narrative performance

From the beginning of the novel *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), there is a search by the main character for affirming a return of Christ. The protagonist works for the New York Post-Dispatch newspaper, writing in a column that supposedly gives advices to people going through problems. At first, when he assumed such post, he thought that the job was nothing but a big joke, but, after receiving approximately thirty letters every day, he totally changes his mind and begins to see, in Christ, a way to provide sincere responses and to persuade his correspondents and himself that living in this world is worthwhile.

However, at the newspaper, they mock his job, seen with sarcasm by his own editor, Shrike, whose name seems to refer to Christ; this underlines the performance character of that inscription. The journalistic texts take on the role of metanarrative of salvation, to which the journalist directs his efforts, under the pseudonym Miss Lonelyhearts, by corresponding with the readers. Such correspondence works as some kind of eternal return, in the form of a continuous session at every text. In this way, from the very beginning, the novel shows the contractual relationship with the journalistic discourse, to convey it, in face of the bankruptcy the North-American was going through during the great depression, with the attractive expectation for the messianic coming, to bring hope and consolation to his readers.

Miss Lonelyhearts appears as a capitalist source to give rise to the belief in a savior, which will start to project a mistaken image of Christ, confounded with that of the journalist, in a co-fusion, which passes to the other, reflected on the proposition itself set in the title of the first part 'Miss Lonelyhearts, help me, help me', as well as in the first paragraph of this very same part through the questions "Are-you-in-trouble? – Do-you-need-advice? – Write-to-Miss-Lonelyhearts-and-she-will-help-you" (WEST, 2012, p. 1). Miss Lonelyhearts, according to the third-person narrator, answers, representing the salvific role, seated at his desk.

Such procedure makes room for the imaginary projection he ends up incarnating and to which he devotes his textual performance, in order to provoke in the editor, Shrike, a jocose behavior, in face of the supposed divine intermediation, 'well-intentioned', of the journalist. The editor, mockingly, leaves on

the desk of his coworker a pseudo-prayer that triggers the game of masks:

Soul of Miss L, glorify me.
Body of Miss L, nourish me
Blood of Miss L, intoxicate me.
Tears of Miss L, wash me.
Oh good Miss L, excuse my plea,
And hide me in your heart,
And defend me from mine enemies.
Help me Miss L, help me, help me.
In saecula saeculorum. Amen (WEST, 2012, p. 1-2).

In spite of the taunts uttered by Shrike, the journalist keeps writing, answering to the readers, convinced of being performing his 'divine' intermediation: "Life is worthwhile, for it is full of dreams and peace, gentleness and ecstasy, and faith that burns like a clear white flame on a grim dark altar" (WEST, 2012, p. 2).

In face of the historical situation of the depression, the mocking aspect is highlighted in Miss Lonelyhearts' reply as well. Her words seem to tease the reader with a black, merciless humor.

The letters he receives describe pathetically grotesque cases of violence. The correspondents identify themselves in a bizarre manner, such as Sick-of-it-all and Desperate; or by incomplete names, like Harold S., and others. These letters have in common sadness, abandonment, fear:

I am going to have a baby and I don't think I can stand it my kidneys hurt so much I can't have an abortion on account of being a catholic and my husband so religious. [...] I sit and look at myself all day and cry. I have a big hole in the middle of my face that scares people even myself so I can't blame the boys for not wanting to take me out. My mother loves me, but she cries when she looks at me. [...] Gracie is deaf and dumb [...] a man [...] did something dirty to her. [...] I am afraid that Gracie is going to have a baby [...] If I tell mother she will beat Gracie up awful (WEST, 2012, p. 2-3).

The scenario of ruins and decay in which the salvific performance moves grows worse; and the journalist continues to sustain the miraculous chance of the divine advent. The textual performance leads him to an incessant drift that sharpens the incongruence, the misunderstanding of the proposed project. Desolation takes the scenario over. The 'salvific' journalist goes to the Delahanty's and, on the way, sees no life, nor a vivid landscape, even in the middle of spring:

As far as he could discover, there were no signs of spring. The decay that covered the surface of the mottled ground was not the kind in which life generates. Last year, he remembered, May had failed to quicken these soiled fields. It had taken all the

brutality of July to torture a few green spikes through the exhausted dirt (WEST, 2012, p. 3).

This image of desolation fits the development of the narrative performance in which the religious act by Miss Lonelyhearts starts to persuade those who were thirsty for miraculous and seductive answers, capable of mobilizing the alien belief, in crisis, before the picture showed by the humor that disguises it, as a whiffing opera of a Christianity and a capitalism without will to power. They are portraits, according to the critic Alan Ross (1957 apud MUGGIATI, 1985), of the Christian symbols emptied of faith that, in the end, witnessed, as bitter flowers, the downfall of the American ordinary man, hurt by the stabs of his own defeat, as West's narrator points out:

He got back to the house in time for lunch and, after eating, they went for a walk in the woods. It was very sad under the trees. Although spring was well advanced, in the deep shade there was nothing but death – rotten leaves, gray and white fungi, and over everything a funeral hush (WEST, 2012, p. 23).

The editor's wicked game, manifested in his facial expressions, when advising the journalist to leave the position of the crucified one, and the masochist contractual position of Miss Lonelyhearts, underlines the joking traits, the weirdness and the priceless development of the correspondence writing. Throughout the novel, the caricature makes the desire seem ridiculous, there, where there was no visible truth.

Thus, the behavior of the journalist establishes the paradox and, with it, the humor, in a production of deforming images. Unexpectedly, in the media field, the issue is installed: at this moment, Miss Lonelyhearts finds herself at the same point of nomadic singularities, just as Dionysus, in an undifferentiated abyss. A Dionysian machine producer of a new discourse, inside the world of information, of communication, activates and reaches the formless (DELEUZE, 1990, p. 107): "You shall be a monster, a shapeless mass".

And this process of turning into monster is the target of the indetermination and of the obscurity that deconstruct the productions of the consciousness, such as psychoanalysis, Marxism, religion itself, encircled by the 'wights', ghosts and obsessions West directs and puts in motion. He makes them live in *Miss Loneliness*, this funny pseudonym of a feminine element, of a fascinating god crossed with the name of Christ, the crucified one. He disperses them and transforms them into a mirage in the desert of the representations of the true man and, at the same time, it results in a great comicality, by sliding through the intended eternal

return, but voiced by a comedian, in a modern, subversive species of the *Divine Comedy*.

Throughout the novel, the characters and the roles are prepared to introduce the journalist in this Christ complex that would possess him since childhood. And, in this way, this 'play' of salvation is organized. Let us observe:

As he was a boy in his father's church, he had discovered that something stirred in him when he shouted the name of Christ, something secret and enormously powerful. He had played with this thing, but never allowed it to come alive (WEST, 2012, p. 6).

In another attempt at his apartment, he takes Christ from the cross and nails him on the wall:

Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love (WEST, 2012, p. 6).

As an emotional counselor, Miss Lonelyhearts presents her 'calculation' of the ridiculousness, which appears in the quotation below, in some kind of "[...] splendid aping [...]", a Diderot's expression, in *Paradox of the Comedian*, referred by Forbes (1999, p. 61). Let us see:

You have a big, strong body, Mrs. Doyle. Holding your husband in your arms, you can warm him and give him life. You can take the chill out of his bones. He drags his days out in areaways and cellars, carrying a heavy load of weariness and pain. You can substitute a dream of yourself for this load. A buoyant dream that will be like a dynamo in him. You can do this by letting him conquer you in your bed. He will repay you by flowering and becoming ardent over you [...] (WEST, 2012, p. 30).

Miss Lonelyheart dresses herself with an imaginary illness and bends over her own inconsistency:

He moved his head to cooler spot on the pillow and the vein in his forehead became less swollen. He felt clean and fresh. His heart was a rose and in his skull another rose bloomed.

The room was full of grace of grace. [...] He immediately began to plan a new life and his future conduct as Miss Lonelyhearts. He submitted drafts of his column to God and God approved them. God approved his every thought (WEST, 2012, p. 34).

He entangles himself in his sublime invention and in the *unheimliche* of his grotesque position

worsened by the illness. The acting comes to the cosmic fall, with the grimace of a trapeze artist. The black humor reaches its apex, when he judges that, by holding a cripple, he or she would be healed, as if, at last, he became a character of the new gospel, a double of Christ, but as a bad actor: "He would embrace the cripple and the cripple would made whole again, even as he, a spiritual cripple, had been made whole" (WEST, 2012, p. 35).

West's novel, therefore, opens in the literary narrative spaces for ironic correspondences, criticisms fed by a bitter humor, by introducing the performance into the narrative. There, where the boundaries between mass literature and fictional literature move in order to allow the parade of the masks of god, besides the appeals and the ironic associations from which hollow and shapeless images result, from a look that capture the sublime ridiculousness, and makes the novel a comic double of salvational discourses, in the modern world.

Final considerations

Understanding, in this work, that the author was producing a true search for the eternal return and for the messianic inscription of his narrative means to fall into the same process of misunderstandings that will mark the character Miss Lonelyhearts with the sublime ridiculousness. The novel averts this truth position and does so with the sharp weapon of its fiction. The face of Christ is, first, delineated according to the mediatized order of a superstar, as Deleuze and Guattari (1996) would say. Dionysus' face is also part of a production of the landscape that disarranges the Christian face and world.

The discourse of the messianic metanarrative presents itself in the relations between cruelty, suffering and pleasure, taking into account that the main character plays this role of incarnating the Christ that returned, with the supposed purpose of helping people, through the advice column of a newspaper, in the period of the American great depression. The novel constitutes a space in which the proof of the truth is subjected to the decomposition of the black humor, which betrays the illusory character of the salvation 'program'.

There is no difference between the face and the mask, hence the misunderstanding, the fall, the mockery. And, about that, West's discourse experiments with fiction as the place, or the non-place, where the return is invented in the literature as series and repetition. And, likewise, the sending and resending that the textual performance brings to the performer gestures of the author/actor/character,

supplementing them with the narrative and mythical corpus.

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