

A LETTER FROM RIO DE JANEIRO

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A Letter from Rio de Janeiro

Une lettre de Rio de Janeiro

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When I learned that Bolsonaro had been elected president, I was with my family and friends. In the days leading up to the election, some of them had participated with me in the adventure of talking to people and soliciting votes for his opponent in the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Fortunately. This net or spider's web materialized through flyers, exchanges of words, the distances travelled in step or out of step. It kept me going and helped me withstand the fall and the feeling of plunging into the abyss.

In the minutes that followed, again with a safety net, I thought of a joke or rather a disconcerting anecdote that Freud tells in *Humor* (1927). A man sentenced to death is brought out to the gallows on a Monday and declares "Well, the week's beginning nicely."

Freud cites this anecdote as an example of humorous “satisfaction.” I have always found it curious that his example is so tragic and terrible. If the psychoanalyst finds in it something like greatness and exaltation, a narcissistic triumph or a refusal of the ego to let itself be had by the traumas of the outside world, it remains nevertheless a question of death itself. The mechanism by which the condemned man behaves haughtily in the face of death, by recognizing that his disappearance will not prevent the world from continuing to exist, is less akin to a narcissistic position than to a narcissistic detachment that is only attained by great sages and mystics. Or perhaps the narcissistic affirmation – in spite of everything and everyone – of truly mad men. Indeed, to state that my death gives a nice start to the week is a kind of delusion: it implies that we underestimate reality and are going along a strident path, one that deviates from what reality convokes as a position face to face with the other, as discourse.

I did not understand why this sentence comforted me, or brought me hope that day. I had no intention of alienating myself from the harsh reality that we Brazilians have had to live for a number of years, ever since the rupture of the democratic pact by the burlesque scene of the deposition of Dilma Rousseff. It revolted me to observe that from that moment on, the symbolic fabric of our society began to be torn apart, to such an extent that it has become acceptable – for our institutions and for some of us – for a member of Parliament to pay tribute to the worst torturer of the military dictatorship. And I was disgusted by the perception of holes appearing in this torn symbolic fabric, holes that form spaces where there is no law and which are dangerous for people close to me (my daughter, my students), who are subject to intimidation and threats simply because they are perceived as being homosexual, for example.

For me, Freud’s sentence was not an attempt to flee or deny the situation. On the contrary, it came to me like a promise, as a possibility of subverting what was oppressing me and putting me in the painful position of being the vanquished, the loser, the victim condemned by an executioner or by the cruel father of the horde. It was only the next day – a Monday, as it so happens! – that I could listen to this sentence in the right way: out loud, like a cry against an aggressor. THE WEEK’S BEGINNING NICELY. It is pronounced as a disapproval and an insubordination. What is humorous is the twist it proposes: instead of making a declaration of disapproval and insubordination from the position of a victim confronting his tormentor – for example, affirming with hate that his death is useless because others will rise up – the position from which the statement is pronounced refuses the position of victim and twists its way back onto the very speech of the aggressor. It brings words that are not those of intolerance and violence. The sentence does not react to the discourse of the crowd – made stronger by the insult, as Freud had already affirmed in his 1921 text (which is so terribly pertinent today), *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. It is pronounced outside this logic, turning it around in a crazy way – in a political way. Today, it is precisely strategy that we are lacking – a strategy of discourse, the ability to establish a position of pronouncement that is distinct from a position of a reaction that ends up reinforcing the master’s discourse. Because the master’s discourse predicts – and neutralizes – the place of our indignant cries. (Popular electoral wisdom tells us that “all publicity is good publicity”). The creation of words that can create an effective resistance, that of the subversion of this discourse. Words that are not limited to reinforcing the identificatory links between an “us” in opposition to “them”. Other symbolic logics. Possibly a bit of delusion. Some invention, in order to upset the psychological misery of the crowd of which Freud speaks in *Civilization and its Discontents* – a misery devoid of words and thoughts that turns indignant slogans into an automated repetition.

To achieve this, it may be that psychoanalysis has a role to play, a historic task, in society today. Is psychoanalysis not the discourse, par excellence, that makes a theme of the U-turns of speech, even encouraging them in everyday clinical practice?

And it may be that art too has a fundamental place in the construction and transmission of these discursive devices. It is no small thing that art is systematically vilified by the discourses of political and religious intolerance. The field of poetic action in culture is one that invites the agent who pronounces to reposition himself as a subject, refusing to be reduced to a position of subjection to language and the prevailing discourses. The field of the arts seems dangerous to retrograde forces insofar as it may indeed possess great power: or that we may possess a great power through it.

All that I have just written may seem excessively theoretical and may hardly be considered “interesting”. This text certainly fails in its intention to constitute a proposal for constructing a discursive strategy of resistance. Allow me then to make a more concrete suggestion to the reader: what if, instead of broadcasting *fake news* or spectacular threats to our friends via WhatsApp, we committed ourselves to mixing all the words that compose them, as the Dadaist Tristan Tzara did when he cut out all the words of a news article, mixed them in a hat, then took them one by one at random to build a poem? Or what if, before spreading such texts, videos or audio recordings, we altered them by adding our own words, words that came to us in the moment – absolutely anything – or a cake recipe, like students used to do in order to trap teachers who are not in the habit of reading to the end of essays?

Symbolic guerrilla tactics can have endless possibilities. They do not eliminate, of course, the work of sorting, preserving, and disseminating information worthy of the name. We must distinguish them from the political propaganda that saturates the Web and the networks with words and images via the power of a subliminal contagion comparable to that of Nazi propaganda cinema – but which, strangely, do not depend on invisibility in order to hypnotise. It is perhaps even more important to expose the singular gesture of transformative approval of the versions of truth that reach us and the fact that this gesture can start a kind of spark among us. A spark that is not limited to the web, but which is meant to catch fire in our bodies and in the street.

I spoke to a friend about it yesterday, the psychoanalyst Simone Moschen, who reminded me of a situation we experienced at the exhibition *Lugares do Delirio* (Places of Delusion) in São Paulo. We built small paper boats in a workshop given by the artist Eleonora Fabião. Children and adults were sitting at a table, engaged in the construction of boats to be placed on the ground in a “fleet” that would mix, in delusional fashion, with other boats built by the artist Arthur Bispo do Rosario and several others. Some of these small boats ended up in a small, unfrequented lake designed by the artist Lina Bo Bardi. One of them had a quote from Guimarães Rosa: “Every abyss is navigable by little paper boats.”

Today, I would add: every abyss is navigable if many of us are boats, if we multiply, until the movement of the whole circumvents the walls of the abyss and forces them to take on the centrifugal force that will allow us to escape.

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