

José Gil. *Metamorphoses of the Body*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

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Recently published by the University of Minnesota Press, *Metamorphoses of the Body* by José Gil overcomes a kind of social and philosophical barrier: from now on, the excellence of the intellectual activity of one of the most important contemporary Portuguese thinkers is (at least partially) available to English-speaking readers. Gil's analyses of the body and its substantive languages will prove indispensable to philosophers, historians and interpreters of culture. They tell, with scrupulous determination, an intensive story of the body, its energies and metaphorizations and the capacity to build mechanisms that pervade modern societies shaped after corporeal representations: body of the king, community body, body politics, the body of the State. All in all, Gil narrates an appetite for insight, be it through the rearticulation of western philosophical *topoi* (such as symbol, force, power or time) or through the vibrations of their margins (dance, voodoo, rites or magical-religious establishments).

Like Fernando Pessoa in other books, the literary worlds of Franz Kafka are often used by José Gil to enrich and intensify his argumentative apparatuses. In the well known story called "Metamorphosis," the narrator Gregor Samsa tells us how he awakens one day totally transformed into a gigantic insect-like animal, a disgusting being that becomes a burden to his family. Climbing more and more the ladder of nausea and decadence, the monster finally dies, relieving the family of his anti-existence. Gil reads this tale as an aporia of the body, which can be neither animal nor human, and is unable to move from one state to the other. In other words, Samsa's tragedy is that his body cannot acquire its own space. He does not have the power to undertake a real self-metamorphosis. Caught between two double identities, Samsa is a human insect, a non-being whose thoughts and feelings are imprisoned in a monstrous, deformed body. His current body illustrates the body that is incapable of undergoing the process of "becoming-animal."

Kafka's character failed to overcome his situation of impotence. What could he have done to avoid that? According to Gil, in order to inject power into itself the body has to create a series of conditions in which power is reproduced through a magical-religious therapy. In traditional societies the

body captures a therapeutic power. It acquires a god-like capacity to encode and overcode energy - by making energy circulate, power *embodies* it. Therapeutic ritual is primarily connected with the self-acknowledgment of one's energies and powers, since it is related with "the possibility of capturing the free forces that transverse bodies" (85). Now, given that the idea of power is closely associated with the potency of the body and the circulation of its energy, then power is something only ascribed to people, and that ultimately means that bodies function as measure of the system of power.

By establishing an analogy with mimes who dismember their own magical bodies, Gil coins a name for the activity of the body that becomes a source of signs: *infralanguage* is a "property of the body to be the home or the agent for the transformation of the signs" (111). It is this language that completes the codes and metaphors of the body, which acts as a metalanguage by moving from one body to another - out of non-signification it can create meaning, out of confusion it can elaborate a logical path, and out of silence it can compose a meaningful message. Now we can grasp Samsa's failure: his metamorphosis was not translated by an infralanguage, but rather his body was retained in a fixed, closed image preventing him from translating forces and signs. In spite of his will (but perhaps not Kafka's will), Samsa saw himself as a martyrological center. However, as Gil puts it, "[a]s a pure transformer of energy, [the body as an infralanguage] ... is capable of transferring a qualitative load of forces from one context to another, from one set of signs to another, without, for all that, itself becoming in turn a privileged context or sign" (291). To avoid this privilege, the body as it was conceived in archaic societies activates several languages, i.e., it becomes "abstract," ritualizing the symbolic spaces into several correspondences. In itself the body does not carry a signifier: each force, each source of energy dissipates itself in its own process of inscription.

José Gil builds his theory of the body over four main antinomies: (1) power is related to signs, not to forces, versus power is above all force; (2) power is by and large multiple and social versus individualization of power; (3) power comes out of life versus death is the absolute power; (4) power has spatial and temporal limits vs. power is limitless. Gil finds the solution to these antinomies in the capacity tribal societies have for dealing with symbolic thought. Within this symbolic thought, the body recreates itself in a web of magical-symbolic relations, that is, as an infralanguage modulating both forces of the antinomies, not allowing any one of them to assume itself as a

supreme signifier. In tribal societies irreconcilable powers coexist. There, people are not enclosed in a single power because they live without historicity. In this kind of society the antinomies dissolve themselves in a type of magic power: they do not even really materialize since repetition of time brings life and death into an intimate association, transforming the antinomies into a new system of distribution of forces and signs.

Historical societies, on the other hand, shape time as a teleological device framed by a single model of power. Here, each party wants to emphasize its adhesion to one of the sides of the antinomies as a manner of achieving a totality of power. This way magical-religious power and infralanguage yield to the State and the body of the king (the body of the State). Politics becomes the emblem of power, the king's body is now the supreme signifier, gathering all kinds of power. The body of the king becomes the body of Gregor Samsa: "[h]ere [in the king's body] the infralanguage is, so to speak, doubled back on itself. Taking itself as its own subject, translating itself into itself, it makes its image appear; the body is not only a transducer of forces, it becomes a symbol, a magical 'machine,' and a surface of inscription. The body of the king has a meaning, while the infralanguage has none" (293). Like Samsa's body, the body of the king concentrates in itself - and for its own sake only - all the meaning of the world. The limits of the king are now the unlimited world and the latter, transformed into a body of the former, becomes paradoxically the limited body of a single language.

With the canonization of the king's body as a symbol of the western State a device disappears, which plays an important role in Gil's philosophy: the floating signifier, that is, the faculty some signs have to remain free from a specific signification that floats between the known and the unknown. Under the king's body, everything has to be crystalline; being ascribed to indigenous thought, the floating signifier opens a zone of indeterminacy, for it "denotes the fringes of semantic disturbance that are the signs of any taboo-transgressing activity, attacks of sorcery, the practice of shamanistic rites, or the behavior of someone who has gone mad: energy and the space between codes often go together" (95). It is the floating signifier that prevents the body from being paralyzed and that makes it move from one body to another, reorganizing and changing the codes. It refers to the body and it gives meaning to the body, since the body alone signifies nothing.

The body needs the inscription of codes. It is the intimacy of different languages that makes it float. This means that the body is only accomplished

when it produces enough energy to perform an act of self-metamorphosis. In each metamorphosis the body disappears through the acquisition of new conditions and the translation of new codes. From metamorphosis to metamorphosis, the body achieves a state of non-metamorphosis. In a curious way that illustrates the sense of philosophical originality, experience and insight pervading this remarkable book. José Gil places the representation of the Renaissance *écorché* (flayed) somewhere between the body with an infralanguage (in a Christ-like position ready to undergo metamorphosis through crucifixion) and the body of the king, devoid of the floating signifier. The removal of his skin symbolizes the inscription of the language of science - with it, another operation and another aura, will be engraved in the body.