

Plantation Boy: The Memory of Loss

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“My uncle explained to me the way that black clay made sugar white.”

José Lins do Rego (1932)

In the decade between 1922, the year of the “Week of Modern Art” in São Paulo, and 1932, when *Menino de Engenho* (*Plantation Boy*) was published, Brazilian literature was driven by strong winds of renewal. This was due to reasons that transcend the literary scene—as is almost always the case. These were the turbulent years in Brazil, which saw the end of the “Old Republic” (*República Velha*, 1889-1930). They witnessed the mutiny of young officers at the Copacabana Forte, they accompanied the crisis provoked by the slump in world coffee prices, the overthrow of President Washington Luís, the Revolution of 1930 and Getúlio Vargas’ rise to power. These were also years of liberal modernization and widespread intellectual ferment.

It was during this time that the most progressive Brazilian intellectuals began their search, within the domestic scene, for parameters within which to debate important national issues. These included the need for new guidelines for aesthetic creativity in an effort to rid themselves of external or Europeanized standards. It was a decade of polemic and provocative Prefaces and modernist Manifestos, among which may be cited, “Arte Moderna” by Menotti del Picchi, and “Prefácio Interessantíssimo” by Mário de Andrade (1922); “O Espírito Moderno” by Graça Aranha, and “Manifesto da Poesia Pau-Brasil” by Oswald de Andrade (1924); “Manifesto Regionalista” of 1926,¹ the Manifestos published in the *Festa* and *Verde* magazines (1927), “Manifesto Antropófago” by Oswald de Andrade (1928), and the “Manifesto do Verde-Amarelismo, ou da Escola da Anta” (1929).

During those years the two main currents of Brazilian literary modernism were outlined. One of these came from the South of the country, with its irreverent nationalism and its iconoclastic writing, the generator of and heir to the "Week of Modern Art." The second was the regional modernism of the Northeast, more sullen and introspective, distrusting the flamboyant humor of the new Paulista literature, and less explicitly daring in formal terms. This second stream of modernism despised "the sidewalks of inaccessible cities"² and opted for settings such as the large sugarcane plantations, or for the desolate drought-stricken regions of the Northeast, the *caatinga*. The insistence on this physical and anthropo-social setting, with its swamp and semi-desert, reflected Northeastern modernism's independent search for sounds, tastes and smells as a platform from which to mold space, personalities and events that were uniquely Brazilian. Thus the so-called "novels of the 30s" emerged, of which José Lins do Rego's *Menino de Engenho* is one of the most celebrated. For many, the initial starting point of this era was the year 1928, marked by the publication of *A Bagaceira* (*Trash: A Novel*) by José Américo de Almeida.

The feeling of Brazilianess in the literary production of the Northeast, although very different from that exhibited by the modernists in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, was no less ambitious in terms of its aesthetic aims. It went far beyond the rich national repertoire of images and themes, which had been exhaustively exploited since Romanticism, and which were now colorfully re-inaugurated in the novelty of the diverse modernistic nuances. The truth is that these two perspectives, from the South and from the Northeast, complemented each other in relation to the new Brazil. For the country was taking uncertain steps towards a controversial and overpowering modernity, which, of necessity, dramatized and confronted, within the literary scene of that time and in the subsequent decades, both the sophistication and the misery which extended from the metropolises to the huge arid backlands and the decadent mansions ("*casas-grandes*") with their "slave compounds from the times of captivity."³

For the authors from the Northeast, their raw material, pregnant with Brazilianess, became an inseparable part of existential experience, which was utilized from the inside-out, as it were, to authenticate and validate their product as national literature and as creative fiction. From this Brazilian kernel, this "inside-out" succeeded, at certain key moments, in transcending the limited environment of a "regional literature" that was defined, primarily,

by its geographical location. In this sense, whether from the perspective of a fictional memoir and an autobiographical standpoint—the case of *Menino de Engenho*—, or whether from the adoption of a more impersonal, or detached, narrative posture—as in *Fogo Morto* or in *Vidas Secas*—, the narrative voice invariably works from the *sertão*⁴ to the outside world, rather than from the outside world to the *sertão*. This contrasts with the urban, cosmopolitan references which frequently mark Paulista modernism, in its attempts to “discover” Brazil from the outside-in.⁵

In common with what often occurred in writing from the South, which also explored the rich seam of fictional memoirs,⁶ the novel with an autobiographical stamp also served the aims of Northeast modernism. “There is an intellectual narrator who speaks of himself, and of others, taking stock of the past. The individual’s memoir becomes a record of the experiences of many, revealing the general characteristics of his era,” wrote Adriana Oliveira, emphasizing the supremacy of the discourse of the dominant class within this literary production.⁷

The appeal of a retrospective vision of childhood nestled in nature, and the consequent memoir posture, is not restricted to fictional prose. It is equally well expressed in the poetry of the Northeast. Thus in his own poetry, Jorge de Lima writes that,

I jumped over so many sugarcane juice boilers,
I swam through so many streams,
I knew so many deep water holes!⁸

Similarly, the historical documentary facts are intertwined in *Menino de Engenho* with the fictional as both are woven into the individual experience of the author, the latter being relatively concealed (and liberated) by fictitious names.

The 75th edition of José Lins do Rego’s first novel was published in 1999. Its acclaim is well justified. The novel conveys the fluency of the popular tale and the “contours of the fable,” which so enchanted Carlos Drummond de Andrade. It recalls childhood memories of the home where the narrator-protagonist lived on his grandfather’s sugarcane plantation. From these introspective details of domestic life, the text paints a subjective physical anthropo-social mural of pre-industrial agrarian life, which was sustained through a rigid and paternalistic hierarchy of classes.

The plot is straightforward. The text opens by describing the traumatic effect a mother's assassination has on a four-year-old child. The initial chapters paint a picture of family tragedy by following the fragments of childhood experience. The little boy goes to live on the sugarcane plantation and the reader shares with him his experiences and impressions of life in the mansion, with the poor working in the fields and among the animals left to pasture. Finally, when twelve years old, he takes a train in the opposite direction when he leaves the plantation to enroll in a high school in Recife. His stay in the Catholic boarding school is the theme of Rego's second novel, *Doidinho* (1933). But the protagonist's existential course is doomed to failure. "The character-narrator of the trilogy *Menino de Engenho—Doidinho—Bangüê*, Carlos de Melo, or Carlinhos, narrates his own trajectory towards nothingness."⁹

The character's structural fragility, confirmed in these later novels, is not only restricted to himself, but encompasses an infirm social order destined to crumble. In common with William Faulkner's relationship with the American Deep South, Rego strove to record in his fiction the decadence of the former dominant class and the repercussions of this process on their descendants and on those who depended upon them. Rego's world of the Northeast describes, first and foremost, the decadent sugarcane plantations, their dramatic transitional phase from a mercantilism inherited from colonial times to an emergent capitalist economy, and the no more than nominal liberation of the slaves.¹⁰ The text of *Menino de Engenho* is incisive in this respect: "The Santa Rosa slave quarters did not disappear with abolition. They continued glued to the mansion, with the black women giving birth, the good breastfeeders and the good workers of the settlement" (41). It is an endearing novel, with its orality and spontaneous patterning. In Blaise Cendrars' words, "Brazil in its entirety can be found in this transparent book."¹¹ This "transparency" is, however, illusory; it is an integrated part of the captivating character of the text itself. It is not only by chance that so many elements of fantasy are inserted into the text, which are much more than an homage to Northeastern imagination.

These fantastical elements include the stories told by old Totonha of "king and queen," of "hangings and fortune-tellings," of strange jungle creatures, the childhood terrors of the supernatural, "a world inhabited entirely of goblins, in flesh and blood lived for my sake" (34), states the narrator. This retelling of fantasy, at times in the form of text within text, is

contrasted with the factual, concrete retelling, represented (always through the eyes of the narrator) by the grandfather's voice. "My grandfather's stories captured my attention in a very different way to those told by old Totonha. Grandfather's stories never appealed to my imagination, to fantasy. There were no miraculous solutions, as in the others... They were the work of a storyteller stirred by reality" (62).

One of the pleasures of working with *Menino de Engenho* is that the novel is endowed with a vitality often lacking in several of its characters. It flows in a way that suggests the "transparency" so highly praised by Cendrars, and yet harbors in its core a powerful tension. This tension is inherent in the (utopic) attempt, on the part of the text, to frame itself as a continuous, seamless woven cloth, devoid of ruptures and obstacles. And this despite the fact that the text depicts the difficulties of life and the social injustices, which are *presented* and *exhibited* but never *questioned*. A textual reading reveals this desire to create continuity and a magical piece of writing—similar to old Totonha's stories, with "miraculous solutions"—whose narrative flow neutralizes the thorns. The craving for smoothness and for continuity unfolds as metonymy, and the narrative voice takes momentary pleasure in the uninterrupted size of "Grandfather José Paulino's lands." It is indicative that at this very moment the narrator resorts to a fairy-tale vocabulary, mixing it with a description of the large estates of the Brazilian Northeast.

The lands of Santa Rosa stretched for leagues and leagues from north to south. Old José Paulino took pleasure in looking out over his dominions as far as the eye could see. He liked to rest his eyes on his own horizons. All he wanted was to buy land and more land. He inherited a small Santa Rosa, and *turned it into a kingdom*, bursting its boundaries by buying neighboring properties. (51, my emphasis).

Menino de Engenho suffers, paradoxically, from the tension caused by refusing to address these tensions that are derived not only from the nature of the literary text itself, but also its immersion in the harsh theme of the Northeast and its people. This tension interrupts the seductive fluency and the melancholic reminiscences upon which the novel is built. Within the narrative posture that directs the text, however, there is nothing that is intentionally destabilizing; everything appears to adhere to a higher order. It is considered a true fact that nature always returns to normal after calamities,

like the flooding of the River Paraíba. On the human level, this can be seen in the charismatic figure of the elderly patriarch, who corrects mistakes, reprimands, takes care of the ill and the needy: "on the estate, my grandfather gave balm to the wounded" (58).

Menino de Engenho circumvents any tensions to such an extent that several of its active characters, as well as those simply named (e.g. the urchin Ricardo, Vitorino "Papa-Rabo," the saddler José Amaro, Colonel Lula de Holanda, and even Carlos de Melo), have no depth, and, in some cases, lack the tragic qualities that they will acquire in later novels. Thus the grandfather José Paulino is here portrayed as the "saint who planted sugar" (62). Colonel Lula, a pathetic figure in *Fogo Morto*, is here described as "that pleasant elderly gentleman... with his Santa Fé estate falling to pieces" (52). The poor, for their part, stoically accept their lot and the adversities that befall them.

And my Aunt Maria distributed all the dried meat and rice which we had bought for those people. They appeared happy, no matter what, very submissive and very content with their fate. The flood had washed away their clearing of cassava, taking with it the little, almost nothing, they had. But they did not raise their arms to curse their ill luck, they were not indignant. They were gentle folk. (21)

The tension thus emerges from the text obliquely. It is not by chance that Carlinhos is "a sad little lad" because his life is made up of a series of losses: his mother and his small cousin, Lili, are taken away by murder and disease, respectively. The father-assassin, placed in a mental institution, is never seen again, nor is Maria Clara, his first sweetheart ("I'd lost my companion of the cashew trees," 66) his second mother, "Aunt Mary," was lost because of her marriage to the Gameleira's cousin; his own innocence, lost in the brutality of premature sexual encounters with a series of prostitutes and barnyard animals; and, finally, the loss of the sugarcane plantation itself, with his departure for the boarding school.

The text, however, is more artful than it appears and warns the reader, in the simplicity of its title, that it is not focusing primarily on the *engenho* (the sugarcane plantation), but rather on the *menino* (the little boy) who lives there. The boy is the novel's narrative filter but does not possess the *engenho*. On the contrary, *he is possessed by it*: "Lost little boy, little boy from the sugarcane plantation," are the final words of the novel. In spite of childhood fantasies and the ever-glorified reality of a still-powerful

grandfather, this sugar plantation and its universe escape the protagonist's grasp. Similarly, the rural world of the Northeast, so raw and painfully poignant, spills over and frustrates the powers of the novelist's writing, inserting itself into its gaps, colliding with the well-accomplished narrative flow.

As already mentioned, the view of the dominant class prevails in *Menino de Engenho*. Thus, the important point of reference, the axis of narrative balance, will always be the authority of the grandfather. (According to the narrative voice, José Paulino does not talk "with," but talks "to" others—e.g., "Every evening, after supper, my grandfather used to talk to all who sat silently at the dinner table" [60]). Each and every demonstration of independence or rebellion is neutralized when faced with the greater power.

The following example is odd, because here it seems that two voices oppose each other.

João Rouco came to the clearing with his three sons. His wife and the smaller boys stayed at home, near the fields. He was more than seventy years old, but managed to handle the tough work, just like his youngest son. His mouth was wrinkled, toothless, his arms muscled, his legs strong. Nothing was difficult for this old backwoodsman that worked for my grandfather. He was never subservient like the others. He answered Colonel Paulino's shouts with shouts. Perhaps it is because they were the same age and had played together as children. (59)

However, immediately afterwards, the narrator's voice relents and concludes the episode: "And when [grandfather] needed a reliable person for a heavy job there was always a message for João Rouco."

The presence of living nature is also found in Carlinhos' reminiscences, always restrained by a stronger force, namely the social class to which he belonged. This is evident in the following: "All this was a delight for me: the cattle, foamy warm milk, the chill of five o' clock in the morning, the tall, solemn figure of my grandfather." And it is this social class standing which initiates the little boy in the mysteries of the sugar plantation: "Uncle Juca took me to bathe in the river. With a towel around his neck and a big cup in his hand he called me to bathe. 'You have to learn what it means to survive as a country lad.'" The episode assumes a truly ritual character: "On the way back Uncle Juca said, smiling: 'Now you have been baptized'" (8).

The anxiety of the text lies in the inevitable clash between the dominant social class, however absolute, and the documentary inclination that also

inhabits the novel. The account of the prosperity of this class, which is carried out in retrospect, contains, of necessity, elements that foretell its decadence. The utopia of the harmonious discourse, of appeasement, is occasionally diverted by an escape towards magic, whether by nostalgic memories, found in the references to old Totonha, or by secrets of terror: “Werewolves had been spotted at Rolo forest” or “Zombies were also found on the sugarcane plantation” (32-33). A different textual posture, or, rather, an intertwining of the documentary material (seen critically, in its social sense) and the aesthetic organization, would be the same as admitting the tensions that *Menino de Engenho* had opted to negate. In this way, the text appears to gain strength and leave the task (of criticism) for later.

Only in José Lins do Rego’s entire oeuvre (or singly in *Fogo Morto*) would existential and socio-economic issues of the decadent patriarchal Northeast society—formerly well embedded in mono-culture and slavery—be questioned with greater dramatic intensity. In this latter novel, his masterpiece, the greater complexity of points of view, the emphasis on characters from various socio-economic strata, and the ruptured chronology, confer both strength and dynamism to the composition. This composition is based precisely on the recognition of the gaps denied by his first novel.

José Lins do Rego’s oeuvre is a *post facto* dramatization of the decadence of the large estates, the extinguishing of the old sugarcane plantations and the development of the sugar mills: the “dead furnace” of that semi-feudal world which is a “kingdom” in the eyes of the narrator of *Menino de Engenho*. This kingdom is persuasive because the narrator is able to evoke, without sentimentality, the poetry of childhood. Even though the night is close, sheep turn into stallions: “Below the hog plum, the dark cold of night grew nearer. The sheep ran. And the fear of the silence at the end of the day, those heavy shadows, made me run faster with my stallion” (51). However, even when giving up space to magic, the text is persecuted by the surrounding reality. In the same passage: “Workers with hoes on their shoulders came home from work. They talked boisterously, as if the twelve hours of work did not weigh heavily on their backs” (51).

According to Antonio Carlos Villaça, *Menino de Engenho* witnesses a victory of the novelist over the author of memoirs.¹² Further, this first novel by José Lins do Rego achieves a poetic balance between an honest documentation of the real, its illusory negation, and the complex “as if” in the building up of the difficult remembrance of loss.

Notes

¹ The influence of the “Regional Manifesto,” and of Gilberto Freyre, its great spokesman, was decisive on the works of José Lins do Rego in general, and especially on *Menino de Engenho*. While acknowledging this well-known fact, the present essay uses an alternative interpretive approach.

² Andrade 126.

³ *Menino de Engenho* 38. This and the remaining quotations from the novel by José Lins do Rego are taken from the 75th edition (Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1999). (Translator’s note: The translations of all quotations from *Menino de Engenho* are our own.)

⁴ The *sertão* is an arid, semi-desert backland region found in the Northeast of Brazil. (Translator’s note)

⁵ See Paulo Prado’s 1924 testimony about his friend, Oswald de Andrade: “In Paris, at the top of a studio in Place Clichy, the navel of the world, Oswald de Andrade was dazzled by the discovery of his own country. Returning to his homeland he confirmed—in the enchantment of the Portuguese medieval architecture—the surprising revelation that Brazil did exist. This fact, which others had doubted, opened his eyes to an ecstatic vision of a new world, unexplored and mysterious. The poetry ‘*pau-brasil*’ (brazil-wood) was created.” Prado 5.

⁶ Related to this, Silviano Santiago wrote that, “Oswald de Andrade and Lins do Rego... after publishing novels of memoirs at the beginning of their careers, including *Memórias Sentimentais de João Miramar* and *Menino de Engenho*, respectively, felt the need, in their old age, to rewrite the *same* novel. However, their writing now stemmed from memory, without the conniving framework of the ‘novel,’ namely, *Um Homem sem Profissão* and *Meus Verdes Anos*. This coincidence is very significant because it demonstrates how fragile the distinctions of the literary schools are... and how fluid and of what little worth there is in the frontiers between the discourse of fictional memoirs and autobiographical discourse are in terms of the Brazilian definition.” Santiago 33.

⁷ Oliveira 32.

⁸ Lima, “Flor Sanctorum” 32.

⁹ Milton Marques Jr. and Elizabeth Marinheiro 20.

¹⁰ Gomes 38.

¹¹ Blaise Cendrars, qtd. in Villaça, xv.

¹² Villaça xx.

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