

## Guidelines for Reading Vieira

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In the prophetic writings, sermons and correspondence of the Jesuit Antônio Vieira (b. Lisbon, 1608; d. Salvador, 1697), time conveys nature and history as factual figures or allegories of the divine. For Vieira, time is theologically categorized as deriving from God. This suggests, therefore, that the enlightened idea that God is dead and that history is no more than a human process, inherent to the *res publica*, are alien concepts for Vieira. These ideas, conceived in the second half of the eighteenth century, saw time quantitatively as a continuum of steps progressing towards the fulfillment of Reason in a utopian future. This concept of time does not entail, however, mythical or cyclical temporality; neither is it pantheism or a view of history as illusion or appearance. As a counter-reformed Jesuit, Vieira states that eternity is in all those periods that are part, as created periods, of the complete realization of the concept of God, a concept both totally indeterminate and totally identical to itself.

Therefore, two points must be borne in mind when reading Vieira's work. First of all, his interpretation of the events, which took place during the Portuguese Empire, asserts that all times are real and bear their own historicity. They are, thus, different because they are similar but not identical types of Time. The second point is that none of these times is repeated in Time, since the only Thing to be repeated in each and every moment is the Identity of the divine concept which guides them as First Cause and Final Cause. As an *example* or *shadow of things to come* (*umbra futurarum*), all times entail the eternal and the eternal is always the here-and-now, as both *Light* and *Prototype*. In their similitude, however, or rather, in their difference,

times have not yet made Christ's Kingdom materialize. Completely present in God or in the identity of the concept of God, future is, and has always been, fulfilled by the eternal, but remains no more than virtual for humankind, who have used it or shared it only in an incomplete way. Christ has surely come once and Providence continues to charitably reveal to all men the efficacy of the New Alliance, by mysteriously foreshadowing the future of the Second Advent. Thus, according to Vieira, it is the will of all individuals, orders and institutions of the Portuguese Empire as the righteous will of the Good, as well as the freedom of all concerned as the straightforward choice for the Good already confirmed by Christ's sacrifice, that have to be sought to bring to pass the Kingdom of God on earth. The *recta ratio agibilium* and the *recta ratio factibilium*, that is, the straightforward reason behind all things to be undertaken and attained, is supported by God's innate Grace or His counsel, whose natural light *is* here-and-now, in the *synderesis* present in the human mind.

The past experiences of forefathers, prophets and heroes of Faith prefigure the fulfillment of the providential meaning of history. It is because of this that humankind and past events are re-focused by Vieira in the act of preaching, as *examples* to be imitated in the process of bettering the "mystical body" of the Portuguese State. In this case, a rhetoric of Aristotelian-Ciceronian nature proves to be entirely capable of persuading audiences of the providential meaning of history, thus illuminating their wills and their freedoms towards the coming of future generations. Vieira wrote the *História do Futuro* (*History of the Future*)—whose title has seemed paradoxical and imaginary since the eighteenth-century—with similar theological and political assumptions. However, the same title clearly becomes historically intelligible when both the contemporary foundations and the categories of its discursive logic as well as the material and institutional conditions of the time are reconstituted.

It is necessary to remember that nowadays we *read* Vieira's sermons by attributing to them an autonomy that dissociates them from their oral practice. In Vieira's day, they were *heard* rather than *read*. Catholic preaching presupposed both that the divine Light was within the Jesuit's mind, which was externalized in his voice, body and style by means of oratory *actio*, and that it would legitimize the Portuguese public institutions as the naturalness of the hierarchy. Delivered by an authorized voice, sermons worked as instruments of hierarchical subordination whenever they reinstated the divine presence that, in turn, authorized both power and its practices.

Sermons were orthodoxly polemical because they were papist, monarchist and anti-heretic. The decree of the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546, had already defined the voice of the Priest as the mediator of the truths of the faith. Vieira's preaching, therefore, combats the Lutheran theses and the practice of individual reading of the Bible, the *sola scriptura*, declared heretical by the Council. He also attacks the Machiavellian definition of political power as an artifice that is independent of Christian morals. His voice is entirely set on the earthly affairs of the Empire and thus establishes analogies between human beings and biblical events, as well as between human beings and the historical events of his homeland, i.e., Portugal.

As an agent of the Jesuit *devotio moderna*, Vieira never dissociates theory from practice. His actions and works were strategically opposed to the Inquisition, because he wished to retain the assets of those Jews persecuted in Portugal, who otherwise would take their assets and flee to Holland. In order to face the mercantile competition of the reformed European countries, mainly England and Holland, the Portuguese planned to use the Jewish money to found trading companies for India and Brazil. In exchange, the Inquisition would soften the "methods" used against new-Christians and Jews. The safekeeping of Jewish assets in Portugal was closely aligned with Vieira's prophetic style in relation to the Americas. Above all, his voice prophesied that Portugal's future as a universal instrument in favor of Catholicism would be outstanding, which proved to be an absolute mistake. In such a future, the role of Brazil and those of Maranhão and Grão Pará would be essential.

In the "Sermão da Epifania" ("Sermon of Epiphany"), which he delivered to the Portuguese court in 1662 after ten years of unsuccessful struggle to defend the Indigenous against enslaving colonizers in Maranhão and Grão Pará, Vieira states that the Portuguese discovery was a second, new creation of the world. The first time, God had created the world alone; this second time was an attempt to integrate "remote and alien peoples" to Christianity. God had made the Portuguese and Portugal His "second causes," or rather, the instruments of His Will:

This is the end for which God chose, amongst all other nations, our own nation, which is considered pure in Faith and loved for her piety: these are the foreign and remote peoples, to whom God promised we would take His Holy name: this is His Empire, which He wanted to extend through us as well as to establish within

us: this is, was and will be the greatest and the highest glory of the Portuguese worth, zeal, religion and Christianity.<sup>1</sup> (2: 10)

In April, 1659, while at the Amazon Mission at Camutá, Vieira had written a letter to his friend, Father André Fernandes, later Bishop of Japan. The text, known as “Carta ao Bispo do Japão” (“Letter to the Bishop of Japan”), spelled out in detail his prophetic interpretation of the *Trovas* by Gonçalo Anes Bandarra, a sixteenth-century shoemaker. Castro has suggested that Vieira has transformed the *Trovas* into the “... foundation for a new concept of Sebastianism, according to which the return of the *Encoberto* (‘a Portuguese king sent by Providence’) would not bring King Sebastian back immediately, but indicated the advent of King John IV. This became the essential foundation of Vieira’s belief in a Fifth Empire and in the inevitability of the King’s resurrection” (125).<sup>2</sup>

The “Sermão dos Bons Anos” (“Sermon of the Good Years”), which Vieira delivered on January 1st, 1642, in the Royal Chapel of Lisbon, comments on one line from the Lord’s Prayer, *adveniat Regnum tuum*, “thy Kingdom come.” In this sermon, Vieira prophesied that King John IV, who was alive and present at the preaching of the sermon, would provide continuity for the dead King Sebastian, thus fulfilling God’s promise to King Afonso made at the battle of Ourique. He claimed that the Kingdom that Portugal once was had come and that Portugal was still to be the future Kingdom, namely the Fifth Empire.<sup>3</sup> (The previous empires had been the Chaldean, the Persian, the Greek and the Roman.)

In 1647, in order to negotiate peace in Brazil and Africa, Vieira went to The Hague. During this time he was in contact with the Jews such as Menasseh-ben-Israel at the synagogue in Amsterdam. In 1640, the latter had written a prophetic text called *Esperança de Israel* (*Israel’s Hope*), later imitated by Vieira in *Esperanças de Portugal* (*Portugal’s Hopes*), the 1659 letter addressed to his friend André Fernandes. Vieira discussed the destiny of the lost tribes of Israel with his Jewish friend, as well as the recovery of Judea and the advent of the Messiah: these are also themes which were dealt with in Vieira’s later letters and prophetic works in which he describes the providential role of the New World and of the Native Brazilians before the return of the Messiah. For him, armies of converted Native Brazilians would combat the Turks in Europe before the Second Advent. The biblical books of Daniel and Isaiah, the *Trovas* by Bandarra; the treatise *De Procuranda* written

by the Peruvian Jesuit José de Acosta, among other works, provide the substance from which Vieira would later prophetically interpret the meaning of the Jesuits' teaching of the divine word to the Native Brazilians in the sixteenth century, beginning with the mission of Nóbrega and Anchieta.<sup>4</sup> For him, when the New World was included in the Christian fellowship of love, the Jesuit mission and the catechism of gentiles was a mystery of Providence that helped the Church in its spiritual redemption of humankind. It was precisely because Native Brazilians were savage, barbarian and "stupid and ignorant" that they had to be lovingly led to overcome their barbaric state. When colonizers enslaved the Natives, they also became responsible for their lack of faith, as well as for the loss of their souls to Satan. In this way, the Portuguese Crown was sanctified due to its apostolic work of sponsoring the Jesuit mission, which, in turn, bore witness to the existence of the innate Grace that brings about God's supernatural project in practice.

In the "Sermão XIV do Rosário," Vieira interprets African slavery in the same way, i.e., that it is by means of baptism that divine Providence frees the soul of the African gentiles from Hell, where they were destined to go had they remained in the natural freedom of their land of origin.<sup>5</sup> Almost 50 years afterwards, in 1691, Vieira was approached by the Council of Jesuit Missions regarding the measures which ought to be taken in relation to Palmares, the nation of runaway slaves led by Zumbi, and who were attacking the sugarcane mills of Pernambuco, in the Northeast of Brazil. Vieira provided five reasons in favor of the destruction of the *quilombos* (the runaway slave villages) and the extermination of its inhabitants. His first argument was that it might be possible to send African priests, originally from Angola, as ambassadors to *palmarinos*, the inhabitants of Palmares. Secondly, however, he suggested that these ambassadors might be regarded as spies of the Portuguese government and concluded that they would be slaughtered as a result of this. Vieira conceded that the *palmarinos*, might indeed stop all attacks against the settlers, but they would never stop sheltering runaway slaves. His fifth argument, the most decisive of all, stated that "... because they are rebels and slaves, they are and will continue to be in a state of sin, from which they cannot be freed, nor be given the Lord's grace, without going back to the service and obedience of the their masters, something which none of them shall willingly do" (D'Azevedo 372).<sup>6</sup>

Vieira was obviously not an adherent to the Enlightenment. As a counter-reformed Jesuit, he did not accept any doctrine that was dissociated from

practical things, because he believed that these practical things were also endowed with the Lord's Presence. Slavery, the slaves' baptism, their salvation, as well as the extermination of rebel slaves, were all integral parts of his objective to achieve political-economic hegemony in the Southern Atlantic region. This hegemony would obviously be a Catholic hegemony, secured by a Portuguese monopoly in the trading of slaves and the African workforce. Therefore, when Vieira emphasized the slaves' duty of obedience, he presupposed that slavery was a subject that demanded deep meditation, a task, which had been assigned to Portugal by divine Providence. As he often said, Brazil had its body in America but that its soul was in Africa.

The final aim of all of Vieira's actions and work was the orderly integration of individuals, public institutions and religious orders of the Portuguese Empire, ranging from the most humble slaves and "wild" Natives to court aristocrats and royal princes. His aim was their collective redemption in a single "mystical body" of guided wills and freedoms directed to bring to pass the Kingdom of God on earth, namely the return of the Messiah. Vieira made the Bragança dynasty sacred by establishing mysterious links between Catholic ritual, the canonical texts and absolute monarchy defined as an instrument of divinity. Therefore, in order to defend the universal destiny of his country, which included the catechism of the Indigenous, the enslaving of the Africans, the integration of the Jews and the New Christians, the founding of the trade companies, the disciplining of the nobles, the making sacred of the Braganças as chosen by God, among other aims, Vieira qualified the medium of language as something to be perceived as a form. The same theological concept of divine Identity grounded his rhetorical technique as the thinking of similitude or figural rationality. Here it is fundamental to discuss the question of form.

Inspired in the systemic approach developed by Niklas Luhmann, I may suggest that the Sun, the source of light, cannot be seen; rather, we see things in light. In the same way, we do not read letters, but rather, with the help of the alphabet, we read words. If we wish to read the alphabet itself, we must by necessity order it alphabetically. The coordination of elements produces form, but the means of support or coordination of form does not in itself usually attract attention. In Vieira's art, things are seen in light, yet Light itself is seen as well; we read words, signifiers, as well as the substance of both letters and sounds. Vieira's art is a device that "produces presence," a theological-political device for the production of divine Presence within the

milieu of Portuguese institutions, both in the metropolis and in the colonies—I am referring to the concept of production of presence as proposed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (1999). Vieira's doctrine of the sign is different, because his thought also encompasses a qualified metaphor for the divine. For Vieira, language is *never* instrumentally autonomous from form as an aesthetics. Rather, language itself, by nature made up of sounds in which a human set of signs resides, is the presence of the divine in the human mind and in the means by which social interaction takes place. In this way, the substance of both form and content, disdained in contemporary theories after Saussure, also takes part in the cohesive power of their metaphysical principle. The substantiation of language, therefore, also makes language visible as a medium.

Vieira's art multiplies what is One, mirroring it by means of attribution, proportion and proportionality in the similarity of sounds, letters, words, concepts, images and arguments. This is done in order to make both discourse and the act of discourse into an effective figure of the Presence, which makes the world be and wish for the Being. The substantiation of language is obviously a poetic and historical process that is outdated. It is not a trans-historical "(neo)baroque" structure. Nor is it an "aesthetic rupture" that can be made autonomous from its contemporary function of propaganda for an absolutist State. It is neither a literary nor an "original" manifestation of either "good" or "bad" taste. It is not a pre-enlightened irrationality damned by Hegelian-positivist retrospective accusations, which conceive the past as no more than a step towards the glories of a neo-liberal present.

The acuteness of styles is one of the main features of the metaphysical and logical analogy that articulates the complementary opposition of *finite/infinite* in seventeenth-century Luso-Brazilian practices. An inherent element of the historical form of absolutist rationality, acuteness teaches that representation is infinite. In its folds, folds that are not Deleuzian, it alludes to that which is unexpressed in its First Cause, that which appears unclear within the material medium of language as a tendentially sublime void. The sublime effect of God's presence is similar to the effects produced by the impossibility of representation in our contemporary virtual reality. Such a comparison makes the counter-reformed metaphysics of the Jesuit's sermons and prophetic works intelligible. However, since the French Revolution, the metaphysical subordination of history to time, defined as divine presence, as

well as the sublime effect of representations as concepts, have become ruins more than ruined. They are only interesting in as much as they can be seen as constituted by their irremediably extinct historical difference. One day, the present, acclaimed today as the global eternity of “post-utopia,” will also ruin itself.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Este é o fim para que Deus entre todas as nações escolheu a nossa com o ilustre nome de pura na Fé, e amada na piedade: estas são as gentes estranhas e remotas, aonde nos prometeu que havíamos de levar seu Santíssimo Nome: este é o império seu, que por nós quis amplificar e em nós estabelecer; e esta é, foi, e será sempre a maior e a melhor glória do valor, do zelo, da religião e da cristandade portuguesa.”

<sup>2</sup> “... fundamento de uma nova concepção de sebastianismo, segundo a qual o regresso do Encoberto não traria já D. Sebastião, mas significava o advento de D. João IV, e fazendo delas, por conseguinte, a base essencial da sua crença no Quinto Império e na inevitabilidade da ressurreição do Rei.”

<sup>3</sup> See Vieira 1: 315-342.

<sup>4</sup> In a series of sermons focusing on Francis Xavier asleep and awake, Vieira established a homology between Xavier’s work and that of other Jesuits in India and Japan and in the Brazilian Jesuit missions. He suggested that God attributed to the Portuguese monarchy the essential mission of universalizing Catholic faith by means of the Society of Jesus and thus prepare for the Advent of God’s Kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> See Vieira 11: 301.

<sup>6</sup> “... sendo rebelados e cativos, estão e perseveram em pecado contínuo e atual, de que não podem ser absoltos, nem receber a graça de Deus, sem se restituírem ao serviço e obediência de seus senhores, o que de nenhum modo hão de fazer.”

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