

JOSÉ MIGUEL WISNIK.

Veneno remédio: O futebol e o Brasil.

São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2008.

Roots of the Twenty-first Century

Why does no one write works of national interpretation anymore?

Some will say that this kind of project has no place nowadays. Gilberto Freyre and Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, respectively, wrote *The Masters and the Slaves* and *The Roots of Brazil* nearly eighty years ago. We simply didn't know as much as we do today, thanks to decades of work by social scientists and historians. But if all this knowledge lets us write about Brazil with more nuance, it also stays our hand with the reminder that any attempt to set down national characteristics will be merely an impressionistic exercise, one that cannot stand up to rigorous historical analysis.

But the work of national interpretation is not and never was merely a record of accumulated facts. These works don't speak of Brazil as it is. Their horizon is radically different from that of purely scientific or historical studies; it is ethical, almost transcendent, and sounds out the nature of the collective. It asks not only how we arrived where we are but also where we're headed, and even where we should be going. Its field of vision encompasses the past, present, and future in a single continuum, taking an extremely long-term view of history, as if we were navigating on a current without knowing where it carries us. The true writer of national interpretation names our destination, making it into a fable in which the reader can recognize himself.

And so, after decades of development in social sciences and historical studies, is there still room for works that announce Brazil's purpose?

The answer came four years ago, in the form of a book that may become the *Roots of Brazil* of the twenty-first century: *Veneno remédio: O futebol e o Brasil*, by José Miguel Wisnik. It's lamentable that the book hasn't yet provoked much debate, especially in academic circles. Perhaps this shows some reticence regarding the book's subject material, since not all intellectuals are prepared to take football seriously. But perhaps the problem is that the book points to an unresolved

question: miscegenation. Not simple miscegenation of genetic or phenotypic traits but miscegenation as the fundamental rupture of patterns associated with order and discipline. Miscegenation, in short, as the mixture of the structures and principles of civilization. Which would be, shall we say, a fertile mess.

For Wisnik, football isn't an escape valve for social tensions, or a banal form of entertainment, or the simple expression of economic and commercial interests. Rather, it's principally a symbolic system that brings wide sectors of society closer than they otherwise would be to real experiences of gain and loss—which, as such, should be felt and lived collectively. Either all lose, or all win. One can't overlook the political and identity-related ramifications of this shared adventure.

The temptation to see a populist drive behind the game of football, a possible manipulation of the masses, is powerful but misplaced. It's true that fans' devotion may be a form of eradicating respect for difference (hooliganism is a reality), but aside from fanaticism there is an immense gradation of associative possibilities, various ways of identifying with what's going on down on the field. The psychoanalytic framework of Wisnik's argument won't escape the reader: discussion of football turns into the analysis of complex mechanisms of transference. That is, what happens on the field has implications for the person watching the game, because history is coded therein—and, as it happens, the destiny of not just the observer, but of all, is involved.

A fundamental difference between the game of football and manipulative mass phenomena like fascism, Wisnik argues, is that its fans exist in the hypnotic state that moves them forward, avoiding anything that might give them a reality check (or an encounter with “the real,” in psychoanalytic terms). The game, meanwhile, is a mesmerizing battle always on the edge of the real, and it will inescapably fall into the real. In fact, as mesmerizing as the game may be, when one plays for keeps the risk of defeat is both assumed and lived, as if loss formed part of the dialogue the subject holds with destiny. In playing, one learns how to lose. But the fascist model sustains itself through the negation of any and all loss, avoiding the shadow of frustration and always intent, irritably and brutally, upon sweeping from the map those who might contribute to an unacceptable defeat.

Why does Wisnik use the language of “poison” and “cure” to characterize Brazilian football? The formula recalls the *pharmakon*, which contains within itself the seeds of both healing and destruction. The book's argument is fairly

simple, partly intuitive and unfailingly accurate: according to Wisnik, Brazil exists in an imaginary oscillating dualism of success and disaster. Either we're the best, or we're worthless. The country, Wisnik says, "is either the recipe for happiness or a dead-end failure." There is no compromise, no middle ground between the two poles. The most perfect satire of this state of the collective soul is the "Brás Cubas Poulitice" that Machado de Assis puts into his protagonist's imagination; Brás Cubas dies just as he hits upon a providential solution that will alleviate "our melancholy humanity" once and for all. Against profound sadness, eternal happiness. Machado's lesson is that we'll die of this yet.

Veneno remédio is a book in which erudition on the subject of football is paired with cultural and philosophical analysis. If the argument that it proposes is closer to Sérgio Buarque de Holanda's radical uncertainty about Brazil's future, Wisnik's dense and elliptical prose puts him, at least stylistically, in the company of Gilberto Freyre. Or perhaps we can say that *Veneno remédio* plays midfielder between the two essayists, since the goalposts Wisnik uses come from their thinking. I shall limit myself to one question, a fundamental one even for those who don't follow football. It has to do with something that, in *Veneno remédio*, is termed "the nonlinear nature of Brazilian football."

Why are nonlinearity, ellipses, and sinuous curves called upon to say something that goes far beyond the football field? How can this resistance to the rectilinear help decipher the meaning of an entire social matrix and pose questions about collective destiny? The answer lies in a realization born of literature.

In addition to being a lover of football and a musician himself, Wisnik is a talented literary critic. Thus *Veneno remédio* takes its initial inspiration from the distinction made by the Italian filmmaker and poet Pier Paolo Pasolini, who, in the early 1970s, imagined the opposition between football played in prose, which he associated with European teams, and football played in poetry, a style identified with South American football, and Brazilian football in particular.

The provocation has profound consequences for understanding the game from within. But, at the same time, it points toward different ways of playing the social contract, different ways of exploring the spaces of society. On one side is the European style (capitalist, urbane, First World, etc.), "linear and goal-oriented," with "triangular passes, defensive emphasis, counter-attacks, crosses, and follow-through"; on the other is the Latin American mode (peripheral, rural, Third World, etc.), with its "creation of empty spaces, feints, autonomous dribbles, [and] a congenital tendency toward the attack." Two systems of

playing and two proposed civilizations face off, even though the principles in question are present in each society.

Even with the proviso that the two methods aren't exclusive, this brings us to a delicate moment, when more irritable readers, suspicious of the "Freyrian" approach, which praises tropical civilization in all its malleability and ductility, will pin Wisnik with an apology of tropical *malemolência*—as if each effective dribble, in all its dazzling material beauty, were proof of the superiority of a society that sidesteps conflict, being unable to face it. Here one might see a superficial reading of the "cordial man" by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, which the unwary tend to identify with the elimination of violence and the triumph of a "natural goodness" fully realized in this blessed homeland.

The reader in question is invited to swallow his irritation and put his lips back in their original position for a moment, before trying out his ironic smirk in the face of—just look!—one more thinker stepping into line behind Freyre. Discussing whether Wisnik is more or less Freyrian is, frankly, useless. Evidently, there is something quite modernist in the study of the consequences of these dribbles, something in these "irruptions" that end up short-circuiting the linear order of clear objectives defined by the logic of means and ends, which is perhaps closer to Mário and Oswald than to Freyre. Or perhaps that something is tropicalist, dreaming of a civilization that constructs itself against the threatening order of technique and predictability, valuing a Dionysian freedom born of the pleasure and joy of the body.

The football coach, in this sense, is an unwanted castrator. If necessary, he will ask the genius to put aside his creative outbursts in the name of efficiency, because results are what matter. This is a kind of Dunga or Parreira complex—men who, not by chance, ended up playing the paradigmatic role of the castrating coach. They were hated because they would have pruned back exactly what Brazil did best.

This is not to say that castration and technique are unnecessary. Any psychological organization (including the collective) develops in the space between the assumed and internalized rule, on the one hand, and the space normally identified with "freedom," on the other. This "free" space would not exist without the established order. Transgression can't exist without laws, just as freedom depends, after all, on the breaking of an internally fixed rule that functions on the subjective plane. To use the old psychoanalytic jargon: one doesn't play well when the superego dominates, but one can't let one's instincts run wild,

either—the id, that is, the “this” that, when uncontrolled, would plunge all into a war against all, with no truces and no end.

Let us leave aside some of the book’s internal mirages, such as Wisnik’s enchantment with the unique character of football—which, unlike American football, supposedly lives on the edge of the imponderable, set against the cumulative and progressive strategies of the most popular American sports. There is something very interesting, in fact, about a sport in which the slightest and least expected details can decide the game. Soccer tends to give the sense that the best team isn’t always the one that wins, as if in the end there were a certain poetic justice waiting to redeem even the weakest. Meanwhile, sports like basketball and American football function via the linear accumulation of points, making it practically inevitable that the best will win in the end—the team with the best strategy, preparation, and talent, that is—thereby eliminating, so to speak, the power of chance.

It is the power of chance (yes, Mallarmé is also central in *Veneno remédio*) that is at stake when the “superiority” of Brazilian football comes into play. But this is not chance as cosmic punishment, or as mythical determinant of history. The “chance” in question points toward the fertile power of uncertainty, that which opens into a myriad of possibilities, precisely because nothing can close off or control the environment when one is talking about a truly poetic play—and there are many, beautifully described in the book.

Poetry (and football as well, with its epiphanic moments) lives on the edge of uncertainty, testing and pushing the boundaries of the possible, in that “band of structural spontaneity” that Wisnik attributes to football. Technique, however, works with the boundaries of the possible, bending itself to them and respecting them in a kind of reverence for the given.

One can then imagine the range of the “nonlinearity” postulated as a national characteristic by *Veneno remédio*. Instead of constituting a fixed and inescapable character, it is simply *one more element in play*, which Brazilians should come to terms with and which might even benefit them. From a “rational” perspective (developed, controlling, technical, etc.), nonlinearity is a cardinal flaw. But it is from this drug that Brazil will extract its cure; rather, it is through this poison that Brazil can enter into dialogue with the masters of the world. In this sense football can be thought of as the “Brás Cubas Poultry that worked.” The idea is tempting, and Wisnik calls another Buarque de Holanda to the field in the middle of the game—this time, the son of the author of *Roots of Brazil*.

Observing a scrimmage between European boys and the sons of immigrants in Paris in 1908, Chico Buarque noted that the rich boys played like “masters of the field,” preferring “control of the ball as a way to occupy the field in an organized way,” while the poor boys were merely “masters of the ball.” The passage is worth reproducing for its striking conclusion: the immigrants’ sons, says Wisnik, echoing Chico, “take advantage of the opportunity in football to instruct themselves as best they can in the art of intimacy with the ball (developing, within the game, the splendid and wasted expertise that we know so well from the fleeting spectacle of the ‘stoplight jugglers’). Some people are *equilibrados* [well-balanced], others are *equilibristas* [acrobats].”

Between the well-balanced and the acrobat, the question begins to stir of the mastery of codes, and how much one can trust in the rules. The well-balanced rich boy plays as if the field were his natural plane, since every square millimeter of it can and should be occupied rationally. The exception, of course, is the exact, wandering point where we find the ball, because it is there that the “poor boy” shows up to even the game (the circuslike aspect of Ronaldinho Gaúcho leaps to mind). After all, nobody has told the poor boy that the field is his as well. This is why he should construct his marvels up and to the sides, always around himself, without losing the precious ball in its capacity as an unstable point of equilibrium.

Still in the fathers-and-sons bracket, José Miguel goes on with the observations of Guilherme Wisnik, reminding us that the occupation of space is revealing when it comes to American history and the nation’s march to the west. In this, one can see “the imperialist proclivity for conquest,” the tendency to advance point by point across the territory, which recalls not only the American football field but also a grand poetic lineage leading “from Walt Whitman to Herman Melville, including John Ford, Frank Lloyd Wright, and land art.”

We, on the other side (an imaginary “we,” naturally), find our balance wherever and however we can. However, in *Veneno remédio*, nonlinearity is called in not simply to speak to the truth of a “jeitinho” or a “bossa”—“our things,” as Noel Rosa called them. It would be no use to gild these “things” and hang them on the wall of our illusions like trophies, telling ourselves that we are the best even if the rest of the world doesn’t know it. In short, this is neither self-deprecation nor self-glorification. *Veneno remédio* poses the urgent question of what to do with what we have: how to evolve, given the state of things?

At one point in the book, when various authors are pulled in to say something

about football, Wisnik recalls Mário de Andrade, who, writing about Brazil's defeat by Argentina in 1939, imagined the Brazilians as "eleven hummingbirds," defenseless before the oiled platinum machine, as if a "Minerva-Argentina" had delivered a masterful slap to the face of an "adolescent, completely drunk Dionysius," who, in his divine stubbornness, still invented "a few subtle trips, a few samba-like ways of deceiving," and "a few lightning-swift volleys, a radiant, Pan-like thing, full of the most sublime promises."

Here is the secret of *Veneno remédio*: it depicts a sublime and unrealized promise, a spasm of beauty and genius that consumes itself in the same instant, that empties itself without becoming productive—a fleeting and useless spectacle, like the boys juggling at the stoplight. But how to turn this unproductive productivity, this glorious moment without consequences, into a project, a chain of clear and stable consequences for society? How, out of the incessant pleasure that drives Macunaíma throughout his antihero's saga, to construct something? Must Macunaíma be sent to school to learn the technique that he ignores and scorns on principle?

Garrincha is Macunaíma; Macunaíma is Garrincha. Beyond the "biographical" similarities with this *saci-curupira* with the crooked legs—exceptional birth, abnormal growth, simultaneous precocity and retardation—Garrincha is the master of the dribble, and he takes it to unimaginable extremes of grace and curvature. And the Macunaímian dribble of Mané Garrincha is, for Wisnik, the fortuitous conjunction of three terms: *ellipse* (a flight from linearity that produces a poetic effect on the rhetorical plane); *slip* (a flash of the unconscious, in Freud's vision), and *syncopation* (a contrametrical accent found in the intersection of European and African rhythms). All three are dribbles, in their own way: the ellipse is a way of getting around the next logical step, creating a suspension and an unexpected swerve in the discourse; the slip (*Witz* in the original; *ato falho* in Portuguese; *mot d'esprit* in French) is the shift that gets around the censorship of the conscience and lets loose that which was guarded in the unconscious; syncopation makes it possible for the body to slide between the beat and the backbeat, doubling over to fit into a space that resists the military step of the march and then expanding in those swaying *requebros* of capoeira that, in the eyes of more traditional writers at the turn of the twentieth century, seemed like a simple, regressive element, dangerously Africanized—and that in the modernist view was justly regarded as a treasure, something closer to our purest essence (or, perhaps, in Mário de Andrade's words, our most "sublime promises").

But nations aren't made with Garrinchas alone, and we may ask to what point a stubborn and premodern amateurism can still exist in an advancing society that is starting seriously to test the waters of its future. *Veneno remédio* has appeared, and not by chance, at a moment when Brazil is testing out the strange feeling that, just maybe, there might be a place for it at the table of developed nations. Evidently, the tension between technique and freedom, predictability and spontaneity, virtual and real, becomes an agonizing question for the country and explains, at least in part, why the "essay of national interpretation" has been reborn exactly now, in the midst of the thrust of the past decade (God only knows where it will carry us). When the transcendent question about the collective's fate starts making sense and increasing its volume, the essay becomes urgent and lets critical imagination loose the ties of strict objectivity, just as necessary as it is limiting.

Best not to get into Pelé, leaving football lovers with the task of looking for the dialogue that Wisnik strikes up with Tostão and Décio Pignatari in order to understand the utterly exceptional player who seems to have "brought the virtual into the present." Let us remain with the unresolved (and unresolvable) pendulum between technique and freedom, the well-balanced and the acrobat, which throws us into a sort of tunnel in the history of ideas, at the end of which are the luminous debates of Brazilian modernism, which in turn become relevant in the discussion that, in the midst of the dictatorship, the critic Antonio Candido made of the constant swing between "order" and "disorder"—a restless, provocative swing, which Candido would famously name, and not without irony, the "dialectic of malandroism."

When he published his essay in 1970, Candido analyzed Leonardo, the protagonist of *Memoirs of a Police Sergeant*, by Manuel Antônio de Almeida. Here, we can see precisely the problem that Wisnik tackles in his essay. In the nineteenth-century novel, according to Candido, "we can say that there is a positive hemisphere of order and a negative hemisphere of disorder, functioning like two magnets that attract first Leonardo's parents and then Leonardo. The dynamic of the book supposes a seesaw between the two poles as Leonardo grows up and participates in one, then the other, until finally being absorbed by the conventionally positive side."

It so happens that, in a critical reading of a clearly modernist bent, Antonio Candido made (according to Wisnik) "a surprisingly positive reading" when he concluded that the novel produced, in its atmosphere of negotiations, "an en-

chanting ‘world without blame’ with a democratic and tolerant spirit, against all stigmatization and witch-hunts.” But Wisnik sees a discreet preference for the paradoxically positive value of disorder. It’s as if Garrincha had won the battle, if perhaps not the war.

For pointing out the ways in which social structures permeate novels, Antonio Candido’s arguments would be fundamental for Roberto Schwarz, who criticized Candido’s flirtation with disorder—affirmed precisely when Brazil needed some order to face off against the arbitrary will of the dictatorship—in an essay titled “Assumptions, Unless I’m Mistaken, About the Dialectic of Malandroism.” But before we lose ourselves in this thicket of interesting issues, we must note that the “dialectic of malandroism” refers to a balance, a “see-saw,” between two poles, without necessarily indicating that either will prevail. Neither poetry nor prose, neither technique nor epiphany, neither football nor *futebol*—what we have is first and foremost radical irresolution.

The productive reading of *Veneno remédio* demands not only that the reader take the title’s provocation seriously but also that he or she pay attention to the fact that its argument is carefully set up in successive oppositions, rich in their irresolution and tension: “prose and poetry,” “leather ball and capital,” “ritual and game,” “mud and grass,” etc. One need only note how the essay is constructed to see that Wisnik is writing about an *indivisible* (and not by chance; *indivísivel* is the title of his recent album) unit of contradictory forces, a perpetual pendulum that proclaims itself the deepest truth about Brazil. This is not an essential truth, frozen in space and time and buried in the geological depths of “being,” but a truth of tension and irresolution. And the impression remains that, whenever they can, Brazilians will fall toward the pole of disorder, because it is there that clashes are “softened” and the world is potentially made more “open.”

Here we return to the bone of contention, because this supposedly malleable and porous side of things indicates precisely the bloodless confrontation, cordiality in its most generous aspect—opening the curtains of the past to reveal the thorny question of the legacy of slavery and how it was established and developed in Brazil.

One can’t accuse Wisnik of avoiding the problem. On the contrary, he tries to take the bull by the horns when, taking up the dialogue between the exiled critic Anatol Rosenfeld and Mário Filho about the presence of blacks in football, he suggests a sort of “racial democracy on the field.” In the wake of the first de-

bates about affirmative action in the country, it's worth reproducing the passage in full: "We can say that racial democracy in Brazilian football prescribes (in the medical sense, of recommending a cure), but does not describe, Brazil. Or perhaps that it describes realized and significant possibilities that do not form a complete system. In other words, the country does not align with itself; racial democracy has to be thought of as something which both is and is not. This paradox is the crux of the problem."

The question is how to leave the football field and realize what is only realized as a fleeting and spectacular moment—how to spread this promise and turn it into reality or a "system," allowing society to dribble through the harsh opposition between classes and races. The problem becomes even more glaring when class and race overlap and mingle as much and as often as they do in Brazil.

Miscegenation is not, however, the simple promise of mixture. Wisnik sees no "cosmic race" on the horizon of this civilization, nor is there any intention to deny racism in Brazil (racism "à brasileira," as Roberto DaMatta would say), or to negate the importance of the *negro* movements. What we have in *Veneno remédio* is a vote for the plurality of a composite formula, as if a new, more "porous" model of civilization could spring from it, one with a healthy disregard for the straight lines that clarify, with no margin of error, who is on which side.

The path is treacherous, and Wisnik is well aware of its traps. The biggest is Gilberto Freyre's "Lusotropicalism," which, in its most unfortunate and reactionary moment, flirted with Salazarist Portugal and advocated the exceptionality and the gentleness of Portuguese dominion over the tropics (back when Portugal still had its African colonies, that is). One could argue that the political solutions of a Lusotropicalist Freyre weren't fully revealed back in 1933, in *The Masters and the Slaves*. But let us stop walking on coals and return to the horizons of *Veneno remédio*.

The ungovernable principle—which Wisnik calls, with entertaining and ironic precision, "anthropological π "—suggests that we will always be approaching some undefinable quantity in this laboratory, which would be, essentially, football. Something in the sport, like a reigning uncertainty, recalls Caetano Veloso's diagnosis when he, looking in the North American mirror, reminds us that "down here, uncertainty is the rule."

The tropicalist wave, which others besides Caetano and Wisnik have joined (Hermano Vianna, for one), is carried on the belief in this threshold space, a

place where order slips and ultimately fails, permitting the entrance of an unexpected, unclassifiable element. From here are born racial theorems, or post-racial ones, which not a few critics identify with a perverse form of self-negation by a country that never quite settled its scores with blacks. But this would be a way of putting authors like Wisnik, Caetano, and Hermano (different as they are) into a bubble where they are made to become representatives of a revived and poorly understood Freyrianism. This violent, reductive interpretation is a way of not hearing what they're saying.

Reflections on the limits of order are a vital way of thinking about the limits of classification, not to mention the limits of social spaces—which doesn't mean, of course, that the playful (dis)order on the field can break down the real, cruel barriers off the field. The problem is that this problem doesn't exist solely on the plane of ideas, and as such it forces us to face historical and sociological questions. After all, the "alchemy" of the poison/cure—Brazilian football—has yet to produce the formula to bring democracy into the plane of the real, to provoke that "reality check/fall into the real" that Wisnik proposes, and that may be the only effective way of breaking the enchantment of any magical formula. But once the spell is broken, what will become of Brazil?

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