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**João Gilberto Noll and the critique of *Romance*
*Reportagem***

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João Gilberto Noll and the critique of *Romance Reportagem*

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Abstract

This paper analyses how the Brazilian writer João Gilberto Noll makes a critique of *romance reportagem* novels – a literary genre which achieved an unprecedented success among Brazilian readers in the 1970s and 1980s – through his work. I first show the way Noll appropriates *romance reportagem* thematic elements and structural aspects in his own narrative, in order to establish a critical evaluation of this merged genre of journalism, biography and political literature. I then consider how such an evaluation, while denouncing *romance reportagem*'s ineffectiveness at conveying a valid critique of the socio-political system it proposed to attack, unmasks the ways in which literature becomes appropriated – both as an instrument of ideological propaganda aimed at the self-promotion of its author-narrator and as an inexhaustible source of financial income for the writer and his publisher. My analysis is particularly centred on Noll's narratives throughout the 1980s: the collection of short stories *O Cego e a Dançarina* (1980) and the novels *A Fúria do Corpo* (1981), *Bandoleiros* (1985) and *Hotel Atlântico* (1989).

Resumo

Obtendo um sucesso de vendagem nunca antes experienciado no mercado editorial brasileiro, o romance reportagem inaugura um tipo de literatura de caráter político-ideológico através da manipulação e amalgamento de linguagens e estruturas narrativas provenientes sobretudo de romances policiais, textos jornalísticos e narrativas biográficas. O objetivo deste paper é discutir a maneira como o escritor João Gilberto Noll se apropria dos elementos temáticos e aspectos estruturais do romance reportagem no intuito de estabelecer uma avaliação crítica deste gênero literário denunciando tanto a sua ineficácia em promover uma crítica viável ao sistema sócio-político a que se propõe atacar – revelando assim o caráter fático do romance reportagem que faz uso da literatura enquanto instrumento de propaganda ideológica e promoção do seu autor-narrador – quanto ao uso da literatura enquanto fonte de renda inesgotável para autores e editores deste tipo de romance. Minha análise estará particularmente centrada nas obras de Noll publicadas durante a década de 80: a coleção de contos *O Cego e a Dançarina* (1980) e as narrativas de *A Fúria do Corpo* (1981), *Bandoleiros* (1985) e *Hotel Atlântico* (1989).

1 *Arte engajada* and the politicisation of the aesthetic

Brazilian democracy collapsed in 1964, inaugurating a 21-year dictatorship which had its most oppressive period between the years of 1968 and 1975. If, as Robert Schwarz suggests, intellectual production during the first four years of military government had experienced a certain level of freedom and autonomy in expressing its leftist ideals, at least at a theoretical level, this situation underwent a radical shift after the so-called “coup within a coup” of 1968, especially after the promulgation of the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5).¹ The main purpose of the AI-5 was to suspend the Brazilian Constitution, passing supreme power to the military president in all elements of political, social and economic decision-making in the country. The dictatorial imposition enforced by this military act made it compulsory, amongst other demands, for all material produced for publication in Brazil to be censored before being made accessible to the general public. Among the sectors most targeted by this fierce vigilance were the agencies of public information - newspapers, radio and television - which, due to their ability to reach a wide audience, could easily and rapidly disseminate the subversive ideas of leftist intellectuals.

In the face of these new sanctions, many Brazilian artists became engaged in an aesthetic programme that was politically committed to the denunciation of the social and economic conditions of the oppressed workers at the hands of the military and monied classes. This artistic practice known as *arte engajada* or *arte de resistência* became the criterion upon which one could judge the ‘aesthetic value’ of artistic production during the years of military dictatorship in Brazil. It served also as a reference point for defining the level of ‘political engagement’ assumed by the artist in society. Works which failed to convey a left-wing ideological message and therefore did not follow the precepts of *arte engajada* were severely reproached by left-wing supporters for their ‘lack of social responsibility’; and their creators were labelled as ‘alienated’ and ‘reactionary’ for tacitly corroborating the values of the dictatorial system.

¹ For Schwarz, the increase in military repression over intellectual production was concomitant with the growth of instruments of cultural diffusion among the country’s population as a whole. In 1964, intellectuals were free to engage in discussions and exchange their ideas, provided that those discussions did not trespass the limits of academic circles and reach the masses, that is, the non-intellectual world. With the rapid rise of mass-media sectors and their role in the diffusion of information, military rulers started to see imminent danger in the ‘popularisation’ of intellectuals’ leftist debate for the masses. For a more detailed discussion on the topic, see ‘Culture and politics in Brazil, 1964-1969,’ *Misplaced Ideas: essays on Brazilian culture*, translated with an introduction by John Gledson (London and New York: Verso, 1992), p. 128.

In 1974 the military government entered the period of *distensão política* (political relaxation) and censorship, whilst still playing a central role in the cultural production of the time, was gradually lifted. It is in this socio-political context that the literary production of the 1970s, known as *romance reportagem*, gained force. Used to fill the gaps in information that had been caused by the censorship of the mass media, this emerging literary genre transformed into a new journalism. Rescuing what realism and naturalism had previously claimed to have portrayed in their literary programmes, the novel had become a way to promote a critique of society, by presenting the 'veracity' of facts. However, far from promoting a pertinent analysis of the socio-political situation of the country under military rule or a search for new aesthetic possibilities which might provoke a sense of discontent in their readers in face of the problems of the nation, *romance reportagem* limited itself to the description of crimes and torture (mostly crimes which had a great impact on the country or the torture suffered by the author), which were not given full coverage in the mass media.

From 1979, the period of *abertura política* (political opening-up) marked the political transition from military dictatorship to democracy. Censorship was further relaxed, especially after the suspension of the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5). Amnesty was granted to those convicted on the basis of their left-wing political activities and those who were forced to leave the country in order to avoid persecution. Many returning from a period of political exile or having had their prison sentences suspended by the same regime which incarcerated them used literature to express their endurance as left-wing militants in the fight against the dictatorial system. Their narratives, following the models of epic accounts, were mainly devoted to the listing of different techniques of torture to which the author-narrator was submitted while imprisoned by the military government. The predilection of publishers to promote *romance reportagem* narratives was based on a clear financial interest: to exploit the curiosity of those middle-class readers avid for new descriptions of violent physical torture.

The growing success of *romance reportagem* accounts became a point of debate among Brazilian literary critics who, especially in the 1980s, started to question not only the literary value of such narratives but also the stated principles of their authors. Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda employs the term *patrulhagem ideológica* (ideological patrol) to describe the artistic climate of the 1970s, dominated by the relentless surveillance of left-wing supporters. For the critic, the ideological straightjacket imposed on artists during the period of military repression reinforced the censorship and totalitarian laws dictated by the state: it abrogated any possibility

of a democratic exercise by subjugating artistic expression to one single ideological parameter.²

Buarque de Hollanda also highlights the relationship maintained between the *artista engajado* (novelists, poets, song-writers, etc.) and the public, notably founded on a commercial web in which 'art' became transformed into a profitable source for its producer and a form of entertainment for the consumer. Once integrated into the system, *arte engajada* had lost its rebellious character to endorse, in contradiction to its *raison d'être*, the same (bourgeois) economic system it proposed to attack. These arguments were supported by other critics such as Silviano Santiago and Flora Süssekind.³ They claimed that the inaccessibility of the cultural production at the time was maintained by intellectual leftists who produced and consumed 'revolutionary ideals' within their own middle-class restricted milieu, becoming entirely disengaged from the oppressed public that they intended to represent.⁴

It was in the context of a growing discontent with *arte engajada* and, more specifically, *romance reportagem* among Brazilian artists and critics that João Gilberto Noll started to publish his works. His literary debut in 1980 with the critically acclaimed short story collection *O Cego e a Dançarina* was a turning point in Noll's career.⁵ Noll justifies the belated publication of his work by asserting his own difficulties in publishing his writings in an epoch in which the writer had to demonstrate in his work an active political engagement. When asked his opinion about the proliferation of *romance reportagem* in the 1970s Noll is clear in affirming

² "[The] ideological patrol," writes Buarque de Hollanda, "is identified as repressive and totalitarian towards cultural production, even more repressive than the control imposed by the military state." Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, *Impressões de Viagem: CPC, vanguarda e desbunde: 1960/70* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1980), p. 118. [My translation]

³ As a matter of fact, Santiago and Süssekind were two of the main literary critics in Brazil who acknowledged the innovative and transgressive character of the fiction of João Gilberto Noll. For these critics, Noll was one of the few young writers at the time who was innovating the literature of the 1980s by experimenting with other themes and narrative forms outside the ideological constraints that shaped the literary production of the previous generation. See: Silviano Santiago, 'O Evangelho segundo João,' *Nas Malhas da Letra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989), pp. 62-67; and Flora Süssekind, 'Ficção 80 dobradiças e vitrines,' *Papéis Colados* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1993), pp. 239-252.

⁴ For a detailed account on these ideas see: Silviano Santiago, 'Repressão e Censura no Campo das Artes na Década de 70,' *Vale Quanto Pesa: ensaios sobre questões políticas culturais* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982), pp.47-55; and Flora Süssekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: Polêmicas, Diários & Retratos* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1985).

⁵ In fact Noll started to publish his texts a decade earlier. At the end of the 1960s he contributed some short stories and poetry to the Saturday literary supplement of the newspaper *Correio do Povo* in Porto Alegre. In 1970 he contributed two short stories 'A invenção' and 'Matriarcanjo' in an anthology introducing the new literary talents of Rio Grande do Sul (Carlos Jorge Appel, ed., *Roda de Fogo: 12 Gaúchos Contam* (Porto Alegre: Movimento, 1970). However, it was only after the publication of *O Cego e a Dançarina*, Noll's first sole book which brought his name to be nationally known, that the author begun to publish his works on a periodic basis.

that: "I think that it [*romance reportagem*] is a terrible thing. It's something which has hindered Brazilian literature... I thought that, back in the 1970s, I would be beaten if I wrote about the themes I wanted and which had nothing to do with the ideological project of political denunciation of the time."⁶ Due to the severe constraints of *literatura engajada* with its left-wing militant tone, its praise of austerity through the copious descriptions of crimes and tortures and its explicit manipulation of artistic expression aimed at the denunciation of an unjust socio-political system, there was, in the 1970s, little recognition for those writers who refused to follow the arbitrariness of these political-literary principles. These principles were clearly at odds with Noll's own literary project which refrains from following a specific authoritative ideology or political model, serving rather as a vehicle for questioning dogmas and certainties.⁷

Noll's literature shows little interest in and even distrust of the political transition proposed by the military regime, whilst revealing a serious concern for the future of the country after the weakening of the opposition by the Brazilian left. The increasing political and civil liberties conceded by the military government led to the segmentation, popularly referred as '*rachas*' (fissures), of the left. This made it impossible for left-wing supporters to form a strong, unified opposition against those still in power. By then, the explosion of leftist factions acted like the splinters of a bomb, hurting the enemy without being able to effectively destroy it. Brazilian leftists were more preoccupied with their own ideological battle than with fighting for a common ideal.

Noll's works allude to the resulting wreckage of the left in an extremely pessimistic, if not despairing mood, as we can read in "Alguma coisa urgentemente,"⁸ the short story which opens *O Cego e a Dançarina*. The narrator is a teenager puzzled by the successive and unexplained disappearances of his father. He questions his father (who one assumes is engaged in illicit political activities) but is told he is too intellectually immature to understand the situation lived by the father. After another of his father's disappearances, the narrator is left alone in an empty

⁶ Severino Francisco, 'Na fúria do corpo da linguagem: João Gilberto Noll – revelação dos anos 80,' *Jornal de Brasília*, 31 de março de 1989, no pagination.

⁷ As Noll asserted when staking out the route of his literary project: "I do believe that literature cannot have a code of morality, whether a religious morality, or a Marxist morality, literature cannot ratify a ready-made ideology, literature does not exist to endorse an ideology, that isn't the function of literature ... Literature has to get into those things that aren't normally broached in the social sphere, in society. Literature isn't for polite social gatherings. I believe that literature has precisely to lift up the carpet and take a look at the filth that's been swept away underneath it in social terms." David Treece, 'Interview with João Gilberto Noll,' *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 6.2 (1997), p.126.

⁸ Translated into English as 'Something urgently,' trans. David Treece. *Travesia: Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 2 (1993), pp. 5-13.

apartment in Rio de Janeiro where he has to provide for his own subsistence through prostitution. When his father next returns he is in a clear state of physical deterioration, confessing: "I've come here to die."⁹

Unable to find out how to help his father and afraid to comment on his despairing situation to others, in case he is interrogated by the police on his father's mysterious activities, the narrator finds himself in an unbearable position. As his uneasiness grows, he receives the unexpected visit of a classmate, Alfredinho, sent by the headmistress to ask why he has stopped coming to school. Alfredinho's arrival makes the narrator fully aware of his own deteriorating situation:

Alfredinho noticed the nasty smell in the house, I'm sure, but he made a point of not showing he had. It was when he sat down on the sofa that I noticed how threadbare it was and that Alfredinho was sitting kind of carefully on it, as if the sofa was going to collapse under his bum, but he pretended not to notice anything out of the ordinary, *not even the cockroach crawling down the right hand wall, or the noises my father made as from time to time he thrashed about and moaned in the bedroom next-door.* [my italics] (pp.11/2).

This passage depicts the socio-economic and political chaos of Brazil during its period of *abertura política*. The decaying home seems to represent the nation which, after 15 years under military dictatorship, had accumulated a colossal foreign debt estimated around 95 billion dollars. This debt, with an alarming average inflation of 100% per year (one of the world's highest inflationary rates) was to reveal the farce of the *milagre econômico* (economic miracle) - the disastrous financial project sustained by the military rulers which had resulted in the country's impoverishment. The repugnant cockroach that crawls down the 'right hand wall' is an allegorical representation of the right-wing military leaders who stepped down from power without ever being tried for their political crimes against human rights.

The agonizing father, on the other hand, represents the gradual disintegration of the Brazilian left at a moment when, due its own internal disagreements and contradictions, it was becoming steadily weakened and unable to offer a viable critique of the military regime. Alfredinho 'is' the country's middle-class which, in approving the measures of political openness taken by the military government, closed its eyes to major social and economic issues. And last but not least, we have

⁹ 'Something urgently,' p. 9.

the anonymous narrator as a representative of the large population who, treated in a paternalistic way by the left-wing supporters and, at the same time, excluded from any dialogue with the government, becomes unable to stand up for itself and, therefore, incapable of taking an active role in the process of deciding its own future. The narrative ends with the desperate words of a powerless and perplexed narrator who, despite being aware of his need to take action – to do something urgently – remains static while observing his father's demise.

The need 'to do something urgently' reflects Noll's approach to his country's crucial transition from dictatorship to democracy. One of the most remarkable aspects of the narrative is its clear distinction from the clichés of political literature at the dawn of the military regime. It is a well constructed allegory without hero or martyr, depicting the plight of a nation unable to cope with its present, let alone build up projects for its future. In fact, Noll was one of the few literary writers during this transitional period to show how Brazilian *engagé* literature had lost its potential to criticise the system by becoming integrated into the commercial market as a mere instrument of entertainment. This critique is pursued in the next section.

2 *Romance reportagem*: the commercial success of literature

According to the classification proposed by Malcolm Silverman in his study of the literature produced in Brazil since the period of military dictatorship,¹⁰ *romance reportagem* are novels which expose crimes of passion, hatred, abuse of power, violence and corruption commonly associated with Brazilian society, the civil police or the military government. *Romance reportagem* can be further sub-categorised into two forms: *romance memorial* [testimonial novel] to be addressed later in this paper, and *romance jornalístico* [journalism novel] in which the author-narrator assumes the role of detective. Unhappy with the reports of official investigations and subsequent judicial resolution, the author-narrator of the *romance jornalístico* seeks to disclose a specific crime by presenting letters, documents, interviews or any other factual sources of information that substantiate his or her arguments. The account has the narrative elements of *faction*, a term used to designate the literary genre initiated by North American authors such as Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. The term *faction* is indicative of the nature of these novels in that they seek to bridge journalistic *fact* with literary *fiction*. The term further suggests the tone assumed by

¹⁰ Malcolm Silverman, *Protesto e o Novo Romance Brasileiro*. Tradução de Carlos Araújo. 2ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2000 [1998].

the novel in its preference for action and alludes to the market success which transformed the genre into fashion.¹¹

Through the avoidance of any allegorical or metaphorical elements in their narrative – elements commonly associated with literary fiction – *romance jornalístico* authors sought to assert the ‘reliability’ of their accounts, thereby differentiating them from all other forms of fictional novels. In this context, any connotative language or allegorical theme had to be treated in *romance reportagem* as obsolete because of its (dangerous) potential to ascribe a degree of choice to the reader, who could then decide on the novel’s meaning. The use of journalistic language, which is supposed to portray the facts through the lense of objectivity and veracity, does not, however, promote a dialogue between text and reader. Since its main purpose is purely the transmission of information, such language misses the powerful connotations of the literary text, which places the reader in the significant role of offering a subjective interpretation of the narrative.

The relevance given to factual information in *romance jornalístico* can be further attested by its constant reference to magazine and newspaper reports, in a clear attempt of the author, a journalist in the majority of the cases, to prove the veracity of his narrative to his readership. This is the case, for example, of *Pixote: a Infância dos Mortos* by José Louzeiro, one of the most successful best-sellers in the genre. The epigraph chosen to open the novel brings some statistical data taken from a newspaper:

There are 15 million children living in a state of extreme poverty in Brazil and waiting for some kind of help. They represent a little less than one third of the 48,718 million of Brazilians between the ages of 0 and 18 years old living in different regions in Brazil: North (3.83%), North-East (31.64%), South-East (42.91%), South (16.64%) and Center-West (5.08%). *Jornal do Brasil*, 5-4-76.¹²

In sharp contrast with the epigraph of fictional novels – which normally refers to a poem or to a passage of a literary novel – we observe in Louzeiro’s work the preference for numbers (instead of lyrical words) which can confirm to the reader the story’s reliability. And in case the inclusion of information found in a newspaper isn’t

¹¹ For a comprehensive analysis of this narrative genre in Brazil see: Silviano Santiago, ‘Prosa literária atual no Brasil,’ *Nas Malhas da Letra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989) p. 32.

¹² José Louzeiro, *Pixote: a Infância dos Mortos*, 5a edição (São Paulo: Global Editora, 1987 [1977]), p. 7.

enough to validate his arguments, the author reiterates the 'denunciative' character of his narrative: "The facts which substantiate this narrative have been taken out of our bitter everyday life" (p. 6). The message is clear: what the reader is about to read is more than a mere 'fictional' entertainment - it is the narrative of a brave journalist who, in a time of fierce military censorship, is not afraid to denounce the coercive and corrupted behaviour of official institutions, especially the police. By describing the everyday life of a street child and his friends, the author's intention seems to be exerting his authority over his middle-class reader rather than pointing the finger at the dictatorial regime. In fact, his 'investigative novel' works as a promise to 'show' the abject lives of those street children from their own perspective, as if the journalist were inviting his reader to 'know' more about the subject without, however, establishing any direct contact with it. The author/journalist is celebrated as a 'hero' whose courageous attitude and perseverance 'uncovers the truth' of a social reality shared only by those who have direct access to the events.

In opposition to the *romance jornalístico's* literary form, which pursues, through a journalistic style, the uncovering of truth, is Noll's short story 'A Construção da Mentira' [Construction of the Lie]. This can be read as a critique of *romance jornalístico* authors of being obsessed with basing narrative upon 'true' situations and 'real' characters, as if seeking to present an accurate portrayal of the country, whilst concealing their true literary motivation - the achievement of personal recognition and financial success through literature. The narrator-protagonist of Noll's story, a journalist who joins a group of day-trippers visiting an old house, admits his interest in any extraordinary event the excursion might reveal and his wish to transform it into a storyline or theme that can be exploited in his sensationalised narrative:

I was the only journalist in the group who was observing the house. I turned off my tape recorder and moved away from the others, following my wish to walk through the house on my own, to be completely immersed in its solitude in order to describe it in a more dramatic fashion to my readers. I walked along its lugubrious corridor imagining that I was going to find a door leading to a mysterious room, *like those I found described in old English novels* [my italics].¹³

The building, inhabited by an old lady and her ageing son – a metaphor which might again suggest Brazil and its 'senile' military rulers – appears to have survived

unchanged through time and is described as an historic place where “battles of consciousness have taken place” (p. 755). The journalist, caught up in his search for interesting action or unusual situations which could be dramatised for his readers, fails to perceive the deep ‘historical silence’ of the house and to make this silence the object of his search. The ‘real’ facts he is searching, the building’s ‘true’ historical elements, are not revealed bona fide but are shaped by ‘fictitious’ models of suspense and imported detective novels. Upon leaving the house, the narrator goes to the *Bar das Artes* to meet his wife. She is eager to learn about his adventures but, in answer to her questions, he can only give a brief and disappointed account of his discoveries: “I found almost nothing. The speech of an old man and *a house which seems to be more literary than journalistic*” [my italics] (p. 755).

Considering his ‘real’ experience to be a ‘fictional’ enterprise, the narrator characterises the house itself as ‘literary’ as opposed to something ‘factual’, which could be subjected to a journalistic style. In this situation, a point of irony occurs: in order to add a more realistic tone to his text, the narrator needs to create imaginary events which make his real experience appear more ‘true’ to his readers. In a broader context, this short story seems to criticise the hidden motives of *romance jornalístico*. It refers to real places, situations and characters using the same ‘objective’ language employed in journalistic descriptions. At the same time, it adds some fictional attributes without discriminating the concrete facts from the imagined fiction.

‘The construction of the lie’ – interpreted here as a critique of– highlights the hidden agenda of *romance reportagem*’s authors through the manipulation of real events into a fictional narrative and the promotion of the heroic nature of the author-narrator. Then, at the end of the story, while playing the tape he recorded in the ‘silence’ of the house, the journalist is confronted by his own unconscious desire to create a fictional hero who would bring the exuberance of fiction into the dry detachment of the ‘objective’ journalistic account: “And then I heard for the first time the words pronounced by that voice. They spoke of the hero I wanted to include in my account” (p. 755).

Noll’s portrait of the journalist’s obsessive search for a factual event to be recounted in the model of English detective stories refers to the massive interest of writers in the sensationalist crime narratives which, especially after 1975, broke into the list of Brazil’s best-sellers. Despite the unfavourable economic situation during the 1970s, the country saw an unprecedented growth in publication. Whereas 3,000

¹³ João Gilberto Noll, ‘A construção da mentira,’ *Romances e Contos Reunidos* (São Paulo:

and 5,000 copies of a book were being printed in 1975, print runs of 30,000 to 100,000 were not uncommon in the second half of the decade. Brazilian publishing houses struggled against international competitors to secure their profits.

This commercial dictate had a profound impact on Brazilian writers and publishers who, motivated by the wide consumption of foreign authors such as Harold Robbins and Irving Wallace, found in sensationalist crime literature a viable chance to enter the market with almost guaranteed success. The opportunity offered by crime literature as an alternative source of income was clearly welcomed by many young writers and journalists. Through this close relation between literary production and market consumption many writers became less interested in the quality of their production (innovation in narrative technique, selection of a wider thematic material, and so on) paying more attention to the market success they expected to attain through their work.

The immediate success of *romance reportagem* has been openly criticised by Noll, who views this documentary genre as being unfailingly connected to the monetary aspirations of the publishing market, thus transforming literature into a source of financial gain. In one of his interviews, Noll expressed his discontent with the genre by commenting that: "I can't stand thrillers any more. Every novelist wants to write detective stories. This cheap international detective novel... there is no excitement (for me) in the thriller, in the serial novel, in this simplification... I have difficulty at a neurological level in following this narrative... this money-scrounging thing."¹⁴

Although inveighing against the monetary orientation of *romance reportagem*, Noll would appear to consciously appropriate a number of the genre's narrative elements in his novel *Hotel Atlântico*. Of all his works, this is the one that mostly obviously bears the stamp of the thrillers of the era. This 'emulation', however, soon evolves into a critique of *romance reportagem* novels. *Hotel Atlântico* offers the account of a narrator-protagonist who describes his arrival in a hotel at the very moment that a dead body is being removed. His descriptions, unfolding in a terse style suggesting the note-taking of a detective at the scene of crime, are dogged by an increasing sense of suspense underlying the action:

Companhia das Letras, 1997), p. 755.

¹⁴ José Weiss, 'João Gilberto Noll: O tempo da cigarra,' *Brasil – Brazil: Revista de Literatura Brasileira*, 17, Ano 10 (1997), p. 89/90.

I climbed the steps of a little hotel on the Rua Nossa Senhora de Copacabana, just off the corner of Miguel Lemos. As I did so I heard agitated voices – someone crying.

Suddenly a whole lot of people appeared at the top of the steps, men mostly, police by the look of them, a few armed officers, and they started down the steps carrying a stretcher.

On it was a body covered with a patterned sheet.

I stood there, on one of the steps, my back rammed up against the wall. A woman with very blonde dyed hair came down the steps crying. She had a nervous tic which made her mouth jerk up towards her right eye.

I regretted going into that hotel. But to beat a retreat struck me as one more act of cowardice I'd have to carry with me on my journey. So I went on.¹⁵

With this opening scene, typical of detective narratives, the reader is implicitly led to ask questions about the identity of the corpse, the causes of its death and the possible connection of the other characters to the supposed crime. The reader is similarly invited to learn about the narrator's identity and the reason for his vacillation after entering the hotel. However, despite the narrator's apparent promise - suggested by the sentence 'So I went on' - to develop his story around the obscure motive for the death and the disclosure of its cause, he never elaborates on this opening scenario nor discloses why he came to that specific location.

The reader, willingly or not, soon follows the narration into a very different plot structure. After leaving the hotel without any further allusion to what might happen next, the narrator becomes involved in another mysterious death. This time he is confronted with the apparent suicide of Susan Flemming, his travel companion on the bus to Florianópolis. The character's name appears in a direct reference to the imported detective novels, especially by its association with the English writer, Ian Fleming, one of the most successful authors in the thriller genre. Confronted with this second inexplicable death, the narrator starts to link the event with the death that opened the narrative: "There was no doubt about it: Susan had died. It occurred to me that it was the second corpse I had encountered in less than 48 hours" (p. 20). Once again, the reader encounters an element of the story which is common to that of detective novels. However, in this narrative, the protagonist is not the one who tries to solve a mystery. Instead, he appears to be the victim of a conspiracy. In order

to avoid being incriminated for a crime he has neither committed nor understood, the narrator decides to disappear from the death scene before he is taken into custody as the prime suspect of the murder: “What was torturing me was that they might start suspecting me. Right then it seemed too late for me to put right the mistake. I would spend years being dragged through the courts, having to face the sordid business of the judicial system, without the strength myself even to believe in my own innocence” (p. 20).

The possibility of a conspiracy against the narrator is enhanced by the introduction of a mysterious character who seems to be watching the protagonist:

Suddenly I stopped. I was standing in front of a bookshop, which also sold a good selection of magazines and newspapers. I was just walking in to flick through something when I noticed the figure of a man in a mac, behind one of those revolving postcard display stands. What drew my attention about the man was the dark glasses he was wearing, just like Susan’s glasses.

The man was turning the display stand. I had stopped, disturbed by his glasses (p. 21).

Nervous at being followed by a possible spy, the narrator, who is in a bookstore, decides to browse through a book in search of reassurance:

I picked up a book to calm myself down. It was a bestseller set during the Second World War. I read the first page, and then looked around: the man with the dark glasses had left the bookshop. I went back to my book relieved.

The situation of the book’s hero was this: he, a British spy and a Catholic, begins the story by going into a church in Paris, and in this church he thanks God for the grace of living in a time when it is clear who is it that one must fight against: the enemy.

In a later scene he is with a lover in a hotel in Nice, he raises a glass of champagne and says:

“Long live the enemy!” (pp. 21/2).

¹⁵ João Gilberto Noll, *Hotel Atlântico*, translated by David Treece (London: Boulevard Books, 1997), p. 7.

The true conspiracy against the protagonist, revealed through his reading of a best-selling spy novel, is for him to have become, even if not consciously, part of a system which has transformed literature into the profitable commercial business of creating bestsellers. Through this metafictional strategy, Noll exposes the commercial aspirations of *romance reportagem* narratives which conflict with the author's stated motivation for writing his novel. Rather than attacking the country's 'enemy' (the military dictatorship which perpetuates an unjust social system based upon the model of capitalism), *romance reportagem* authors are depicted in *Hotel Atlântico* as covertly exploiting, if not their oppressors, at least the system of their oppressors, by offering thematic material which generates monetary benefit to both themselves and their 'lovers', i.e. their publishers.

In the narrative, speculations around Susan's suicide - cloaked in the same climate of mystery as the previous death - are also subsequently abandoned. The development of the plot again frustrates the reader's expectations by refusing to engage any further in resolving the enigma of the 'detective novel' murder scenes: the narrator refuses to reduce his account to a predictable story in which a mystery can be solved.

It could be suggested that this is a conscious decision on the part of the author. Rather than showing any commitment to elucidating this second mysterious death, the narrator's main concern is to find an escape from the constraints of his situation as portrayed in his account: "I decided I had to get away... I began to make my way past the shops in the bus station, until I saw an exit" (p. 22). The narrator's need to run away, although associated with the scene of the crime, assumes a metafictional function in the narrative. It seems to parallel Noll's urge to escape from the restrictions of *romance reportagem*'s thematic and structural elements which are so central to their success as a bestseller. From this perspective, the central story in *Hotel Atlântico* begins not in the first parts of the novel with the accounts of the deaths but in the subsequent events of the narrative, after the protagonist escapes from the crime scenes.

In the ensuing development of the story, rather than allowing the reader to follow a typical commercially-oriented plot, the narrator becomes increasingly involved in situations out of his control. When confronted by a third death he worries about his own fate: "I ought to be really careful, that had been the third death I'd encountered in three or four days" (p. 43). The protagonist's inability to resolve the elements of the story himself and his uncontrolled wanderings in an increasingly baffling narrative is exacerbated by the perplexity he feels facing the situations emerging around him. He is first kidnapped by two strangers who try to kill him for no

apparent reason. Escaping from the hands of his captors, the narrator tries to disguise himself as a priest. Then, he is accused of being a kidnapper and subsequently mistaken for a TV character.

This sequence of situations occurs unpredictably, without any logical connection between them. The narrator has neither control over their occurrence nor can he contribute to their resolution. He has no coherent explanation for the reader and, as the novel 'progresses' through these scenarios of chaos and disarray, its narrative style only transmits his experiences from one moment to the next. Far from seeking to establish a sequential presentation of events and their consequences – an orderly attitude typified by the narrator of *romance reportagem* – the protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico* conveys his experiences of turmoil and inability to communicate to others at the very moment that these experiences take place.¹⁶

The description of his arrival in the city of Arraiol is the passage which most characterises the tension he feels in his inability to establish a logical link between the events. At first, Arraiol seems to be like any other calm, provincial and probably hospitable place: "I saw that it was a small town. There was no-one in the streets, no cars driving past" (p. 47). This situation, however, undergoes a dramatic change when he knocks on a door to ask for directions:

I knocked on a door. A woman wrapped in a blanket opened the door, looked at me, noticed I was all wet and covered in mud, and then slammed the door uttering a yell. Then I heard her shout:

"It's the kidnapper, help!"

I backed away. Suddenly I turned around and I was in front of the house where the opera was coming from. I decided on one more try: I knocked on the door.

A fat, bald man opened the door. The record going round sounded slightly nasal. It was the voice of a tenor. At the sight of me all caked in mud the man took a weapon from his pocket. And aimed it at me.

Once more I backed off. This time I moved away more slowly, without moving a muscle in my hand. The voice was now a soprano.

I thought it better to carry on walking... At the bottom of the street was a black and white police VW, with a revolving red light on top.

¹⁶ Later in this essay while analysing *Bandoleiros*, I shall discuss the implications of Noll's temporal choice.

That revolving red light was the last thing I saw. I grabbed on to the iron bars of a gate and felt my strength draining away. I had time enough to hear the sound of my head striking the pavement.

When I opened my eyes the fat, bald man was standing beside me... The bald man came close to my ear and said that he was the surgeon of Arraiol...

Before asking for a pain killer, a sedative, I gathered my strength as far as I could, which was not much, and raised my head: they have amputated my right leg (p. 48).

The reader is left to piece together the contextual elements of the scene in order to bridge the gaps in information that exist in the narrative. We can conclude that the narrator has been shot in his right leg before falling unconscious to the ground. The loud opera played in the armed man's house mixed with the intermittent noise produced by the police car's siren makes it impossible for the narrator to perceive the sound of the gunshot; the only thing he could clearly hear was the sound produced by the impact of his head against the floor. However, despite being able to reconstitute the information not given by the narrator, the reader still does not know who shot the narrator: the armed man or the police.

The story continues to develop in a mode which again superficially draws on parallels with the structural development of *romance reportagem*: after the shooting incident, the narrator wakes up in a hospital where he realises that his right leg has been amputated. This momentary 'lapse' into the content-driven narrative of *romance reportagem*, which would normally extol the protagonist's detailed account of physical tortures, gains no relevant foothold in the story, as the narrator makes no further comment on the experience of having his leg amputated. Where *romance reportagem* is explicit in its description of physical violence, Noll's narrative is evasive: the reader is denied any of the 'gory' details or self-aggrandising accounts of dealing with his pain or loss.

A completely new scenario then unfolds in the hospital, whose chief surgeon, Dr. Carlos, emerges as an authoritative character (redolent of the authoritarian military dictators) who invests himself with the power to determine the physical state, indeed the life of his patients and the information they are allowed to receive. During his stay at the hospital, the narrator comments that:

the hours dragged by, I couldn't read any of the things that fell into my hands. One day it was a book about the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. The

book began with Francis already a saint. It didn't talk about his childhood, his early youth, how he had come to sainthood. The book began with Francis already surrounded by a halo.

I asked Sebastião to get rid of that book.

He told me it was like that in the hospital, the books getting to the patients, often getting to the actual hospital staff, without anyone knowing where they had come from and why they had fallen into those hands and not others.

"They sent you The Life of Francis. Who sent it, can you guess?"

"Dr Carlos" I asked.

Sebastião looked at me without saying a word, staring at me dreamily.

(p. 55)

In the hospital, patients are induced to read hagiological narratives to divert their attention from their prolonged illness. These idealised concepts and portrayals of martyrdom can be viewed as parallel to the experiences of *romance reportagem* authors, especially those of autobiographical accounts of ex-political prisoners. These narratives compel the narrator to view his own suffering in the same light as a religious martyr and, by proxy, a protagonist of *romance reportagem*. Indeed, the passage implicitly criticises the *romance reportagem* for endorsing the ideological purposes of its writer in the same way that hagiologic works served the religious dogma of their authors. Even if *romance reportagem*'s ideological propaganda intends to attack Brazilian political and social systems, it ends up replicating the country's stereotypes without presenting any substantive analysis of the contemporary socio-political situation in Brazil.¹⁷

If we consider the unfolding of the story from another interpretive perspective, the experience of the narrator in the hospital could be read as a metaphor of the experience of Brazilian people during the time of *abertura política*. Following a period of confusion, loss and terror, a stay in a hospital for the convalescent could represent

¹⁷ As Flora Süssekind aptly observes, "the incentive to [literary] production, and especially to those works that *promote a picture of the country*, is not so easy to perceive another opponent, who appears sometimes as a sponsor, other times as a father, but as powerful as or even more powerful than censorship. So powerful that it sometimes turns a blind eye to the promotion of works which are considered 'denunciative'... because, as in a great part of the documentary literature of the period, [the dictatorship government] find in those narratives efficient contributors. That is because [those narratives] are at the service of the same master: the interest of literally *representing one Brazil*. And even the negative of the picture is interesting for the National Politics of Culture... [in this way] the 'common enemy' (censorship, repression) is replaced by a 'perhaps friend' (state assistance)." *Literatura e Vida Literária: Polêmicas, Diários & Retratos*, p. 27.

a period of transition and uncertainty in which the patient will either recover or die. The transition is not optimistic. In the specific case of the narrator, a complete cure is impossible: he has lost his leg and has to learn henceforth how to live without it. Indeed, when the narrator first attempts to leave his wheelchair, he fails in his task completely: "When I found myself under the open sky without my wheelchair... I felt dizzy, overbalanced and fell into a bed of chrysanthemums... I said that now I would have to get used to falling over."¹⁸ The euphoria of liberty experienced by the protagonist when he finds himself under an open sky, which is a possible metaphor for democracy, is soon replaced by a feeling of loss: he does not have the means to travel through the open space which he had previously navigated with unconscious ease. From now on, he is resigned to falling and failing in this world. An essential part of him has been amputated through a unilateral (dictatorial) decision in which he had no say.

With the help of one of the hospital nurses, Sebastião, the narrator succeeds in escaping from the hospital. He decides, together with his aide, to go to a coastal location where they can be close to the sea:

"Ah the sea", he suddenly exclaimed, "I've never seen that fella before."

"You've never seen the sea?" I asked.

"Not so far," he replied. (p. 65)

Sebastião's encounter with the sea coincides with the moment of the narrator's death. This allegory of death used by Noll seems to indicate that the narrator in the final stages of the story is far from fulfilling the literary function of 'someone who discloses truth' – a role assigned by the authors of *romance reportagem* to the narrator (who is often a *doppelgänger* of the author). The narrator only expresses his wish to come to terms with his own confusion: "[I] said to Sebastião that one day I hoped to understand why it was that all this had happened" (p. 68). A moment of lucidity unexpectedly marks his sudden death, thus reversing the condition of the narrator throughout his fictional life in the novella. His ensnarement in silence and in the lost gaze which he casts towards the world is now turned back to the world itself which, though it becomes silent to the narrator, can now be seen clearly: "[t]he world had become mute, there was just silence, but I could see everything fine... Then Sebastião looked at the sea. As did I... Then I went blind, I could no longer see the sea or Sebastião" (p. 70).

¹⁸ *Hotel Atlântico*, p. 54.

The gradual loss of the narrator's senses occurs simultaneously with Sebastião's discovery of the sea. The protagonist's nomadic fictional existence, deprived of any further purpose, utilitarian project or goal, finds its function at the conclusion of the narrative: bringing the sea into the life of his companion, Sebastião, albeit in an unexpected way. The death of the narrator completes his function in the narrative. He is the person in a turbulent present who travels through the confusion of the world around him and survives the violation of his physical being to bring something unpredictably new to those who have accompanied him at the end – Sebastião and, on a metafictional level, the reader.

Contrary to the *romance reportagem* narrator who seeks to win over the reader, the protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico* seems to destabilise the reader's 'positive identification' with the narrator himself by the very fact that he, as the storyteller, does not assume an omniscient knowledge or even an authoritative role in relation to his own account. The death of the narrator-protagonist in effect effaces any final meaning or closure in the narrative: it is left open. The last sentences of the novella simply describe the very instant in which the narrator takes his last breath:

In those seconds as I was filling my lungs with air, I felt Sebastião's hand squeezing mine.

Sebastião is strong, I thought, and I gradually let out the air, slowly, ever so slowly, until the end. (p. 70)

The word 'end' alludes both to the death of the narrator and to the end of the narrative. But, in a recapitulatory loop, it could quite convincingly be suggested that this 'end' also refers the reader back to the very beginning of the account, which started with the removal of a corpse whose identity was completely unknown. Everything has come full circle except that the narrator's power over meaning has been totally altered. At the conclusion of the novella, the reader - who by default assumes the position of Sebastião, the character left alone holding the corpse of the anonymous (but eerily familiar) protagonist – is invited to give the final meaning to the text. The death of the narrator removes this teleological crutch from the reader. The author-narrator can no longer help configure the narrative in the reader's search for meaning.

This is in stark contrast to the implicit pact – a conscious or unconscious collusion – between narrator and reader in *romance reportagem*. Here the text commits the narratorial voice to answering the reader's questions with explanations of the experiences described in the novel. This deprives the literary narrative of an

implicit interpretative function for the reader and holds it to the interplay of promises by the narrator and the hopes of the reader, who is dependent upon him. For Noll, therefore, the definition of a literary work is not based upon the fulfilment of a reader's expectation in the resolution of a narrative but it is the narrative itself which invites its audience to offer a personal interpretation to the text at each new and recapitulative reading. As Noll himself states unequivocally: "the novel can be purifying because the reader will come into it in a certain way and will leave it in another way... Let's calm down a little, calm down this expectation that everything has to lead us to a final purpose."¹⁹

3 The *romance memorial*: heroism through the worship of 'macho' attitudes

Continuing the classification proposed by Malcolm Silverman, we can define *romance memorial* as the second type of narrative belonging to the *romance reportagem* genre. On the whole, *romance memorial* assumes the same position presented in *romance jornalístico*: it promises to expose, through the description of 'real' facts, the arbitrariness of an unjust political and social system based upon the use of coercive force. However, despite its non-fictional characters and use of a journalistic style, *romance memorial* differs from *romance jornalístico* in two ways: the level of the author's involvement in the plot and the implicit ideological nature which structures its narrative.

The narrator-author of *romance memorial* is no longer the objective journalist who seeks to show, through his own investigation, how justice has failed to judge specific crimes. He becomes, instead, the narrator who offers his autobiographical account as a left-wing political militant who falls into the hands of the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship. Presented as a portrayal of reality, this form of *romance reportagem* often describes the incarceration of its author who survives inhumane treatment in prison without betraying his left-wing political principles. The ideological message in the narrative always confirms the moral superiority of the protagonist over his torturers in a clear message of self-heroism by which its author-narrator, often in an emotionally detached account, demonstrates his courageous behaviour on the ground of his capacity to withstand torture.

Centred on the perspective of the political prisoner, such narratives seek to seduce the reader into identifying with the sufferings and epic behaviour of the narrator. As Idelber Avelar has rightly observed, the ability of an author-protagonist to claim credit for enduring torture manages to perpetuate the "genuine mythology of

¹⁹ José Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

the macho who withstands torture and never betrays the cause.”²⁰ It also fails to propose any substantial analysis of the political system which had led the writer to be imprisoned and subsequently tortured. The body, in this context, becomes the obstacle which must be overcome and from which one must tear oneself away in order to prove one’s own moral and ideological strengths. Physical torture, in fact, seems to function in *romance memorial* as a rite of passage by which the left-wing prisoner could not only prove to his peers his political engagement but also integrate his own identity of a selfhood on the grounds of a political praxis and based on his capacity to resist pain.

In such a narrative, there is no space for the accounts of those who could not resist physical suffering and, for that same reason, ended up with no other choice than to give away important information on their political activities and companions. This, in fact, might have been the situation lived by a relevant number of political prisoners whose testimonial accounts were not worth being made public precisely because they missed out the *leitmotiv* of heroism through resistance so heralded by the *engagé* literature of the time. It is as if all left-wing militants shared not only the same political ideals but, more importantly, the same courageous behaviour which inevitably ascribed to them an image of virtue. This macho attitude was further corroborated by the terse linguistic style in which *romance memorial* novels were written. At a structural level, these narratives present a cold and objective description of violence and torture in a direct and emotionally unattached text – thereby further augmenting the stoic heroism of the macho author who was capable not only of resisting pain but also of confronting it by expounding his experience in the public sphere, recalling all the possible details of his suffering.

One of the narratives to inaugurate this political and autobiographical genre was Carlos Marighella’s *Por Que Resisti à Prisão* [The reasons why I withstand arrest]. Imprisoned on 9th May 1964, less than a month after the military coup of the same year, Marighella decided to narrate his experience in prison to the wider public with the specific objective of convincing the ‘young revolutionaries’ of the importance of facing their own personal fears and inspiring them to resist torture in defence of their political ideals. In his book, Marighella clearly states the advantages for the left-wing political activist in making use of literature as one of the most efficient media for evading the censorship imposed by the military rulers:

²⁰ Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 66.

I make use of political literature, a very convenient genre in our current circumstances, when all sorts of restrictions are set up against political activities. The published book, despite the hatred and violence exerted by those in power, those who create cultural terrorism – serves as an escape route... The political militant has to use all the possible alternatives available to him as long as he can communicate with the public and instigate the political dialogue so hated by the enemies of liberty.²¹

Despite its initial proposal to establish a dialogue with the reader, what we find in Marighella's account is a biased ideological message by which physical struggle and resistance configure the axis of a narrative clearly directed at the construction of a courageous image of its author. The narrator constantly reminds the reader of his bravery by describing how he confronted to the last minute the violence of his persecutors purely motivated by the determination of his political ideals: "I resisted my prison ordeal until the end... My strength came from my political conviction, of being certain that all this is dictatorship and that liberty can only be defended by resistance" (pp. 19/20).

Marighella's heroic posture is endorsed by commentators such as the acclaimed Brazilian literary critic Antônio Cândido who affirms that: "[w]hen we know that the price he paid was death, we can be certain of Marighella's position as *a hero of the Brazilian people*" [my italics]²² and the novelist Jorge Amado who writes that "Carlos Marighella, killed by the military dictatorship in 1969, *hero of the fight of the people against poverty and oppression. Hero because bravery, determination, resistance and devotion were qualities of his character*" [my italics].²³ The epic passages of *Por Que Resisti à Prisão* are sustained by constant descriptions of physical violence and open reference to bloodshed. Indeed, one of the most recurrent images in the narrative is the bleeding body as a symbol of political nonconformism and ideological commitment, such as described in the passage in which the narrator comments on his imprisonment: "They [police officers] couldn't make me shut up while I was fighting against them, my blood spattering on the people who, puzzled and without reaction, came to watch my detention, the whole pavement covered in red."²⁴

²¹ Carlos Marighella, *Por Que Resisti à Prisão*, 2a edição, apresentação de Antônio Cândido e prefácio de Jorge Amado (São Paulo, Editora Brasiliense, 1994 [1965]), p. 30.

²² Antônio Cândido, 'Apresentação,' *Por que Resisti à Prisão*, p. 8.

²³ Jorge Amado, 'Prefácio,' *Por que Resisti à Prisão*, p. 9.

²⁴ Marighella, p. 21.

This sort of description of physical violence played an essential role in defining the success of *romance memorial*. The more detailed the depiction of torture and bloodshed in the text, the more 'realistic' and interesting the narrative became for the reader. It is in this context that Flora Süssekind utilises the term 'vampire-reader'²⁵ to refer to those many readers whose literary interests were devoted to devouring more information about torture techniques and bloodthirsty scenes.

João Gilberto Noll's first novel, *A Fúria do Corpo* also draws on *romance memorial* descriptions of imprisonment, police interrogations, violence and torture. However, as we saw with his play on *romance jornalístico* in *Hotel Atlântico*, Noll deliberately appropriates the thematic elements of *romance memorial* in order to subvert the genre. Describing his experience in jail, the fictional narrator avoids any heroic tone of political commitment or physical resistance. Scenes of cruelty and torture appear in *A Fúria do Corpo* as indicative of the condition not only of the political prisoner but even more so of the situation of ordinary Brazilians (poor children, women, and so on) who are deprived of a voice in their daily struggle of survival in a unjust social system:

I cross streets congested by all sorts of machines and perishing bodies, I come into the Building of Wonders, I climb up the stairs... I run through corridors and can't figure out what I see in the rooms through which I pass, wide open doors show women lacerating pieces of meat, girls being beaten by old men, children being stabbed by policemen... rooms of horror, I go through a door looking for the way out, I meet the allurer of the building's terrace sitting down, waiting for me, I kneel down in front of him, I beg him to let me go, I plead with him to forget me, to have pity on this man who has already suffered so much... in the most vile gesture, my last resource, I kiss his feet which melt in contact with my lips.²⁶

Distancing himself from the heroic bravery shown by the authors of *romance memorial*, the narrator of *A Fúria do Corpo* is not ashamed to expose to the reader how he begs his torturer for clemency in order to avoid physical pain. The importance placed on the narrator's personal emotions, in this case astonishment and fear, and the dreamlike character of his descriptions – the reader does not know where the scene takes place or if it does take place at all – also circumvent the ideological objectives of *romance memorial* which, in its attempt to allure the reader, relates to

²⁵ Süssekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: Polêmicas, Diários & Retratos*, p. 45.

the factual experiences of its author-narrator. The novel does use one of the most widely descriptive elements present in *romance memorial* - police questioning – but again the description of interrogations, which were always followed by scenes of torture, challenges the exemplary heroic position of leftist activists whose portrayal of political resistance is more important than their own physical well being.

After being detained by the police under the suspicion of (political) terrorism, the narrator-protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* gives a full account of his (meaningless) interrogation and, indeed, his adamant refusal to pass any relevant information to his enemy:

When I came again to my senses, they had taken the hood the blindfold from my head and I saw in front of me, under a weak and low light, a man who introduced himself: I am the Colonel, he said in a half smile, and went on:

- Are you afraid of torture?

- No.

- Are you afraid of dying?

- No no.

- Do you confess?

- No no no.

And behind me I felt two hands hitting my ears. I don't know if what I felt could still be called pain, I collapsed on the floor. Some minutes had gone by when the Colonel appeared again above my face:

- Are you innocent?

- No.

- Do you plead guilty?

- No no.

- Are you afraid?

- No no no. (p. 66/7)

The complete description of the scene, which occupies a full page in the narrative, depicts an almost jocular, otiose interrogation: the colonel does not ask any substantial information about the supposed 'subversive behaviour' of the tortured narrator, nor does the narrator know what the colonel is accusing him of. In sum, the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* is a social outcast, whose life and behaviour do not

²⁶ João Gilberto Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, p. 191.

fit into the expected models of the left-wing combatant and cannot, therefore, fulfil any kind of identifiable role for the novel's reader. The reiteration 'no' in response to each of the last questions of the interrogation, rather than indicating political resistance, operates here in a more connotative sense, pointing to the fact that the narrator in *A Fúria do Corpo* has no significant ideological message to transmit - not to the police, nor to the text nor to the reader.

4 Temporal perspective and personal identity in Noll's narrative

Romance reportagem's narratives, following the model of detective stories, are constructed around the orderly sequence of past events leading to the disclosure of a criminal's name or, as in the case of *romance memorial*, they expound its author's dauntless experiences to paint for the reader an heroic self-image. In some cases, such as in the narrative of *Por que Resisti à Prisão?*, the journey into the author's past can regress far back into his genealogical ascendancy. Apart from presenting his own courageous actions, Marighella recalls the behaviour of his ancestors in the following terms: "my father was a worker born in Ferrara (Italy). He arrived in São Paulo as an immigrant and moved later to Bahia. My ascendancy on my mother's side is from *hassuás*, African slaves brought to Brazil from the Sudan (and famous in the history of the revolutions in Bahia against the slave owners)."²⁷ In order to make the reader understand the narrator's courageous behaviour, it is considered necessary to explore and expound his origin. The allusion to parents and family is perceived as a way to lend contour to the narrator's own distinct revolutionary character.

These novels are not just describing past experience: they consistently ascribe a specific meaning to that experience. It is in this manipulation of a temporal perspective that *romance reportagem's* narrators can exert their authority over the reader. What is present for the reader – the description of a specific occurrence – belongs to the narrator's past. The narrator has not only reconstituted events which took place before the start of the narrative but has also organised them chronologically to arrive at a conclusion which will be disclosed at the end of the story. By organising, controlling and determining the significance of past events, the omniscient narrative voice in such novels, allows the reader little freedom to add new possible meanings to the story. As Roland Barthes has observed in his analysis of the novel's temporal framework: "the preterite is the expression of an order, and consequently of a euphoria. Thanks to it, reality is neither mysterious nor absurd; it is

²⁷ Marighella, pp. 19/20.

clear, almost familiar... The preterite *signifies* a creation: that is, it proclaims and imposes it" [author's italics].²⁸

Reference to the past, the ground upon which the construction and justification of a heroic image can be established by the *romance reportagem* narrator, is completely abandoned in Noll's work. Noll has openly acknowledged his preference for the present tense in his narratives, while affirming that: "the present is what inspires me. The immediate present, the space where I am. I am not a writer worried about the past, I am not interested in the historical reconstruction of events or epochs."²⁹ The focus on present time in Noll's narratives stands as an exercise of 'symbolic freedom', by which the meaning derived from the literary text is never something to be revealed by others (be that by the narrator, the other characters or even the author of the text), but is a demiurgic exercise to be resolved by the reader during the process of reading.

Noll, as is clear in this statement, emerges as a writer who does not set out with a conscious agenda but who finds himself driven along by his narrative rather than choosing it initially. His work does not evolve through a chronological sequence based on causality but instead conveys the immediate experience of narrator-protagonists and characters for whom every action and perception is impregnated with meaning. It is this temporal framework in which the time of the narrative coincides with the time of the narration, alongside other factors, that distinguishes Noll's literature from other forms of confessional narratives which aim to provide the reader with a moral or epic account.

Noll's first-person narrators do not present themselves through a 'coherent' or 'absolute' self, whose existence precedes the act of reading. They openly resist being framed in an identifiable category by omitting circumstantial details about their lives such as proper names, social position or a recollection of their past experiences. It is perhaps in *A Fúria do Corpo* that we can find the most radical example of the effacement of personal identity. At the very beginning of the novel the narrator addresses himself to the reader by commenting: "My name, not. Nor my past, not, do not want to know what I was before this moment, let's say that everything starts at this very instant."³⁰ The supposed autobiographical aspect of the narrative, the account of a first-person narrator who describes his personal

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), pp. 37/8.

²⁹ Miguel do Rosário e Bruno Dorigatti, 'A literatura é muito perigosa,' *Arte e Política*, http://www.artepolitica.com.br/entrevistas/entrevista_noll.html, no pagination.

³⁰ *A Fúria do Corpo*, p. 25.

experiences, is subverted by the negation of the proper name and the denial of any personal history which stand at the core of biographical accounts.

In our first contact with the novel, we are told surreptitiously that the narrator's identity is a fictional construct which can only take place at the very moment the reader reads the novel. This metatextual reflection further indicates that the text can only exist as a continuous present which runs in parallel with the reading. The important role played by the reader in giving meaning to the narrated story is finally announced by the novel's narrator who proclaims to his audience: "Give me whatever name you want" (p. 25).

These metafictional remarks that open the narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo*, make the novel a dialogical process which stands in opposition to the authoritarian and one-sided account found in *romance reportagem*. The use of the present tense in Noll's novels places both the fictional (narrator) and metafictional (reader) components of the novel in the same position in relation to what is being narrated. As a metafictional strategy, this temporal perspective encourages readers not only to assume a role in the fictional world but also invites them to put aside their own identities from the 'real' world during the reading process. Conversely, the 'real' world of the reader, considered from the perspective of the narrator and characters in the novel, appears as a fictional construction.

It is in this way that the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* casts doubt on the reader's existence by questioning "who are you?... do you really exist?" (p. 27) – positing a reversal in which our 'real' identity assumes the character of a 'fictional' construction. Through the very act of reading, the reader is implicitly asked to suspend – even if momentarily – his personal values and conceptual beliefs which establish the basis of his 'fixed' identity.³¹ The fictional pact between reader and novel is emphasised in the narrative, which establishes that the reader also becomes a character in the story by assuming a new identity, from the moment the first page is turned. This 'identity', however, may not always be congruent with the reader's everyday beliefs and moral principles, so "the reader may revise his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality."³² This operates

³¹ As Wolfgang Iser remarks: "[o]nce the reader is entangled [in the fictional world], his own preconceptions are continually overtaken, so that the text becomes his 'present' whilst his own ideas fade into the 'past;' as soon as this happens he is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were his 'present'... Reading reflects the structure of experience to the extent that we must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text." 'The reading process: a phenomenological approach,' *New Literary Review*, 3:2 (Winter, 1972), pp. 295/6.

³² Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984), p. 34.

against the exhortative nature of testimonial accounts in which the author uses his or her past experiences as the irrefutable proof of a 'real' knowledge which then operates as an 'exemplificative lesson' for the reader.³³

However, whilst the present assumes a central importance in João Gilberto Noll's work, it must be stressed that this temporal perspective by no means disregards the relevance of past experiences in the constitution of the subject, even when dealing with a fictional character. In fact, the immediate present for Noll's narrators does not rule out the idea that their present is constantly shaped and informed by past experiences and future expectations. This is what can be inferred from a closer analysis of Noll's works, such as *Bandoleiros*. In its structural aspect, this novella eliminates any clear distinction between past, present and future by making different time planes coexist. The narrative alternates between the protagonist's experiences in Boston, Viamão (a small town in Rio Grande do Sul) and Porto Alegre, which are correlative to different times in the account. Boston and Viamão belong to the protagonist's past, while Porto Alegre, the city where the narrator is situated at the beginning of the account, indicates his present experiences and his projection for the future. This approach to non-linear time is best illustrated by the different position assumed by the other two main characters in the plot. The anonymous narrator always speaks from the perspective of his present while the other two male characters in the novel, Steve and João, seem to embody respectively the narrator's past and future.

This sense of past to which Steve appears to be bound is highlighted by the choice of the character's name. The phonetic realisation of the word 'Steve' analogises the Portuguese verb *estive* (I was) during the process of reading. This implicit verbal choice – *estive* (*estar*) in place of *fui* (*ser*) – appears to have an obvious implication in the understanding of how personal identity is conceived in the novel. Whereas the verb *ser* indicates an innate and enduring quality of being that is immune to change, the verb *estar* points to a transient condition of a subject whose identity is fluid in a reflection of the variety of his life experiences. This 'deciduous' past is further reinforced by the way in which the character Steve haunts the protagonist:

³³ This didactic aim is justified by the writers of *romance memorial* who, on the basis of their 'real' life events, try to convince the reader to share the author's moral and political principles and to repeat their heroic behaviour. This is the case, for example, of Carlos Marighella's book in the author clearly states that: "this book is a message of resistance. It is especially addressed to the new generation. Only the young people of today will be able to fully understand it." *Por que Resisti à Prisão*, p. 102. For the author, we can conclude, the narrative of his personal experience needs to be taken as a lesson for forthcoming

I call Steve. I shouted his name because he is very close to me and is holding my shirt, pulling it with his eyes expressing panic. As if I could give him any sense... I had nothing to give to that man who was pulling my shirt like a desperate animal. I shouted the name Steve. I shouted asking him to move away from me... and then I saw that Steve was walking far away. His steps were surprisingly firm, as if he wanted to reach the sunset on time. Because Steve was walking towards the red sunset... That was the right moment for me to escape, to get away from there. And suddenly I started to run. But, as much as I wanted to avoid him, I couldn't run in any other direction than towards the red sunset.³⁴

In his impersonation of the narrator's past experiences, Steve is always placed either 'behind', 'pulling back from' or 'following' the protagonist. The relation between Steve/past and the narrator/present – antithetical, yet interdependent – provides a crucial clue to the novel's meaning and structure, suggesting that there is no past that could be called upon to elucidate the present. Both temporal dimensions, past and present, shuttle freely throughout the novel without either of them assuming priority over the other. This erratic time perspective contrasts sharply with the temporal progression that shapes the narratives of *romance memorial*. When confronted with his past, the narrator of *Bandoleiros* is not able to give it a coherent meaning or justify it in any way, as his past is continually modifying and being modified by his present experiences. This corroborates the idea that "the past [is] almost reinvented, with your experience of the present: you sometimes bring into being forgotten possibilities from the past."³⁵

On the whole, *Bandoleiros* presents temporality as recurring and non-linear, whilst also enhancing the slanted and illusory aspects of personal memory. As it emerges in the novel, memory is not a factual representation of reality but the equivalent of personal imagination: through the very act of remembering, the past acquires its own version of imaginative truth for the subject. This point is underlined in one of the passages in the novel where the protagonist fantasises about an encounter with the Argentinean writer Ernesto Sábato:

generations. His message is not devoted to his contemporary readers, but to 'the young people of today' who can become the revolutionaries of tomorrow.

³⁴ João Gilberto Noll, *Bandoleiros* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, p. 230.

³⁵ Treece, 'Interview with João Gilberto Noll.', p. 128.

In the library I start to think about Ernesto Sábato who was a student here in Boston. I walk by the entrance of a big building. Many students are coming in and out. Who knows if Sábato didn't come to this building every morning? Then I start to feel the sadness of Sábato. A busy day like this, and Sábato with his book in his hands... If I were to meet Sábato there, on that corner, we could perhaps talk for a while. I would declare my admiration for him. We would drink some coffee as I am doing at this very moment. And then I take his hands in mine and kiss them. I realize Sábato's embarrassment with my affective exaggeration... Sábato laughs. And he keeps on walking. I wonder where his steps are taking him.³⁶

The sudden dispersion across unrelated verbal tenses (present, past imperfect, past subjunctive, future conditional and present participle) indicates how the protagonist's attempt to talk the past into being makes that 'past' an irremediable figment of his imagination. While re-evoking Ernesto Sábato's sojourn in Boston, the narrator revives some experiences and sentiments that might have occurred to Sábato himself. The desire to have met Sábato in the past becomes a factual memory for the narrator who then recreates an encounter with the writer. The reader is unable to determine with any degree of certainty whether the narrator does or does not believe in his illusory digression. This passage, like many other similar examples in Noll's works, shows how Noll's narrative blurs the distinction between reality and fiction by suggesting that our memories of the past are always provisional and therefore capable of being reinvented and revived as an episode whose veracity is in accordance with our personal needs and desires, in the same sense that "when you pretend that something exists, you pretend so much that this something begins to come into being."³⁷

In contrast to his account of Steve, whose past experiences are constantly evoked in the story (even if in a dazzled, fragmentary and non-chronological order), the narrator makes no reference to João's past. The only thing we learn in the narrative is about João's future in which he is condemned to experience a gradual withdrawal of life: "João is in front of me... he is suffering from an unknown disease. He was losing his strength and his movements – his nervous system was deteriorating."³⁸ João's irreversible physical decline – a metaphor for the process of ageing – could also represent our inevitable mortality: "João smiled, and he wasn't

³⁶ *Bandoleiros*, p. 244/5.

³⁷ Treece, "Interview with João Gilberto Noll", p. 128.

³⁸ *Bandoleiros*, p. 211.

worried if he was going to die. He's going to die. I'm going to die. We're all going to die" (p. 320).

The recurrence of the sentence 'João is in front of me,' uttered by the narrator throughout the narrative, suggests both an opposing and a parallel relationship – as if mimicking a subject confronted with his own projected image in a mirror.³⁹ In fact, João seems to embody the narrator's idealised image of the writer he wants to become. João is described as a combative writer, able to write "novels with hope" (p. 260) while the narrator is categorised as a disenchanting novelist whose "talent is employed in a corrosive bitterness" (p. 260).

In conclusion, João appears to symbolise the narrator's hope for a future which would bring lucidity in a twilight zone of confusion and dismay. This future, however, is not only uncertain but is constantly threatened with the possibility of not becoming realised: "between my waking state and my dream, I imagined an impenetrable skin... and even if I would spend my years punching this skin and could break it, there would be no other João on the other side of myself" (p. 213).

To sum up, *Bandoleiros* provides a sustained meditation on time whilst also suggesting that the past is no more fixed or certain than the future and that both temporal dimensions are conceived according to the momentary and ever-changing experiences of our present. This temporal approach stands in clear opposition to *romance memorial* narratives which, drawn on 'real' past experiences, manipulate time so as to justify and even defend the brave behaviour and heroic identity of their narrators, in order to serve as a model for future generations. In Noll's narratives, past and future are dissolved in a confused present, thus preventing the reader from ascribing a coherent identity to the narrator or establishing an identification with him.

5 Concluding remarks

In this paper I have contextualised Noll's works within the mainstream Brazilian literary production of the 1970s and 1980s. I show that, while Noll appropriates some elements of *romance reportagem* novels, particularly where they portray violence, police interrogations, scenes of torture and unsolved deaths, there is a reversal by which the author utilises the very strategies employed by the genre in order to criticise it.

³⁹ The novel's conclusion "João was there on the other side, with his beautiful arm bent upwards, his hand against the glass, I went there, I placed my hand on the glass, exactly where João had his hand" (*Bandoleiros*, p. 320) highlights the idea in which the glass works as a mirror separating the narrator from his image.

Noll's fiction leads the reader to re-evaluate *romance reportagem*. It reveals how, by employing an objective and detached language, these narratives worked on the perpetuation of macho ideology. It also exposes their commercial nature, in aping international detective novels and crime thrillers for the Brazilian readership.

I have also shown how Noll's work differs radically from the *romance reportagem*, in being stylistically and formally fragmented through the abolition of an omniscient narrator. This fragmentation is sustained by the suspension of moral or ideological judgements upon the narrated events, the unsystematic shift between different temporal perspectives and the conception of memory as a subjective invention. These elements ensure that Noll's narratives cannot arrive at a tidy and conclusive resolution. We are left without a solution and burdened with questions which we may only answer by embarking upon a personal interpretation of the text.

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