

ONTOLOGICAL EXCESS AND METONYMY IN EARLY MODERN
DESCRIPTIONS OF BRAZIL: NARRATIVES OF THE IMPLAUSIBLE

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ABSTRACT: This paper relies on and furthers a hypothesis advanced in previous research: that the well-known eccentricities to be found in the early-modern *corpus* of the Portuguese colonizers of Brazil — its references to entities like monsters and demons, its bizarre descriptions, and odd classification systems — can be explained in view of a certain style of thinking, addressing a specific ontological concern. Ontology emerges here as a structural differentiating factor between radically distinct kinds of approach to reality, and the notions of excess and metonymy helps us to characterize the specificity of a cognitive enterprise which, in its several manifestations, is rather literary-religious than scientific-empirical. Our perspective is critical and theoretical, grounded on both perennial and contemporary discussions such as renaissance Christian Neoplatonism and poststructuralist thinking. And it covers significantly visual culture, which helps us to present Brazilian colonial literature on a broad canvas.

Keywords: Brazilian colonial literature. Christian Neoplatonism. Poststructuralism. Ontology. Visual culture.

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EXCESSO ONTOLÓGICO E METONÍMIA EM DESCRIÇÕES DO BRASIL NO INÍCIO DO PERÍODO MODERNO: NARRATIVAS DO IMPLAUSÍVEL

RESUMO: Esse artigo fundamenta-se e desenvolve uma hipótese proposta em outras pesquisas: que as excentricidades do *corpus* do início do período moderno escrito por colonizadores portugueses sobre o Brasil — referências a seres monstruosos e demônios, descrições bizarras e sistemas de classificação inusitados — podem ser explicadas em vista de um certo estilo de pensamento que expressa uma preocupação ontológica específica. A ontologia emerge aqui como um fator estrutural capaz de diferenciar tipos de abordagem radicalmente distintos da realidade, e as noções de excesso e metonímia nos ajudam a caracterizar a especificidade de um empreendimento cognitivo que, em suas várias manifestações, é antes literário-religioso que científico-empírico. Nossa perspectiva é crítica e teórica, fundamentada em discussões perenes e contemporâneas tais como o neoplatonismo cristão renascentista e o pensamento pós-estruturalista. E ela cobre em boa medida a cultura visual, que nos ajuda a apresentar a literatura colonial brasileira num cenário abrangente.

Palavras-chave: Literatura colonial brasileira. Neoplatonismo cristão. Pós-estruturalismo. Ontologia. Cultura visual.

The *corpus* of the Luso-Brazilian¹ encounters of the 16th-century was written at a time when both globalization and modern sciences were germinating. But it did not exactly foster what could be called a modern scientific approach to the empirical aspects of the New World's fauna, flora, and people. Its undertone is more literary and religious (ZIR, 2017). While arriving in Brazil and colonizing the country, the Portuguese were concerned with a presumed relation ordinary things would have with some partially

¹ “Luso” stands for Lusitania, which is the Latin name for the region of modern Portugal.

hidden, never entirely manifested source — a source that would constantly maintain the existence and stability of these things, while at the same time exceeding them.

In order to address this source, with which they were concerned, the Portuguese used three methodological strategies: a very bold use of analogy, the blurring of the distinction between words and things, and the blurring of the distinction between feigned and ordinary reality (or poetical imitation) (ZIR, 2011, p. 51-64; ZIR, 2009, p. 164-198). The style of thinking in question is called *para-scientific* in view of the reasons I give below.

The theoretical discussion that follows and occupies the first half of this paper clears the ground for one to situate Brazilian colonial literature in relation to certain perennial trends in the history of Occidental thought. Instead of merely describing and underlining its supposed exoticism, we inscribe its idiosyncrasies in a much more encompassing perspective, comprising controversial traditions such as Neoplatonism and negative theology as they are critically understood in contemporary philosophy. In the final sections, visual culture provides a scenario against which such issues, as they appear in the written texts of the Portuguese colonists, can be spotlighted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ONTOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The idea of styles of thinking which enabled this analysis of the *corpus* of the Portuguese comes from authors such as Ian Hacking (2002) and Alastair Crombie (1994).² Styles of thinking have to do with people engaging in different kinds of intellectual and practical enterprises only through which they are able to approach certain aspects of reality that interest them. In the case of the *corpus* studied, the ontology implied seems quite peculiar. It has to do with what is called “ontological excess” in the title of this paper. It relates to problems affecting taxonomies, but which are not themselves reducible to taxonomical procedures. To use a Heideggerian terminology, these are really *ontological* rather than merely ontic issues, in the sense that they extrapolate what is generally presupposed in the notion of any well-defined *entity* (HEIDEGGER, 1967, p. 6, 11, 63-65, 85-86; HEIDEGGER, 1991, p. 13-18). The point is not how the Portuguese characterized this or that specimen of

² A full discussion of the notion of styles of thinking as developed by Hacking and Crombie is given in Zir (2011, p. 1-8).

Brazilian fauna and flora, but how they understood natural/supernatural categories themselves.

The notion of ontological *excess* demands, on the other hand, a more deconstructive approach to Martin Heidegger's understanding of the difference between the ontological and the ontic. As pointed out by Jacques Derrida, Heidegger's notion of "being" has never a simple and rigorous meaning. It doesn't let itself be determined either as a subject or as an object. It cannot be characterized as any kind of entity (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 34, 39; DERRIDA, 1967a, p. 36).³ On the other hand, Derrida's own position doesn't simply eliminate the idea of the transcendental in view of some down to earth perspective. It challenges the notion of the world as a totality that could be comprehended either in metaphysical, positivistic *or in empirical materialistic terms* (DERRIDA, 1967a, p. 73).

Historically speaking, Christian neo-Platonic traditions related to negative theology are the ones which ultimately gave shape to the cosmological views surrounding the context of the Portuguese colonizers. These traditions are far away from being immune to Heidegger's and Derrida's criticism of the mainstream directions taken by occidental metaphysics after Aristotle. On the other hand, Derrida has explicitly acknowledged that, especially in the period around the Renaissance, these traditions — as much as Friedrich Nietzsche, Heidegger or Georges Bataille — gave rise "to the most daring discourses" in the history of occidental thought (DERRIDA, 1967b, p. 398, *cf.* 216-217).

Going back to Plato, one might recognize that his theory of forms paved the way to the achievement of our own modern theories of meaning and representation. On the other hand, Plato's idea of a separation (*chorismos*) between the realm of forms and ordinary reality also challenges and subverts the very possibility of such an achievement (PLATO, 2002, 130b, 134d-e).⁴ Plato's *chorismos* could be understood as something similar to what Derrida calls "spacing," "*epoché*," the *seuil* of pray (1967a, p. 103; 1987, p. 537).⁵ Or to what Julia Kristeva calls the *seuil* between the semiotic and the symbolic,

³ It might seem somewhat arbitrary to depart from a perspective of "styles of thinking" and then to rely on Heidegger and deconstruction in order to handle ontological issues one stumbled on the way. But as much as Hacking was influenced by Foucault, Foucault was influenced by Heidegger even if Foucault doesn't acknowledge Heidegger's influence so explicitly as does Derrida.

⁴ For a discussion of these passages and the notion of *chorismos* see Zir (2011, p. 12-13). See also Derrida (1987, p. 585-586; 1972, p. 207-208); Julia Kristeva (1974, p. 22-30, 79-80); Maurice Blanchot (1980, p. 148-149).

⁵ See also Yvonne Scherwood and Kevin Hart (2005, p. 29, 47).

which is itself a consequence of “repression” [*la barre du refoulement*] as it is understood in psychoanalysis and semiology (1974, p. 46, 231-232).⁶

All these terms try to express the notion that meaningful utterances are traversed by something that itself necessarily suspends/defers meaning. Platonism gives evidence to the experience that “the order of what is signified [*signifié*] is never contemporary to the order of the signifier [*signifiant*],” and it becomes truly logocentric only when it equates the order of what is signified with the idea of a “transcendental meaning [*signifié*]” (what can be done, one should note, either in an spiritualistic or in a materialistic way) (DERRIDA, 1967a, p. 31, 33, 38, my emphasis; cf. KRISTEVA, 1981, p. 110, 271; 1969, p. 222-223). But Plato’s *chorismos* cross out meaning as much as it vouchsafes it. It could help one to understand Derrida’s own notion of an “*archi-écriture*,” which is not writing in the ordinary sense of the word. Archi-writing stays for something presupposed by any linguistic system, and which cannot be located either inside its domain [*champ*] or outside it (DERRIDA, 1967a, p. 82, 88).

In Thomas Aquinas, one finds a similar matrix. God causes things not only when they are first created, but for all the time that they are, as the atmosphere remains illuminated as long as the sun is present (AQUINAS, 1941, I, 8, 1, p. 41b).⁷ At the same time, God irreducibly overflows anything he creates, and it is not clear how much Aquinas’ metaphor of light gives rise to a self-transparent and well-defined scenario. We face a difficult, sophisticated point, bypassed by critics and apologists alike, and which goes back to the pseudo-Dionysius understanding of the chain of beings as a hierarchy whose ranks are irreducibly discrepant. In the end, there is an intrinsically unstable dynamics between a *natura naturans* and a *natura naturata*, which could only be referred to metonymically.⁸ Inferences taken from the *natura naturata* are

⁶ In *Σημειωτική*, Kristeva analyzes some passages of the *Thaetetus* giving evidence to the fact that Plato recognized the legitimacy of certain textual practices that are ultimately “*extra-parole*” and “*hors-logique*” (1969, p. 190). And in *Le génie féminin 1*, she underlines the importance for Hannah Arendt of Cicero’s maxim “for heaven’s sake, I’d rather be mistaken with Plato than to be on the right with his adversaries” [*je préfère au nom du Ciel m’égarer avec Platon que voir juste avec ses adversaires*] (1999, p. 140). Hacking himself says in his more recent book: “No ghost more effectively haunts all Western philosophy than Plato’s... Many have posed as exorcists, but none have succeeded” (2014, p. 191).

⁷ “*Hunc autem effectum causat Deus in rebus, non solum quanto primo esse incipient, sed quandiu in esse enservantur; sicut lumen causatur in aere a sole quandiu aer illuminates manet.*”

⁸ In the *Summa Theologiae*, Pars I, quaest. 108, article 5, Aquinas uses the very term of excess, saying that *the properties of inferior ranks can only be attributed to the superiors “as something excessive” (per excessum)* (1941, 647b10). The passage is a comment to the Pseudo-Dionysius *Celestial Hierarchy*, in which it is stated, for

always partial, because what constitutes the *natura naturata* is a *natura naturans* which overflows it like the turning of a Moebius' strip. There are more than one side, they are wholly connected, and nonetheless the correspondence between them is twisted and cannot be plainly expressed.⁹

A feeling for the “inadequacy of predicative language” would thus run in the “family” of several authors connected with negative theology (DERRIDA, 1987, p. 536). On the one hand, this can lead to what Derrida calls “infinist metaphysics,” which sacrifices all particularity and singularity in view of the idea of a super-powerful infinite entity, a totality that would ultimately not exactly rescue but rather eliminate all differences (DERRIDA, 1967a, p. 104-106).¹⁰ On the other hand, the *Deus absconditus* of negative theology, in its very retreat, might turn out eventually to “exceed,” “evade,” “remove” itself as a principle, instead of securing its own supremacy (NANCY, 2005, p. 37). It would accordingly harbor a deconstructive germ, capable of making “the smallest to become, metonymically, bigger than the biggest.” In this case, as much as the idea of a supreme being and totality is deconstructed, metonymy ceases to be a mere figure of speech in the framing of traditional rhetoric, and points to “more ancient... complex and instable structures” (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 113-114; 1978, p. 393).¹¹

The “ontological escalation towards the hyper-essentiality” typical of negative theology (DERRIDA, 1987, p. 541) could then turn out to be the opposite of an ascetic experience in which “signs, figures, symbols... fictions, myths, and poetry” become “rarified” (p. 543). Rather than being “a summon to silence” (p. 544), this escalation could be the postulating of a “secret” (p. 549), the “settlement of a secret” (p. 552), the “secret settlement” (p. 553) about which one speaks “wildly” [*à tort et à travers*] (p. 545). A case in point for these possibilities, as it is defended in this paper, would be the early-modern

instance, that God is a divinizing principle situated “beyond” every “essence and every life,” faraway from any possible “characterization” and resemblance (DENYS, 1970, 140c-d). For a discussion of these passages in Aquinas and the Pseudo-Dionysius see Zir (2011, p. 13-14). Jean-Luc Nancy is an author who has addressed and confronted the tradition of negative theology more openly than Derrida. See his *La Déclosion: Déconstruction du Christianisme*, I (2005, p. 36, 56, 62-63, 91, 113, 131, 132-133).

⁹ Kristeva discusses medieval symbolism in view of more contemporary semiological notions in *Σημειωτική*, (1969, p. 55-58, 183-84).

¹⁰ This is also what Jean-François Lyotard called “*le grand Zéro*” in his *Économie Libidinale* (1974, p. 17-23, 29).

¹¹ Grounding himself in a Kabbalistic tradition with roots in the Peninsula Iberica during the Medieval period, Blanchot says, in *L'entretien infini* (1969), that God, while creating the world, “do not stablishes *more* but *less*,” “mysteriously consenting to be exiled from himself.”

corpus of the Portuguese colonizers of Brazil. They are not “plausible accounts” [*récits du vraisemblable*], as Kristeva characterizes most of the narratives emerging in Europe after the Renaissance (1969, p. 172, *cf.* p. 107-108, 183-184). They are implausible accounts, challenging because empirically elusive and a no go scientifically speaking.

PARA-SCIENTIFIC STYLES OF THINKING

Scientific styles of thinking help us to deal with parts, bits of the chain of beings, which they isolate, define and control. Para-scientific styles of thinking – or *narratives of the implausible*, to coin a new term in view of what we have been discussing above – help us to deal with the dynamics of the chain as such, and with what in each specific case eludes taxonomical enterprises and control.

In the crossroad of the many different traditions that intricately constitute the early-modern period, we have space for both kinds of styles, which should not be confused. Francis Yates seems to have fallen into this confusion, when she defended that the Renaissance revival of hermeticism was a key motivating factor for the Scientific Revolution (1964, p. 447-452). Criticizing Yates, Robert Westman noted that there was a fundamental difference between the scientific contributions of a Kepler and a Galileo, and the magic and neo-Platonic speculations of a Giordano Bruno and other similar authors. In Westman’s words, “with Kepler comes the important recognition, never appreciated by Hermetic natural philosophers, that a theory of physical causes is insufficient without the primacy of empirically and geometrically controlled statements about nature” (1977, p. 68, 71).

Other authors welcomed Westman’s criticism of Frances Yates’ thesis, but what they seem themselves to bypass is the specificity and significance of para-scientific styles on their own. Brian Vickers complains that hermetic and neo-Platonic authors use metaphors in such a savage way that they don’t distinguish anymore between “words and things... between literal and metaphorical language” (1984, p. 95). He then derides these traditions as being “closed,” in the sense of being unable to recognize “predictive failure” (1984, p. 34, 36-37, 95, 130ff). The anthropologist Robin Horton, to which Vickers refers, has taken the same derisive stand concerning African traditional religious thought (HORTON, 1982, p. 208-209, 235, 256).

Against positions such as these, one might argue that the key motivation behind para-scientific styles of thinking is not prediction. In

connection with this hypothesis, a reappraisal of an idea advanced by Lévi-Strauss in his famous introduction to Marcel Mauss' *Oeuvre* is still the order of the day. Lévi-Strauss specifies there that mythological notions such as *mana* stay for a “*signifiant flottant*.” That is, the real aim of these notions is to denote instability, prolixity, excess, supplementary possibilities — the many possibilities of displacement that are inevitably inscribed in the core of linguistic systems, understood since Saussure as systems of positive values of negative differences (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1966, p. xlix; cf. SAUSSURE, 1976, p. 166).¹²

Science works by contextually stabilizing this excess, of which it ultimately cannot get rid. Other traditions deal rather with all sorts of problems which inevitably overflow the margins and interstices of scientific contexts. One can appreciate the fact that, understood in this way, scientific and para-scientific styles of thinking are not necessarily antagonistic, but rather complementary. The term has been used by the physicist Bernard D'Espagnat, when he defended the importance of maintaining both a scientific approach to empirical experience, and a mythological — we would say literary-religious — approach to elusive aspects of reality, such as the ones implied in Heidegger's conception of Being (D'ESPAGNAT, 1981, p. 109). The term complementary has also been used by Wolfgang Pauli, when he addressed the famous seventeenth-century polemic that opposed the astronomer Johannes

¹² Previously to this, Lévi-Strauss famously applied the Saussurian notion of a system of differences to kinship and totemism. See, for instance, *La pensée sauvage* (1962, p. 141-158). It is true that Derrida has pointed out how the notion of a *signifiant flottant* (as much as the notion of “gift”) means nothing but impossibility itself. Rather than having a meaning, it ruins the logic of the relation between a meaning and its signifier (DERRIDA, 1991, p. 39, 68, 102-103). This is, to some degree, a criticism of Lévi-Strauss and his reading of Mauss. On the other hand, the issue of the *signifiant flottant* concerns the very logic of what Derrida calls “supplement”: the necessity/possibility of adding an overflowing sign to a whole that is decentered. We have supplement exactly because there is an excess of the signifier in relation to what it signifies. And Derrida indeed ends up praising Lévi-Strauss as the model of an author who is capable of using the concepts of the metaphysical tradition in a way that they end up being inevitably deconstructed. See *L'écriture et la différence* (1967b, p. 415, 419, 423ff). Derrida characterizes Lévi-Strauss as being himself essentially a *bricoleur*, not so different from the *bororo*, the indigenous people from Brazil whose culture the structuralist anthropologist famously investigated (DERRIDA, 1967b, p. 418-419). Kristeva quotes Lévi-Strauss's introduction to Marcel Mauss' *Oeuvre* in *La révolution* (1974, p. 72). In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben, analyzes the same passages, but it is not clear how much he is able to take seriously its implications, since he reduces Lévi-Strauss' argumentation to a debate concerning the problem of *denotation* and the *use* of language in specific situations (AGAMBEN, 2005, p. 30, 89).

Kepler to Robert Fludd, the modern heir of magical and occult traditions of yore (PAULI, 1994, p. 260).¹³

THE PORTUGUESE OVERSEAS EXPANSION AND ENCOUNTER WITH BRAZIL: A MANUELINE STYLE

Alongside with Portuguese cartography, the invention of linear perspective by Florentine painters is referred by Crombie among several late-Medieval and early-modern technical contributions to the development of science (1994, p. 433-62). It is known, however, that the scientism of a Leonardo da Vinci, for instance, is to a certain extent poetical. It enabled him to be extremely lyrical, and to depict the most impalpable, almost unreal things, in a suspended, suggestive atmosphere (POMILIO, 1978, p. 7).

The artistic style that is most connected to the Portuguese overseas expansion, the Manueline, was much more convoluted. It has been characterized as a “kind of local resistance” to the Italian Renaissance. It would represent “a society that consumed objects in terms of disjointed, occasional and loose collections, giving expression to a system of alternative rationality, that is clearly anticlassical, and made of unfinished stylizations, aggregations, contiguities... tiny precious details.” In short, the Manueline is an example of the most resilient late Gothic (PEREIRA, 2009, p. 30; cf. SERRÃO, 2002, p. 47-55, 76, 167-170). This characterization applies initially to monuments such as the celebrated Hieronymites’ monastery, built by the King Don Manuel near the shore of the river Tagus, from where departed the Portuguese ships to Africa, Asia and America, at a time when globalization was germinating. The label of resilient late Gothic could also be fairly well applied to the Portuguese early-modern descriptions of the fauna, flora and native people of Brazil.¹⁴

¹³ For a discussion see Paul Feyerabend's *Conquest of Abundance* (1999, p. 172-176).

¹⁴ Scholar Afrânio Coutinho has recognized the anticlassical character of this literature (1986, p. 6-8). He says that “Brazil didn’t have a Renaissance, it went from Middle Ages directly to the Baroque” (p. 34). On the other hand, there aren’t manueline buildings in Brazil. Outside Portugal, one can find examples of manueline architecture only in the Atlantic islands and in Asia. The reason for this is that the riches of the East were more attractive to the Portuguese than the colonization of Brazil, at the time it was discovered. Brazilian architecture starts with Mannerist buildings and fully develops only with the Baroque. See Luís de Moura Sobral (2007, p. 420-454). In Spanish America, however, there were examples of late Gothic constructions. See Ramón Gutiérrez (2010, p. 15-16, 52).

The systematization to be found in the works of the colonizer Fernão Cardim, for instance, is startling. It is not simply the case that the categories themselves are atypical, because they would represent unknown objects and novelties. It is rather that the material breaks up and tips over the very principles that were supposed to organize it. He describes a snake with “very poisonous” pines in a chapter about “snakes that don’t have any poison” (1925, p. 47). A snake that supposedly sticks on people and carries them to the sea is explicitly called a snake, but described in the chapter of poisonous fishes (p. 89). Scorpions, spiders and geckos are described, however, in the chapter about poisonous snakes (p. 49). A chapter entitled “wolves of the water” is dedicated to small kinds of marine men, some species of otters, shells, turtles and frogs (p. 102-103).

In short, Cardim’s treatises are paratactical. He is not concerned with an exhaustive and well-organized taxonomy of what is given and visible, but with what is unique, marvelous and rare – with what overflows and troubles what is ordinarily at hand (CARDIM, 1925, p. 47, 49, 89, 102-3; cf. ZIR, 2011, p. 48-49, 100 n. 88). Soares de Sousa is another colonizer who writes through the accretion of characteristics which overwhelms the whole. His descriptions sound garbled, because of a lack of punctuation, and a “careless” use of relative pronouns. Intentional or not, this way of writing ends being the most adequate to convey the exuberance, fertility, and abundance of the Brazilian land as it is experienced by him (SOUSA, 1989; cf. ZIR, 2011, p. 45).

Another characteristic that has been attributed to the Manueline style is the association “between architecture and the crafts of ephemeral, portable objects, such as basketwork.” The stones lose their weight and the buildings become intrinsically ornamental. As says the art historian Paulo Pereira, the Manueline gives rise to an ephemeral “hyperrealism” that, with its twisted ropes, and growing vegetation, integrates natural and artificial cycles of production (PEREIRA, 2009, p. 31). The terrific pillars of the nave of the Convent of Jesus, in Setubal, each made of three spiraling subcolumns, bear witness to this tendency in which patterns from decorative crafts are absorbed and enhanced by structural elements in architecture (PEREIRA, 2009, p. 53).¹⁵

One could fairly well defend that such a powerful dynamic and hyper real modulation of space is at work also in the ontology implied in the *corpus* of the Portuguese colonizers. The great amount of empirical information one

¹⁵ These pillars precede the twisted columns of Bernini’s famous *Baldacchino*, usually called Solomonic (since they were thought to replicate those of Solomon’s Temple), and widely spread during the Baroque. See Benedito Lima de Toledo, *Esplendor do Barroco Luso-Brasileiro* (2012, p. 164-65).

finds in a book such as Soares de Sousa's *Notícia do Brasil* is organically entangled and intertwined with the most extravagant and capricious anecdotes and inventions (ZIR, 2011, p. 47-49). The overall picture of the land that in this way is conveyed gives the same baffling impression one might get from Gandavo's hyperrealist engraving of a mysterious mermaid-like monster, supposedly killed at the time on a shore in the Brazilian region of Bahia. The figure is diligently depicted with the tail of a fish, womanlike breasts, a canine head, in the top of which there is a wound dripping blood. It has also whiskers, tiny little hairs or scales, and on the whole it appears completely disproportionate in relation to its surroundings (ZIR, 2011, p. 43-44).¹⁶

REBUILDING SOLOMON'S TEMPLE FROM THE 16TH TO THE 19TH CENTURIES: A MANNERIST STYLE

Side by side with the Manueline, and sometimes mixed with it, sharing its anticlassical rationality, Mannerism was another art style conspicuous in Portugal. Its characteristics of distorted proportions and perspectives apply to the painted ceiling of the Church of Saint Roch in Lisbon. The church was built in the sixteenth-century, under the direction of the Jesuits, who, on the other hand, had a key role in the Portuguese colonization of Africa, Asia and America.¹⁷

In what matters the Mannerist features of the painted ceiling of the Church of Saint Roch, an architectonic *trompe-l'oeil* is mixed with a complex and intense iconographic program relating to the Eucharist. The four major representations show essential Eucharistic themes from the New Testament, among them, *The Last Supper* and *The Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes*. They are intermingled with other four smaller representations of themes that are supposed to prefigure the Eucharist in the Old Testament, such as *The Manna from Heaven* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.

¹⁶ Popular art in Brazil still plays with similar hybrid motives. See, for instance, Angela Mascelani, *O mundo da arte popular brasileira* (2009, p. 49, 51) and Weydson Barros Leal, *Samico* (2011, p. 112).

¹⁷ The plan of Saint Roch, with its wide single nave enabling an unrestricted view of the main chapel, and its simple and sober exterior walls (contrasting with a richly ornamented interior), is typical of the Jesuit architectural style. It precedes the construction of the mother church of the Jesuits in Rome (Gesù), being inspired by two churches in Évora (Portugal), one of them dating back to the time of the Manueline style. Francisco Dias, who supervised the construction of the building up to the cornice travelled later to Brazil, where he worked for the Jesuits (TOLEDO, 2012, p. 68-72, 75-79).

These smaller representations from the Old Testament are depicted as if they were overhanging tapestries. The eight Eucharistic representations are still sidestepped by twelve little grayish Biblical figures, not so easy to interpret. In the middle of this entire program there is a medallion of the Cross. This medallion was actually added later, probably in the seventeenth century. It floats over, and does not fit well into the architectonic *trompe-l'oeil*. As says the art historian Joaquim Oliveira Caetano, “the medallion emerges decentered in relation to the [central] cupola. It does not respect the cupola perspective, and appears in a cloud that seems to be inside the church, and protrudes awkwardly from the painted architecture” (2002, p. 22).

This painted architecture was just by itself already highly illusionistic and over decorated. It is demarcated by four large ornamented arcs, above which rise a balcony and three big cupolas. The cupolas are built over opened cylinders constituted by several arches. The overall perspective of the painted design is distorted, since the altar and the central cupolas are aligned with the entrance of the church, but the cupola near the entrance is aligned with the altar. There are almost no flatter surfaces in this architectonic *trompe-l'oeil*, and every niche is overfilled with painted festoons, cherubs, garlands and stamps.

In a lateral angle, bending over from one of the arches of the opened cylinder below the cupola near the altar, there is even a man who looks down into the interior of the church. One could take him as the intruder in Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, following Michel Foucault's celebrated analysis of the painting in *Les motes et les choses* (1966). But the figure in the ceiling of the Church of Saint Roch pertains more to the pre-classical than to the classical *épistémè*. The space inhabited by the intruder is overcrowded and modulated by bowed, almost clenched, in the whole, not entirely coherent lines.

Similar illusionist paintings in church ceilings were common in Brazil till the nineteenth century (SOBRAL, 2007, p. 437-438; TOLEDO, 2012, p. 23, 113; OLIVEIRA, 1995, p. 293-298). Concerning still the church of Saint Roch in Lisbon, there is a further peculiarity, observed by Joaquim Oliveira Caetano. It concerns the similarity there is between the architectonic *trompe-l'oeil* of the ceiling and a representation one finds in another coeval painting pertaining to the church: *The Aparition of the Angel to Saint Roch*, attributed to Gaspar Dias.

In the background of this painting, one finds a monumental nave, from which is prominent a vault with three cupolas built upon opened cylinders constituted by arches. The vault in the painting follows the same model of the

illusionist painting in the ceiling of the church. The mirror-like game could go on indefinitely, since it has been pointed out that the nave in Gaspar Dias' painting is, on the other hand, based in an original drawing from the Dutch architect and painter Hans Vredeman de Vries. The representations might be enlisted in the polemical tradition of archetypical and archeological reconstitution of Solomon's Temple (CAETANO, 2002, p. 26).

This is once more a topic that pervades the early-modern colonial literature about Brazil. In the beginning of Ambrósio Fernandes Brandão's *Diálogo das grandezas do Brasil*, for instance, a character describes a tree in his neighborhood. The tree is said to be growing together with a house and to support it (BRANDÃO, 1925, p. 37). According to the character, who is supposed to represent Brandão himself, the trunk was initially part of the building's structure as a simple board, which became a tree because of the extraordinary fertility of Brazilian soil.

Undoubtedly, this obscure passage has many connotations related to Brandão's speculations about the remote history of the land and the origin of its inhabitants. Later in the book, he will defend that the ancestors of the Brazilian Indians were the same people sent by Solomon to fetch gold and wood for the construction of his temple, in the forgotten time of the old patriarchs (BRANDÃO, 1925, p. 110-111).¹⁸ Along the whole book, there are many other passages pointing to the incredible excellence of Brazilian woods, and the fertility and abundance of the land is compared to the one of a lost Golden Age (BRANDÃO, 1925, p. 53-54).

One should be careful about how to approach this kind of "prophetic" natural history. It presupposes an understanding of time which is not merely linear and chronological. For people like Brandão, time must unfold and change the nature of things according to some providential preternatural, and even supernatural "plan" to which men have no direct access, and which remains intrinsically opaque to a great extent. In modern times, ideas like this tend to be more and more ostracized, surviving only in the works of peripheral authors such as Giambattista Vico (1953) or Friedrich Schelling (1942).¹⁹

The ostracism is justifiable to a great extent. When followed to the letter, as if they would provide a definite control of things, such ideas have led people to terrible dead ends. This happened to the Portuguese king Dom Sebastian, in the infamous disastrous battle of Alcácer Quibir, which ended putting the kingdom of Portugal, for a lack of royal heirs, under the reign of

¹⁸ For an analysis see Zir (2017).

¹⁹ As regards Schelling, see also Heidegger (1971). See also Agamben (2009).

Phillip II of Spain (MARQUES, 1972, p. 312). On the other hand, as says the historian Charles Boxer,

The humiliating defeat and disastrous annihilation of [Dom Sebastian] expedition did not, however, result in the people blaming the King for his headstrong folly and military ineptitude, still less did it lead them to execrate his memory. On the contrary, he was now widely regarded as a tragic hero of epic proportions, whose disappearance was only temporary, and who would one day return and redeem the disaster of El-Ksar el-Kebir by leading the nation to new heights of conquest and glory. (BOXER, 1969, p. 369)²⁰

But this is mythology, or an irreducible excess that overshadows the facts of history. It gives food to thought, and should not be dismissed as something merely unreal. On the contrary, it might come from what is the innermost obdurate but decentered core of being and reality. It is something that, by principle, we can never entirely control, describe and even localize precisely. It would be like “the filthy and bulky monster” that “lives in the end of the sea,” as says the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. The monster lives where “nobody would see me” and “exudes the fears of the bottomless ocean” (PESSOA, 2011, p. 86).

The narratives of the implausible might help us to attain an insight of it, “a vision of the soul,” as the poet would say (PESSOA, 2011, p. 86). They might enable us to deal with what we can never entirely control. Not only monsters, but also “fortunate islands,” “lands which have no place,” where a “King dwells waiting” (PESSOA, 2011, p. 83). In the early-modern period, the belief in the return of the King was mixed with Messianic ideas, which had roots in medieval Christian and Jewish traditions, and persisted in the Iberian Peninsula. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, father António Vieira retrieved all these ideas and applied them to the Portuguese king João IV (BOSI, 2011, p. 79-80). Vieira was a Jesuit, one of the most influential writers of the Portuguese empire at the time. He attained international celebrity, and became confessor and member of the literary Academy of Queen Cristina of Sweden. His style, however, was politically controversial, and he died in Brazil in 1697, with his reputation clouded by intrigues. This did not affect his fame as a literary figure. But strictly speaking, from a scientific perspective, one has little to learn from his prose. Less than one would learn from the natural history written by the sixteenth-century Portuguese

²⁰ The topic of the “empty throne” is also central to Agamben's *Il Regno e la Gloria* (2009).

colonizers of Brazil. But these people partake an understanding of nature that, although biologically inaccurate, remains nonetheless instigating and might contribute to challenge Occidental more canonical metaphysical and cognitive approaches to reality.

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