

**THE METAPHOR OF ENGINEERING IN
J. J. VEIGA AND MURILO RUBIÃO**

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Ao examinar a produção literária durante a ditadura, Flora Süssekind nota que a literatura da época, apesar do gesto crítico contra o regime militar, dispensa a ambigüidade textual; assim, até o texto fantástico determina seu sentido de maneira autoritária. Este ensaio, porém, desmente essa idéia, empregando a “metáfora de engenharia” como espécie de *bricolage* derridaiano para demonstrar como dois contos fantásticos, *O galo impertinente*, de José J. Veiga, e *O edifício*, de Murilo Rubião, conseguem ultrapassar os limites da linguagem alegórica. Ao explorar o impasse entre o discurso fantástico e o discurso racional, nota-se como os dois contos contêm as ferramentas de sua própria desconstrução. Ambos os projetos de engenharia nos dois textos revelam fraturas que permitem a dúvida quanto ao racional e a descontinuidade entrarem na história. A engenharia, afinal de contas, funciona como metáfora da linguagem que se desdobra sobre si; é neste território do paradoxo borgiano da biblioteca de Babel “ilimitada e cíclica”, sem origem ou base sólida, que o engenheiro/*bricoleur* constrói seu projeto. Assim vistos, os contos permitem uma dupla leitura, na qual mina-se a riqueza do discurso fantástico.

In a critique of the Brazilian fiction written under the dictatorship, Flora Süssekind asserts that both of the major currents of prose written during that era (the neo-naturalist and the fantastic) engage in the same esthetic project; namely, in criticizing social conditions in Brazil they abandon a most liberating aspect of prose fiction: the richness of textual ambiguity. Because of this, the texts written in these modes offer a fixed image of Brazil, a vision that is one of identity, and is therefore latently collaborative with the military regime's ideology of development. Süssekind states that the use of allegory in either vein (neo-naturalist or fantastic) offers no margin of plurality in the text (282); in her view, allegorical language remains essentially authoritarian. Perhaps this is an authoritarian reading of the fantastic, a mode that, in my view, necessarily contains linguistic ambiguity. In this paper, I analyze two stories in the fantastic mode, José J. Veiga's *The Importunate Rooster* (1968) and Murilo Rubião's *The Edifice* (1974), and show how they move beyond the conventional limitations of allegorical language. Through the concept of engineering, both stories move away from a mere condemnation of the ideology of development to penetrate the deeper issues of writing and knowing. In fact, the texts' assertions of the epistemological problems of knowledge and interpretation parallel Derrida's discussion of the engineer as the "bricoleur" (285).

However, before moving on to the details of this argument, I wish to recognize the allegorical possibilities of each story. As Malcolm Silverman has ventured, the plot of *The Importunate Rooster* is remarkably similar to the failed Transamazonian highway (162). The story *The Edifice*, as Pedro Carlos Fonseca has noted, portrays men as cogs in an all-powerful industrial system (8). In both stories, then, the huge engineering projects become critiques of what Süssekind terms "*a utopia*

do Brasil Grande" (256), allegories of the growth mentality of the economic miracle. While there is valid sociological grounding for such criticism in Brazil's problems with increased urbanization, industrialization and ambitions of military technocrats, this interpretation does not exhaust other possible readings of these texts. In the first place, the mode of the fantastic itself is problematic in its reliance on and estrangement from discourses of realism and rationalism. Jorge Schwartz has noted that "O sistema discursivo da ficção, através de sua linearidade e coerência, cria o *status* necessário e suficiente para que o leitor dê credibilidade à narrativa" (59), thereby grounding the fantastic text in realism. In examining the operation of the fantastic text, we can begin to understand the play of ambiguity that will allow us to read these stories from a different perspective.

The fantastic relies on the tension between two diverse discourses: that of realism and that of pure imagination. Todorov has claimed that fantastic narrative reveals the point where "the limit between the physical and mental, between matter and spirit, between word and thing ceases to be impervious" (113) in what he calls the "pan-determinism" of fantastic discourse. I believe that the stories by Veiga and Rubião provoke this hesitation between a realistic and a marvelous world view, because both Veiga and Rubião use linear and straightforward narrative techniques which convince the reader of the text's verisimilitude, but undermine textual realism by blurring the distinctions between superstition and fact, myth and history, imagination and reason. In so doing, the texts disturb the reader's sense of acceptance and continuity associated not only with conventional story telling, but also with the positivist linearity underlying the ideology of development. The disruptive quality of the fantastic that upsets the reading of the engineering projects in both stories, not only eats away at our certainty, but also begins to crack the solidity of the projects represented as marvels of engineering. At this impasse the text reveals the fissures which will allow us to consider engineering as a metaphor of writing in the Derridian sense of the "bricolage". The "bric-oleur" must necessarily use the foundations of the system, while we, as readers of the fantastic text, become aware of its very precariousness. This becomes the dilemma of João Gaspar, the engineer in *The Edifice*,

and that of the future scientists alluded to at the close of the *Importunate Rooster*.

Since this deconstructive gesture becomes especially evident at the end of both stories, the endings provide a point of departure for the present analysis. Each text draws a parallel between the failure of the engineering enterprise and the rational basis of knowledge or information inherited from positivist discourse. In *The Importunate Rooster*, while the failure of the highway concludes the story, this does not mark epistemological closure, but rather invites the reader to dismantle the language of science and certainty. The continuation of the engineering project of *The Edifice* is a literary device that marks narrative closure, while it opens textual ambiguity.

At this end point, both texts tackle problems that draw the practice of engineering closer to problems in modern philosophy. For example, in *The Importunate Rooster*, the superhighway closes when a giant rooster outruns a tank sent to destroy it. The tank spontaneously combusts, and the government is left no other choice than to close down the entire project. The acceptance and resignation of the populace confirms a sense of normalcy for the reader, while the narrator speculates as to how a new race of men, if ever they were to come upon the highway, will try to understand it:

Naturally, they will take photographs, write reports, hatch theories to explain the abandonment of such a well-built highway. The mound of molten metal will constitute an enigma forever, but some brain will probably explain it away as a fragment of planet fallen from outer space; perhaps they will take it to a museum and affix a plaque to it for the information of visitors. (82)

This description of the methods used in scientific investigation which depends on evidence, theory and deductive reasoning forms an impasse with the discourse of the fantastic. After reading the story, the reader knows that "scientific" interpretation is utterly false, because the molten metal was caused by the giant rooster. Thus both the rooster and the molten

metal become barriers that neither reason nor language can fully explain. And science, in its futile attempt to explain everything logically, will rely on the "real", observable world – such as a fragment from outer space – to provide closure. The reader's only recourse is a leap into the realm of the fantastic which necessarily undermines established, scientific and "real" concepts of logic and linearity. If we take the story to explore this impasse between the two discourses (that of reason and that of the marvelous), it becomes a much more ambiguous statement about how we choose to ground our experience, since the story refers to the gaps of scientific logic and, ultimately, I believe, of language itself.

A similar impasse is reached in *The Edifice* when the chief engineer João Gaspar seeks to ground his project in a logical manner in order to understand the purpose of building an edifice of unlimited stories. Since the original members of the building commission have died, he goes to consult the records with the archivist: "Anxious to discover any document that might provide them with some sort of explanation, they abandoned themselves to the exhausting task of rummaging through cabinets and files. It was futile" (34). All the engineer finds (along with the technical specifications) is the original prophecy warning of the confusion that he was hired to dispel. Thus he finds no origin or purpose to explain the point of the unending edifice, only a prophecy ironically reminiscent of his own dilemma. Critic Davi Arrigucci Jr. has noted that the use of the fantastic in this story allows it to be "open for an unending telling" (my trans., 9) in that new floors can always be added on or supplemented to the edifice. Derrida re-reads our Western heritage of metaphysics as that of the supplement; he claims that any structure is grounded in a center that is at once present and absent (289-92). Rubião, by re-telling the story of Babel within the limited space of a short story, transmits, via fantastic discourse, the illusion of origins and closure that constructs the edifice of Western notions of progress and history. Ana Maria de Almeida has noted that in *The Edifice*, the linkage between writing and engineering is clear: "creation and, especially writing and constructing the infinite, is to inscribe oneself in the all amorphous, a breaking with primordial innocence" (8). Engineering is no longer grounded in a transcendental signified, but becomes a chain of metaphors which double back on themselves.

The impasses reached in both stories via such ambitious engineering projects also recall the failure of reason Foucault expresses in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. The probing of origins has provoked a crisis in contemporary thought, which has "broken up the long series formed by the progress of consciousness, or the teleology of reason, or the evolution of human thought; it has questioned themes of convergence and culmination; it has doubted the possibility of creating totalities" (Foucault 8).

While giving an illusion of progress and closure, these two fantastic texts reflect the crisis of reason. In the case of Veiga and Rubião, not only are both stories, contrary to Sússekind's theory, non-totalizing, but they also illustrate the non-reductive possibilities of the fantastic narrative. I believe that these stories break with notions of origin, accumulation, linearity and progress (all of which underlie the process of development) in order to question theories of knowledge and knowing. The next step is to discover how these stories articulate discontinuity within the linearity of their narrative. It is here, in my view, that these two Brazilian texts enter the territory of Borges' paradox in *The Library of Babel*, which is "unlimited and cyclical" (58). Language, like the library, has a system that is linear and possesses endless combinations, and yet ultimately, it has no grounding, and only doubles back on itself in a cyclical way. In these two stories, the attempts to ground experience in language fails, revealing only the metaphoricity of language, which is made all the more apparent through the use of the fantastic.

In *The Importunate Rooster* the first part of the story relies on the logic of linearity and accumulation necessary to convince the reader of the reality of the engineering project. The narrator informs us of the engineers' confidence in an ironic tone, saying, "They were not there building a simple road; they were demonstrating how far road building techniques had come" (78). The elaborate process of building and re-building incurs numerous delays and inconveniences including the re-routing of foot traffic through jungle brush and high rivers. Although the general population never believes it will see the conclusion of the project, it finally opens one day when least expected. The narrator describes the highway in a vision that is almost utopian:

Even from that distance it was obvious that the highway was a magnificent accomplishment. There was a wooded island, the trees still small but promising to grow vigorously; there was a path for cyclists, a walk for pedestrians. The bridges were something to be seen, and so numerous we were tempted to think they had been constructed to demonstrate excellence rather than resolve problems of transportation; in any case they were good looking and solid, at least from far away. (79-80)

This description invites the reader to take a "closer" look at what seems real. The highway proclaims itself as a total monument, a solid promise of grounding and identity that makes the people forget their past, because the apparent solidity of the project dispels any doubts as to its concreteness. The narrator reiterates: "Faced with the majesty of the highway, with its bridges, tunnels, and cloverleaves, the people forgot their long wait, passed on from father to son, forgot the relatives and friends who had died without seeing it finished, the detours they'd had to make. . ." (80)

Any previous detour, discomfort, or distress that the highway had represented is eliminated in its linear and totalizing promise for a new beginning, as a monument of progress and utopian engineering. Here the language of science and technology attempts to bring forth a new beginning and pass itself off as the source of its own discourse. Derrida points to the impossibility of engineering one's own origin and discourse in reference to the objectivity of structuralism and its scientific basis. He notes: "As soon as we cease to believe in such an engineer and in a discourse which breaks with received historical discourse, and as soon as we admit that every discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage* and that the engineer and scientist are also species of *bricoleurs*, then the very idea of *bricolage* is menaced and the difference in which it took on its meaning breaks down" (285). Here Derrida acknowledges his own role as *bricoleur* and acknowledges that he is part of the same tradition. Yet by exploring the gaps in received discourse, he disturbs our concepts of facile oppositions; and it is in this gap, I believe, that the play of the fantastic emerges.

The appearance of a rooster of monstrous proportions not only disrupts the realism of the story, but also upsets the complacent acceptance of "progress". Almeida points out that the word "monster" is etymologically linked to the representation of all that which exceeds the unity of nature (8). Here the "natural" language (or verisimilitude) of the story is broken by this monstrous being. The disruptive rooster, in spoiling the motorists' use of the highway, also breaks the linear movement along its horizontal stretch of continuity and unity. The break not only closes the highway, but ruptures the linearity associated with the notions of progress and development. At the story's conclusion, the continuity represented by the horizontality of the highway is temporarily suspended; in its arrested state it shows a play of discontinuity of events that do not fit into any overall logic. It will remain in such a state of suspension until that day when the "new race of men" uncover the highway and the molten metal and set out to incorporate it into the continuity of history by explaining it as just one more stage in human history. At this point it will be included once more into the continuity of the "edifice" of knowledge. Yet the irony lies in the idea that this rational interpretation of the events is based on a false premise; this breakdown of logic illustrates Derrida's point that all language is essentially metaphorical, and its grounding is therefore questionable. Ultimately, the logical explanation relies on the metaphysics of force to ground its premises, which are made precarious by the discourse of fantastic. In the text, the languages of logic and the fantastic form a seemingly coherent whole which paradoxically engineers textual ambiguity. This engineering of ambiguity is also one of the major themes of *The Edifice*; in the analysis that follows, I shall consider the edifice itself as a metaphor of the traps encountered in the linear logic of the continual accumulation of knowledge.

The movement of construction in *The Edifice* shifts the axis of continuity from the horizontal to the vertical; its verticality underscores the teleological model of Western metaphysics and actively reminds us of its philosophical implications. In the story, the play between the discourses of religion and engineering portrays the paradox of the fantastic. As a re-writing of the story of Babel and the original breakdown of language (representing the loss of the transcendental signified), the story necessarily

plays with the idea of the confusion of languages, or discourses – one of the very basic ingredients of the fantastic. Whereas the language of the prophecy seems clear and determinate at the story's outset, its meaning (and communication itself) breaks down by the story's close. The prophecy states “that irremediable confusion would befall the workers upon completion of the 800th floor and would result in the definitive collapse of the enterprise” (29). João Gaspar, the chief engineer, a man who represents the epitome of reason and who has “absolute confidence in the successful outcome of the project” (29), seems to be the perfect man to undertake the task. Despite a raucous party after the completion of the 800th floor, work continues as usual with no evidence of confusion on the part of the workers who easily complete 96 more floors (33). Thus the prophecy seems to be a type of fiction in that the building continues to grow despite its prediction, ultimately proving that the foundation of the building is elusive and its purpose even more so. Yet João Gaspar begins to re-examine the premise of the building, and we begin to suspect that perhaps the continued construction of the building is also part of the confusion referred to in the prophecy itself. The irreducible contradiction of the prophecy (of both presence and absence) is covered over and incorporated into the edifice, and while it cannot be totally ignored, it reveals nothing but a gap in the foundation of the project. This gap in the system also reveals itself in the increasing breakdown in communication between João Gaspar and his workers.

In face of the growing building, João Gaspar attempts to stop construction by articulating his doubt and distress to the workers; he shouts, “it can't be done, a monster with unlimited stories!” The foundations would have to be reinforced as the number of floors was increased – that's totally impractical” (35). João Gaspar, in voicing his belief in the unsound foundations of the project tries to reveal the unexamined gaps within the structure, gaps that will remain blind spots of any model of accumulation. As João Gaspar attempts to articulate what Foucault would call *spaces of dissension* (*Archeology*, 152), he contests the continuity that would blend contradictions into a unity, an overall principle that would justify growth as its own end or explanation.

However, in this attempt, João Gaspar miscalculates the force of continuity, and despite his entreaties, the workers simply view him as a part of the overall plan. He tries to discourage them with such skill that:

Not infrequently, struck by the beauty of his rhetorical images, some of the workers begged him to repeat himself. João Gaspar would get furious and burst into violent insults. Yet these, too, were so elegantly phrased that no one was ever insulted. Pleasantly laughing, [the workers] returned to the job, while the edifice continued to rise. (37)

By this final paragraph, João Gaspar, the engineer, in his use of beautiful images and oratory, has appropriated the skills and language of the artist or writer. In this way, the story alternates between revealing and concealing the contradictions within the edifice and uses engineering as a metaphor for writing itself. Since the building process is continuous and it cannot efface its gaps, it contains and incorporates discontinuity into its movement. Thus, within the linearity of the story, the language of the beginning prophecy seems to be determinate, but by the end the language of the characters becomes the opposite. As João Gaspar realizes that the edifice will go on without him, he faces his own death. His language and the story itself become a paradox of closure and continuity; Foucault compares the impulse of all writing with another image of doubling back and duplication, and has called it a "mirror to infinity, to which every language gives birth once it erects itself vertically against death. . . a virtual and circular mirror, completed in a beautifully enclosed form" (*Language*, 60). Ultimately, in *The Edifice*, the metaphor of engineering becomes one of language, because it mirrors rather than reduces discontinuity and infinity in its closed form.

The conclusion that would show engineering as inhumane or unnatural because it stands in opposition to the "natural" or "human" measures of knowledge begins to dissolve as we examine the contradictions or discontinuities within the texts. By addressing engineering, the stories demonstrate through the metaphors of building and excavation that, like a text, the projects of development are not constructed on a sound place of origin or

identity, but are founded on the fictions or myths that are necessary to begin any building project. In their own archeology, the stories point to the elaborate layers of fictions in both writing and engineering; in so doing, even the form of the allegory eventually reveals the gaps and hairline fractures which allow us to discover where to dig them free from the limitations of closure. One final irony remains; as post-structuralist writers seek to undermine an authoritarian model of writing, their own writing may be quite authoritarian. Yet their own use of force is not innocent. By reading these writers critically, perhaps we can then locate that fictional place where we begin to engineer our own analytical projects, more aware of our own limitations. Our ability to undertake the double reading of allegory is a gesture that would break down authoritarian structures of meaning and demonstrate the richness of fantastic discourse.

NOTES

¹The use of the word "stories" by the translator provides an interesting pun, precisely because the infinite generation of "stories" once again recalls the infinite number of volumes in Borges' *The Library of Babel*.

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