

THE LITERARY CONSTRUCTION
OF THE SERTÃO IN JAMES WELLS'S
THREE THOUSAND MILES THROUGH BRAZIL

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Resumo: *Três Mil Milhas Através do Brasil*, do viajante inglês do século XIX, James W. Wells, é único pelo fato de que seu autor, que cruzou o sertão brasileiro quase todo o tempo sozinho, indo mais além do que qualquer outro viajante daquele século no Brasil, era tanto um técnico, no sentido mais pragmático do termo, quanto um artista. Como artista, possuía também mais de uma habilidade, pois não apenas ilustrou seu texto com desenhos de observação de grande qualidade como demonstrou talento literário.

Palavras-chave: James W. Wells; narrativas de viagens; Charles Dickens.

“O que é que buriti diz? É: –
Eu sei e não sei...”
Grande Sertão: Veredas.

Very little is known about the English engineer James W. Wells, who traveled through Brazil in the late 1870s, and published in 1886 a two-volume book about his experiences in this country. Despite efforts which involved research in the archives of the Royal Geographic Society, the dates and places of his birth and death could not be determined. What we know for sure is that he came to Brazil in his twenties as an engineer, remained here for over a decade, and he later purchased a house in Kent

which he named Olinda, after the beautiful seaside town in the State of Pernambuco. In this house he compiled his notes and wrote *Exploring and Travelling Three Thousand Miles Through Brazil*. This book is in many aspects an exception among travel books on Brazil and especially on Minas Gerais.

James W. Wells had to wait more than a century to have his work acknowledged and discussed, certainly not any lack of enterprise on his part. The acknowledgment, belated as it is, did not come, however, from where he expected. Not in England, his mother country, but in Brazil, Wells' travel book has been recently rediscovered and appraised. *Three Thousand Miles...* was unearthed¹ by Roberto Borges Martins during a stay in the United States. Later, in Brazil, where Martins came to occupy the Chair of the Fundação João Pinheiro, a state foundation for the advancement of economic, geographic and historical research, Martins had a Portuguese translation published as a luxury edition in 1995.²

Every travel book is bound to be curious either for its exotic objects of discussion or for the novel look it casts on otherwise familiar subjects. But *Three Thousand Miles Through Brazil* is unique in that its author, who crossed the Brazilian backlands mostly on his own, going farther than most of the other travelers in 19th century Brazil, was both a technical man in the most pragmatic sense and an artist. He used his hands both for cutting his way through the forest and to make sketches of people and scenery. His descriptions rely not only on preciseness of observation but also on imagination. His dialogues are more true-to-life than true: they are recreated so as to picture the colorful quality of uneducated Brazilian Portuguese in English. For the purpose of expressiveness, Wells kept many terms and phrases in Portuguese, using footnotes for the transcription of the original pronunciation of English sounds. It is not enough for him to convey the meaning of a conversation; he had to stage it in an almost theatrical way.

At every page, we find ourselves before a literary mind that wants to make the most of the material at its disposal. It is not an original mind, to be sure, but one that is formed by the models of its time. Novel writing was Wells' ultimate goal as evidenced by his second book, which has the Amazon as its setting. His model for character drawing, dialogue and humor was Charles Dickens. He also makes use of stock characters from adventure books such as Mayne Reid's and James Fenimore Cooper's, greatly in fashion in his time. Intertextuality plays a major role in his book, for he has constant recourse to citations including contemporary plays and opera as well as classics such as *Don Quixote* and *The Divine Comedy*. Wells' repertoire is a fair sample of what the up-to-date reader in Victorian England would recognize and identify with.

Dickens furnishes Wells with more than general lines. From his *Martin Chuzzlewit* the young engineer takes a formula for travel writing that perfectly suits some passages of his own pilgrimage. In that novel, Dickens tells the story of a young English architect who goes to America in search of work and success. Martin, the protagonist, is very disappointed at what he finds in the land of his dreams: people are pompous, callous and stupid, and grasp every chance to take him in. The small town he was bound to turns out to be an unhealthy swamp, where he almost dies of fever. Luckily, he can always count on his faithful and cheerful servant Mark Tapley, by means of whose industry and support they both manage to escape many perils and return to England in safety. The novel cost Charles Dickens the ill will of the Americans and made an apology necessary in the subsequent editions.

The repeated mentions to *Martin Chuzzlewit* in *Three Thousand Miles...* throw light on the personality of James Wells, of whom very little is known, and can explain his responsiveness to aspects of Brazilian life which the majority of travel writers do not mention. He pictures himself in the book (and indeed, he does not refrain from being the hero of his

own tale) as Mark Tapley, willing to keep his good humor through the most disagreeable experiences. However, his profile is much more akin to that of Martin's, for he is a young engineer and draftsman who intends to succeed in a faraway South American country. Without openly stating it, Wells secretly identifies with Dickens' hero, since he too needed to make a name for himself and eventually win the hand of a suitable Englishwoman. He projects his desires almost naïvely in some episodes of his journey, and that turns his narration into a kind of Bildungsroman, interspersed, however, with pragmatic commentaries on the economy of the country and the ways in which the English might profit from it. The mixture becomes awkward sometimes but, still, it is a telling illustration of the struggle between Wells' all too British prejudices and his unconscious drive towards the Unknown, towards Otherness.

The fact that he does not have a "position" like other famous travelers, many of whom come from the European gentry, or are already famous in their own professions, is a severe drawback for Wells. Never actually acknowledging it, he resents the treatment he gets from his superiors in the engineering firm, to whom he refers in ironic terms. He certainly does not get much consideration from his superiors. Whereas his colleagues worked in twos, Wells did all his surveys by himself and was finally sent on his own on a hazardous journey through the wilderness of Goiás in order to find an alternative road to Tocantins. The evidence of his small importance in the world sank deep into his mind. Although overtly stating the inherent importance of any representative of Britain in a backward tropical land, his own subordinate position makes him liable to identify – subconsciously, as it were – with the lower class of Brazilians whom he employs as his followers but who become more and more his fellow travelers. They too have left their families and native places, are homesick and apprehensive about what is to befall them. Nevertheless, it is in this desolate condition, far from any human community and roaming through a land no one had ever crossed

before, that their qualities show at best. James Wells, who uses a stereotypic discourse, according to which Brazilians are lazy, sickly and ignorant, has to admit, every now and again, that they can be also trustworthy, tough when the circumstances require it and perfectly skilled in their crafts.

Beyond his barely conscious identification with the small of the earth, Wells' insight into the less evident facets of the *mineiros* owes to the influence of Dickens' novels in that this traveler takes a close look on things and people, unusual for foreign travelers. Novel writers are prone to take individuals, more than types, for characters. In *Three Thousand Miles*, the young engineer often abandons the panoramic view for a more detailed scene that another traveler might have reckoned meaningless and unworthy of being described. Neither his colleagues nor the native people look like cardboard figures in his text, however discreet Wells intends to be. His hosts and hostesses have generally an existence of their own, a face and a voice. Sometimes Wells even stops to wonder what is to become of them thenceforth. A comparison with Richard Burton's or Charles Hastings Dent's attitude towards the common people, who stand as a definite "they" for both, will show how much more disposed Wells is to mix with Brazilians in general, in spite of all his sarcastic comments about them.³ If he cannot find a lovely face among Brazilian country girls, he shows himself to be looking for one all the same. His disappointed observation that country girls won't open their mouths before strangers reveals how anxious he is to get to know them.

Wells' good knowledge of spoken Brazilian Portuguese makes it easy for him to perceive the peculiarities of the language of the *sertanejo*, catching inflections which the too callous ear of the educated Brazilian, who, at the time, was in all probability someone who lived in town but had extended properties in the country, did not care for. The deviations from official syntax and vocabulary that would be heard by a Brazilian as mere errors, are received by the foreign ear as a language in itself. However,

the traveler appraises the *sertanejo* speech as a very imprecise one, characterized by a haziness that seems often willfully misleading:

“Is this the road to Inhotim?”

“Nhor?”

“Is this the road to Inhotim?”

“Nhor, sim”, (Yes, sir).

“How far is it?”

“Oh-hum-four leagues or more.”

“How much more?”

“Oh, um pedaço” (a bit)

“How much is the pedaço?”

“Oh, um tiquito” (a small piece)

[...]

I meet many a reply like this; there is always a varying number of leagues and the rest, the rest being um pedaço; um pedaço; alguma coisa; uma coisinha; ou mais um pouco (a piece; a good bit; something; a trifle; or a little more) (116-7).

Some words seem to him to comprise such a wide range of meanings that they end up being almost meaningless. The word “bicho” eludes definition, as it may apply to animals, people and situations alike. “À-toa” is a term that defies classification, indicating that one couldn’t care less for the specificity of a bird or a flower. What James Wells could not foresee is that the term “train”, which he helped to introduce in Minas Gerais, would become a synonym for “thing”.

On the other hand, Brazilian Portuguese lacked some concepts that were basic to English. “Coziness” was the kind of homely comfort that *mineiros*, or any other Brazilians, were unable to conceive of. The local idea of a well-furnished drawing-room consisted of a cane-seated sofa with one cane-seated chair at each side, at right angles with each other, unsoftened by cushions or stuffing. The concept of social classes was far too loose for an English mind. Everybody felt entitled to shake hands with anybody, nobody had the sense of what was due to a better educated man. All formality was a sham:

There was much bowing and passing of compliments, but after the ice of ceremony had thawed, we found many a genial and jocular nature under the assumed “society manner” that an educated Brazilian will assume or drop as he does his coat. The black coat is the war-paint of the ‘doutor’, – I prefer him in a dressing-gown, ceroulas, and slippers; he may be rather slipshod in appearance, but he feels comfortable, at his ease, and is consequently natural, and his good points come to the fore (I: 215).

All of what was antipodal to his own rules of behavior at once annoyed and fascinated the young Englishman. The force of habit collided with longing to be free from rigid etiquette. He represents this longing for spontaneity in a dialogue with a Northern Brazilian girl, in the last chapter of his book:

“[...] are you married?” she suddenly inquires after a pause.

“No, I am a bachelor.”

“Why do you not get married?”

“I cannot find any one to have me.”

[...]

“I am going to be married.”

“When?”

“On the 30th of this month.”

“Allow me to congratulate you upon the near approach of such a happy event.”

She stamps her foot, and says, “It is not soon, it is quite a long time to wait. I do so want to get married.” (after another pause and a repetition of the sigh), “But, perhaps, after all, I shall not marry even then.”

“How is that?”

“Because it is very likely that I may find some one else that I like better. I have already been nearly married lots of times, but when the time comes I refuse. The last occasion was because my lover told me that he did not like me to talk to other young men; did you ever hear of such impudence? I sent him off immediately, for I am not going to be shut up in a house all day with only stupid slaves to talk to. [...] I am so sorry, for I am always thinking of young men, as young men are always thinking of young women, as is quite natural. Do you not think so?” (II: 303, 304).

Although the veracity of the above conversation has been disputed,⁴ it is clear how refreshing it would be for James Wells, young and lonesome, to hear a girl say how natural it was for young people to be sexually attracted by the other sex, a statement that he would hardly have heard from a Victorian girl. At the beginning of his journey, he had found some charming farmer daughters too *en décolleté* but, a thousand miles further, it is useless to be shocked at the sight of a group of wild backwood white girls dressed only in skirts. The mixture of attraction and repulsion at what appeared to him very loose morals makes his discourse waver with undecidedness.

But not only in this aspect does Wells fall prey to feelings contrary to his convictions. The shock of opposed notions of life is a constant in Wells' text. In no other travel book on Brazil does the insufficiency of the colonial discourse show to such an extent, partly as a result of Wells' own personal conflicts, partly because he was young enough to see with unprejudiced eyes what he had only learned to express in prejudiced images. Unlike Burton, he is unable to speak all the time from a central position.⁵

One of the aspects in which his wavering shows more clearly is that of the work ethic. Among the commonplace notions about Brazil, the laziness of the natives is perhaps the most generalized. Whereas Wells sticks to this notion throughout the book, he cannot help feeling the charm of leisure ("This life on the Sono is decidedly pleasant, it is quite like a long picnic") and admiring the *matutos'* untiring muscles whenever they find a goal well worth their effort. The traveler's idle country people are the same who work under his command for twelve hours each day without interruption and even risk their lives for "trifling wages" that will grant them, at most, a spree in town.

Wells comes as a herald of the industrial revolution. Pedro II knew that the only way to promote economic development in Brazil was to

open ways of communication that would bring the products of inland farms to the coast efficiently and cheaply. The train was the modern means of transportation that could do for Brazil what it had already done for the United States. Wells was born at the height of industrialization. He had no heart for the old rhythms of handicraft work, he was all for speed and technology. His up-to-date mindset, however, coexisted with a romantic imagination, aroused by operas and books, as well as with an artistic sensibility for the beauties of nature and the music of words. Each part of his mind searches for something else in Brazil. The engineer seeks money and acknowledgement as an enterprising professional, whereas the romantic wants to prove himself a hero, an explorer and a benefactor of mankind, as well as to capture the beauty of the scenery and the unusual tones and nuances of an exotic language. Whereas the practical man would like to cut down a whole forest and classify the timber according to variety, so as to sell it to the best advantage (399), the artist wants to preserve the woods and the fauna that enlivens it, while the hero wants to be celebrated as the first man ever to cross that wilderness.

It is the emergence of different, sometimes opposed discourses in the text that opens the way to a vision of the *sertanejo* life that, deviating from the pictures drawn by other, older and more higher ranking travelers, reminds the Brazilian reader of Guimarães Rosa's work. The resemblance seems at first to lie mostly on the region described, which corresponds approximately to Riobaldo's "grande sertão". Later we find that some Rosian themes are already touched on in *Three Thousand Miles*, as a result of Wells' curious and unguarded observation of the Other. He is almost the only traveler in Minas to depict independent, somewhat man-like but seductive young women, which could furnish material for the enactment of a character like Diadorim. We may imagine Wells' having met Diadorim as a little girl:

[...] a pretty little whitey girl, about nine or ten years old, was a wild young amazon; it was a sight to see her astride the bare back of a horse, going at full speed, guided only by a rope tied around his mouth, dashing through bush and dodging the branches, with her hair and short skirts streaming in the wind. Nearly every day she passed my rancho chasing cattle, shouting and waving her arms" (I: 276).

The figure of the devil is another constant in Wells' book, significantly in contrast to the Englishman's pragmatic spirit. He makes fun of the superstitions of his Brazilian employees but frequently falls prey to an eerie feeling which he can only describe in terms of Dante's *Inferno*. He is himself taken for the devil in a little village, just like Riobaldo says happened to a stranger in his neighborhood. Moreover, Wells changes his Christian name to Diogo, so Brazilians can pronounce it, but, ironically, never learns that Diogo is an appellation for the devil.⁶

But what especially marks the author of *Three Thousand Miles Through Brazil* as a predecessor, in the Borgian sense, of Guimarães Rosa' is the attitude to language, the ability to distinguish the specificities of the *sertanejo's* language and the amount of attention it gets in the book, where it plays almost the role of a character. As I mentioned above, the misleading meanders of the native speech are depicted in a most theatrical way in Wells. Drawn to extremes, this aspect of language is responsible for a great part of the charm Brazilian Portuguese acquires in *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Riobaldo will tell his tale, but not in a straightforward way, for his tale must flow like the river (Rio= river), not like a man-built channel. This is an apprenticeship Wells has to undergo. The dense vegetation that hinders the direct progress of the track seems to suggest that there are more ways to go than the straight railway. When his surveys are finished, he concludes that it may not be a good idea to build a railway across the wilderness. In the next part of Wells' travels, as he goes through a region never trod by man, he traces a map of it and baptizes the main river with

his own name, in its Portuguese translation: Rio Diogo. The name, written in flowing water, does not stay. But the glory of a moment glimmers forever in his text. Having taken off his coat of prejudices and cliché concepts, James Wells stands like Adam in a soon-to-be-lost paradise.

Read as a Bildungsroman or as an intertext for Guimarães Rosa, James Wells' *Three Thousand Miles Through Brazil* reveals a quality of literary achievement that is hard to find in travel books. Moreover, it presents to the Brazilian reader a rare instance of the crumbling down of colonial discourse in face of an impervious environment. Unable to draw on stereotypes alone, faced with the absence of wild Indians, dangerous beasts, highwaymen, mineral riches and the like, but also with the presence of what is beyond its powers of expression, the discourse of the colonizer falters, announcing, for the attentive critical mind, the post-colonial agency.

NOTES

¹ There are scattered mentions to the book in some Brazilian authors of the first half of the 20th century. Soon after it was published, His Majesty, D. Pedro II, received a copy from the author, which was duly thanked by the Emperor.

² I did the translation, published as *Três mil milhas através do Brasil*.

³ In their books, Burton and Dent only exceptionally make use of dialogue, so that the native's speech is never heard. There is – at least at the textual level – no actual interaction between these travelers and the people they meet on the road. Moreover, they never use the pronoun “us” as comprising lower class Brazilians.

⁴ Tania Quintaneiro, in *Retratos de mulher* (Petrópolis, RJ: Vozes, 1996) interprets this conversation as a didactic exposition intended to show how Brazilian women would express their feelings “if they were allowed to manifest their repressed thoughts and desires” (99-100).

⁵ I take it as a shared characteristic, to a certain extent, of all travel literature about the inland of Brazil, as opposed to the coastline, the abandonment of the locus amoenus as descriptive system, and its substitution by the discourse of lack or “devoidness”. I am currently developing arguments along this line that will eventually compose the material for a book.

⁶ I deal with this subject in the article “Doutor Diogo e o diabo na terra do sol”, published in *Cânones & contextos, Proceedings of the V Congress of the Brazilian Association for Comparative Literature (Abralic)*, v. 2, Rio de Janeiro: 1998.

