

Gogol and Lispector: a scream through time and space

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RESUMO: Esta discussão faz uma comparação entre *A hora da estrela*, de Clarice Lispector, e *O capote*, de Nicolai Gogol. Os resultados da análise mostram semelhanças produtivas que nos levam à discussão da origem e destino de dois personagens que superficialmente parecem não ter nada em comum, Macabéa e Akaky Akakyevich. A comparação também mostra que, apesar dos diferentes séculos em que os textos foram escritos, há grandes semelhanças na maneira em que os dois escritores apresentam seus personagens e sua época.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Rússia, sertão, sobrevivência, província, metrópole.

ABSTRACT: This discussion provides a comparison between Clarice Lispector's *The hour of the star*, and Nicolai Gogol's *The overcoat*. The results of the analysis show productive similarities that lead us to engage in the discussion of the origin and destiny of two seemingly unrelated characters, Macabéa and Akaky Akakyevich. The comparison also shows that, despite the different centuries in which the texts were written, there are striking similarities in how both writers present their characters and their times.

KEYWORDS: Russia, backlands, survival, province, metropolis.

What can the relationship between a Russian Civil Servant in St. Petersburg and a girl among thousands from the impoverished Northeast of Brazil working in Rio de Janeiro possibly be? Furthermore, how can one find any connection between characters whose stories were published, respectively, in 1841, and 1977? On the surface,

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such relationship is absurd, and even to propose it is a bit preposterous. And yet, since art does not obey the laws of time or respect national frontiers, there is a strong possibility that these two characters, Nicolai Gogol's Akaky Akakyevich and Clarice Lispector's Macabéa, are related in more than one way.

This does not mean, obviously, that Macabéa is a version of Akaky. What this discussion wants to propose is a reflection on the ways in which Lispector, a Brazilian writer born in the Ukraine, in her last novel can be seen as taking on a provocation proposed by Dostoyevsky's famous statement "We all come out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'" while, at the same time, proposing a more radical treatment of the character and of the situation than the Russian master did.

Of course, as far as literature goes, there are many "overcoats," many influences, many sources. Although Gogol's might have been one of the most important and he indeed has the distinction of being considered the initiator of Russian realism, Lispector gives us a clear indication of the importance of a literary tradition, through the narrator Rodrigo S. M., who says that "a palavra é fruto da palavra. A palavra tem que se parecer com a palavra" – "the word comes from the word. The word has to look like the word." (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 26)¹. The word is not necessarily a word in any language in particular: it can come from the Brazilian masters or from the Russian master—or from both. The creation of the character Macabéa, just as the creation of Akaky Akakyevich, speaks about each writer's profound need to tell a story of a human being who deserves to be seen as well as respected. In some points, these two stories converge. In others, they distance themselves. A comparison between both will illuminate the ways in which "the word" is never the product of just one writer or one literary tradition, but that, indeed, it participates in a bigger, older, more encompassing project.

Because it is the older text, we will start with Gogol's "The overcoat". It's a classic of world literature and, inde-

¹ All translations into English are mine.

ed, as Victor Brombert warns us, it “lends itself to orgies of interpretations... ‘The overcoat’ can be read as a parable, as a pathetic tale, an interpretive puzzle. But to begin with, there is the temptation to read it seriously as satire with a social and moral message” (BROMBERT, 2001, p. 25).

In Gogol’s short story, a poor government clerk, Akaky Akakievich, lives alone, and his salary only covers the bare necessities. His job consists of copying documents. He relishes this job, mouthing the words he is copying. His young co-workers make fun of him; make up stories about him to his face. But Akaky ignores them, and only when the mockery and the jostling prevent him from doing his job does he ask his colleagues not to pester him. It seems that his life, small and insignificant as it is, will continue this way, and he will die of old age. However, the day his old overcoat can no longer protect him from the cold winds of St. Petersburg, his life changes. His tailor Grigory Petrovich refuses to fix the old coat, and Akaky cannot afford a new one on his meager salary. But the cold of the city is implacable, and he has to agree to have a new coat made. He then begins a severe regimen of six months of great economy and hunger, adds the extra year-end bonus he gets from work, removes from its hiding place the money he has saved for many years, and finally puts together enough money to purchase the material and have the tailor make the coat. Even though the time in which he was saving to be able to afford the coat is a time of great deprivation, Akaky relishes the thought of the day he will have the desired garment.

The day finally comes, and both he and the tailor admire the wonderful piece of clothing, as Akaky goes on to work. The change is immediate: his colleagues—even those who once made fun of him—are impressed. One decides to throw a birthday party, and Akaky is invited, and, although he is bored at first, later he enjoys some champagne and becomes very happy. On the way back home in the middle of the night, Akaky is a transformed man. For the first time in his life, he runs after a woman! However, in a deserted

stretch of the street, two men approach and threaten him, and then steal the overcoat off his back. Confused and afraid, Akaky goes on a pilgrimage through different police offices to try to get the police to do something. No results. One day, following a colleague's suggestion, he finally goes to see a Very Important Person. But the man mistreats him so badly that Akaky leaves the place so crushed that he cannot recuperate from the meeting and dies in a few days raging against the Very Important Person. Here ends the realistic part of the story. What follows—and has attracted different critical opinions—is the appearance of the clerk's ghost around bridges, always trying to rip people's overcoats off their backs. Even the Very Important Person is attacked on a night he was going to visit his mistress, and his coat is taken. After this, the ghost of the clerk no longer appears downtown, but begins to appear elsewhere in the city.

In Lispector's novel, *Macabéa*, a poor girl from the impoverished Northeast of Brazil, lives in the big city of Rio de Janeiro. Like Akaky, she too works with words, and lives on the fringes of society: she is a typist whose salary is enough to cover her bare necessities. She is lonely, and lives in "A cidade toda feita contra ela" –"the city is completely against her" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 21). But she lives on, renting a bed in a room shared with other young women. Her great joy is to borrow a radio that gives her explanations about trivial things, and sometimes music. At work, she falls in love with words whose meaning she does not know, and sometimes takes the initiative of changing them to accommodate the way she speaks. One day, a man, Olímpio, approaches her. He tells her about his life and his big plans. She dreams about becoming his wife, even though he mistreats and insults her. The relationship ends when he meets her colleague Glória, a plump, real carioca who dyes her hair blonde. Macabéa is not angry with Glória, who even invites her to her house and feeds her foods Macabéa never saw before. One day, after explaining how her life has changed for the better thanks to some work done by a fortune teller, Glória suggests Macabéa go to

see Madame Carlota too. Macabéa takes the money and goes to see Madame Carlota. The fortune teller predicts a brilliant future for her, with a foreign man and a new car. “Pregnant with future” (as the text in Portuguese clearly says) Macabéa leaves Madame Carlota’s house and is run over by a Mercedes driven by a foreigner. She hits her head against the sidewalk and agonizes while some people look and one person lights a candle. Finally, she expires after saying, “About the future.”

As the short summaries demonstrate, there are some evident similarities between Akaky and Macabéa. The first one is that both are poor, and both live in a big city. Both have no family. In “The Overcoat” the text mentions “father, grandfather... even this brother-in-law,” all people who “walked about in boots, having their soles repaired no more than three times a year” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 234)². Macabéa, for her part, lost both parents “to the bad fevers in the backlands of Alagoas” when she was two years old. When she is first seen in the story, she has forgotten their names, and it is not clear how she leaves Alagoas and ends up in Rio de Janeiro, except that the text says that her aunt found her a job as a typist, and then died (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 37). When both narratives begin, Macabéa and Akaky live in a kind of dormitory, have no family, are poorly paid, and work with words. But the similarities do not end here.

The narrator of “The overcoat” says that Akaky’s mother was “still lying in bed,” when the godparents arrived and proposed some names for the baby. To each name, she reacted saying, “They’re all such queer names!” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 234-235). Finally, the mother decides, “I can see that such is the poor innocent infant’s fate. If that is so, let him rather be called after his father. His father was Akaky, so let the son be Akaky, too” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 235). Macabéa, in turn, explains to Olímpio that she, too, “finds her name strange, but her mother chose this one because of a promise to Our Lady of Good Death to see if I survived, so up until one year of age I was not called

² All subsequent quotations from this story come from the same edition of “The overcoat”.

anything because I had no name” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 51). Recognizing the singularity of her name, she continues, “I would prefer not to be called anything instead of having a name no one else has, but it seems that [my mother’s idea] worked.... [A]s you can see, I lived...” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 52).

It is important to observe that in the narrative itself, the name “Macabéa” is only revealed past the middle of the story. With this delay one can say that, in technical terms, Lispector illustrates an important point: the protagonist, the girl from the Northeast, becomes indistinguishable from the “thousands of others like her,” nameless in the city. Since the protagonist can be anyone, she can therefore be all of them. In terms of the destiny of the protagonist, this means that, in a sense, one Macabéa dies, but others still go on. Such a possibility is very rich, especially if we consider the allusion to the biblical name of Maccabeus, which does not refer to only one person, but to several with this name: Judas, John, Simon, Eleazar, Jonathan. It is also noteworthy that the most important of the Maccabeus, Judas, is also the one who instituted the commemoration of Hanukkah, a feast of dedication featuring the light of the menorah. Once again, the text illustrates this connection, as we see that, after she is struck by the car and is dying, Macabéa “wanted to vomit something that is not body, to vomit something illuminated. A star of a thousand points” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 96). This last connection between Macabéa in this last moment, and the light that comes from inside her clearly indicates that she, like the Maccabeus, has a light much bigger than herself inside her thin, diseased, hungry and unloved body³.

Some critics have stressed the fact that, even though she did not make a point of stressing it, Lispector was Jewish or, at least, she had been born to a Jewish family. With the creation of Macabéa she clearly aligns her heroine with a people who have had to live in hostile environments, to struggle to survive against many odds. However, since Macabéa is also a daughter of the Northeast of Brazil, she

³ If we look again at the connection with a Jewish background, one can see this name also as an ironic device, since the Maccabees were warriors, and—on a superficial level, at least—nothing can be further from anyone’s mind as seeing Macabéa as a warrior. However, once again, we have to remember that Macabéa is a daughter of the sertão of the Brazilian Northeast. Like the sertanejo that Euclides da Cunha she, too, is forte. Even in her weakness, she is strong as a representative of a people that endures, and survives.

cannot be seen simply as a metaphor for Jewish experience. As I argued elsewhere, both Macabéa and her boyfriend Olímpio de Jesus (family name given to those who do not have a father), are in fact the heirs of the people of the backlands, those sertanejos that Euclides da Cunha describes in his 1902 *Os sertões* when he says that “the man of the backlands is, above all, strong” (CUNHA, 1987, p. 81). This association is clear in the text, when Lispector writes that the man of the backlands is, above all, patient (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 75)⁴.

The subject of Macabéa’s name has attracted other critical readings. For instance, in her doctoral dissertation, Flávia Trocoli mentions the relationship with the Maccabees of the Bible, but she finds other connections:

No próprio nome, Macabéa, a evocação da morte. Nome que foi dado por uma promessa que a mãe fizera a Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte caso a filha, que nascera quase morta, vingasse. Lembremos que macchabée, em francês, significa cadáver. Além da afinidade sonora entre “Macabéa” e macabra (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 91)

In the name itself, Macabéa, the evocation of death. This name was given as a promise the mother had made to our Lady of the Good Death in case the daughter, who had been born almost dead, survived. We should also remember macchabée, in French, means corpse. And, finally, there is the sonorous affinity between “Macabéa” and “macabre.”

Akaky Akakyevich’s name is also complex. In “Gogol’s ‘The overcoat’: the meanings of a downfall,” Victor Brombert writes that, even though the name can be seen as an indication of continuation, since it is the same as his father’s name, the repetition of the syllable “kak”

“like” (tak kak = “just as”)—embeds the principle of sameness in Akaky’s name, determining, it would seem, his single-minded, lifelong activity of copying and implicit condemnation to sameness (BROMBERT, 2001, p. 26).

⁴ See my discussion of *A hora da estrela* in “Languages’ and ‘Voices’ in Brazilian Literature,” where I propose that when Lispector writes that Macabéa is the “crossbreed between one quiddity and another,” who “seemed to have been conceived from some vague notion in the minds of starting parents,” she is making an allusion to the 1852 novel by Manuel Antonio de Almeida, *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*.

The life of sameness, spent in copying documents others had written, is not necessarily a condemnation for Akaky, for whom his work is “a labour of love to him” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 237). Indeed, as Brombert points out, this “labor of love” can also be another element of the name, since “Akaky” can be seen as a reference to “Aca-cius,” “a holy monk of Sinai” (BROMBERT, 2001, p. 26)⁵. Therefore, Akaky’s copying can relate to the task given to the monks—to copy manuscripts—in a life of self denial and of dedication to the preservation of the holy text, even at the cost of great sacrifices. The sacrifice for Akaky is the mockery his fellow clerks submit him to. They do not understand the sacredness of his task, so they simply mock him. Here, once again, as Brombert correctly remarks, Akaky’s name can explain the one exception among his colleagues,

the young man who had only recently been appointed to the department and who, following the example of the others, tried to have some fun at his expense, stopped abruptly at Akaky’s mild expostulation, as though stabbed through the heart; and since then everything seemed to have changed in him and he saw everything in quite a different light (GOGOL, 1957, p. 236).

From that point on, he never makes fun of Akaky anymore, because he has gone through a “revelation” of Akaky’s saintliness⁶. Indeed, if his life can be considered saintly, in a comparison with Macabéa we can see that both characters lead ascetic lives. But there is a point that needs to be stressed in terms of any possible saintliness: Macabéa’s and Akaky’s lives cannot be seen as examples of renunciation, since their poverty and loneliness are not the result of choice. Both are poor as a result of socio-economic and historical conditions, and not of a desire to achieve saintliness. What makes the beginning of their life one that resembles saintliness is the fact that neither rebels against life; neither declaims against the heavens.

⁵ Another aspect of Akaky’s appearance that suggests his relationship with a monastic figure is the “bald patch” on his head, reminiscent of the tonsure medieval clerics used. William H. W. Fanning writes in the Catholic Encyclopedia that the tonsure is “a sacred rite instituted by the Church by which a baptized and confirmed Christian is received into the clerical order by the shearing of his hair and the investment with the surplice. The person thus tonsured becomes a partaker of the common privileges and obligations of the clerical state and is prepared for the reception of orders. The tonsure itself is not an ordination properly so called, nor a true order. It is rather a simple ascription of a person to the Divine service in such things as are common to all clerics.”

⁶ Brombert goes on to discuss “The overcoat” as a possible parody of hagiography, p. 26-28.

But, as we see, each is tempted in a special way, and each falls in similar ways.

There is, however, an important difference in their respective lives: Macabéa shares a room with four other young women who work as clerks in the *Lojas Americanas*, whereas Akaky has his own room in a house whose landlady is “an old woman of seventy,” and who, his fellow clerks joke, beat him up (GOGOL, 1957, p. 236). So, we can say that, even though both are equally poor, there are some advantages for Akaky, who at least has his own, private room where he can, in a sense, indulge in his greatest pleasure, to copy. In turn, Macabéa is not close to her roommates, themselves exploited workers who return home too tired to even wake up when Macabéa coughs at night (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 39). The only advantage Macabéa has in having roommates is that she can borrow a radio from one of them, Maria da Penha, and in the early mornings she turns it on “very very low, so that the others wouldn’t wake up...on Rádio Relógio, which provided ‘the correct time and culture’” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 45).

We can pause here and ask what the real advantage of sharing a living space with somebody else is. Primarily, of course, it is to have company. And, as it follows, it is also to have a sense of friendship and comfort with fellow human beings. But, as the text says, even though Macabéa shares a room with other young women, she lives alone and has no friends. Akaky, who lives in a landlady’s house, does not seem to have much contact with her. Indeed, after work, whereas “every Civil Servant is hastening to enjoy as best he can the remaining hours of his leisure... doing his best to enjoy himself, Akaky Akakyevich made no attempt to woo the fair goddess of mirth and jollity” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 239). In sum, although Macabéa lives with other women in the same room, she is always alone. And although Akaky lives in a house that has a landlady, he too spends his time completely alone. The only remaining space where both of them can have contact with other human beings is their place of work. But what kind of workers are they?

Macabéa, “typist and virgin”, works in a Rio de Janeiro office with Glória, the stenographer, and with Mr. Raimundo Silveira, the boss. But Macabéa is incompetent, and Mr. Raimundo informs her, in a manner, that she will be fired because “she made too many mistakes in her typing, besides always getting the paper dirty” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 31). However, when she hears this news, Macabéa speaks “with great ceremony to her beloved boss: —‘Please forgive me for bothering you’” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 32). Surprised by the unexpected delicateness in the voice of the typist, Mr. Raimundo looks at her again and, with less rudeness, says, “Well, you might not be fired right away. It might take a long time” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 32).

Akaky, in turn, is competent in copying, and his work is “a labor of love to him” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 237). Why does he not obtain a better position in his job? As the narrator informs us, Akaky’s evident care in and enjoyment of his work once called the attention of a kind director, who, in an attempt to reward Akaky for his long service, ordered him to do a less mechanical kind of work and to

prepare a report for another department of an already concluded case.[...] This, however, gave [Akaky] so much trouble that he was bathed in perspiration and kept mopping his forehead until at last he said, “No, I can’t do it. You’d better give me something to copy” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 237).

In sum, even though they are not brilliant workers, both Akaky and Macabéa provoke in their immediate superiors something that, if it is not respect, is at least pity, and both continue in their jobs.

If the relationship with the superiors provokes a mixture of contempt and pity, how do Macabéa and Akaky respectively relate with their fellow workers? Since both seem to not represent a threat to anyone, and indeed remain at the bottom of the ladder, it might be the case that they get along well with everybody. But the matter is

not so simple in either case. For Macabéa, the relationship with Glória shows that the two of them come from different classes and different cultures. Just like the women who share the common room with Macabéa, Glória is not her friend. Their differences are also physical: whereas Macabéa “barely has a body” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 19), “plump, white and warm” Glória is a “carioca da gema”—“pure carioca”⁷—who dyes her hair blonde, eats well, and has a family. It is no wonder that Macabéa’s “boyfriend,” Olímpio, dumps her for Glória once he sets eye on her because he knows that “she would give him honey and ample flesh” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 75). But Macabéa does not resent Glória who, after all, is her colleague, gives her aspirins, and in whom she provokes “a vague sense of motherhood” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 73). In fact, trying to compensate her for the theft of her boyfriend, Glória even invites Macabéa to her house. But as a result of the visit, Macabéa gets sick, not sure whether it was because her liver was affected by “the real chocolate she drank, or because she had been so nervous from drinking rich people’s things” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 76).

As for Akaky, “the young clerks laughed and cracked jokes about him...told stories about him in his presence... showered bits of torn paper on his head and called them snow” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 236). But “it was only when somebody jogged his arm and so interfered with his work, that he would say, ‘Leave me alone, gentlemen. Why do you pester me?’” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 236). As we saw previously, only one of these young clerks becomes so moved by Akaky’s “mild expostulation” that he never bothers the clerk anymore, and indeed, even the memory of the “shortish Civil Servant with the bald patch on his head, uttering those pathetic words, ‘Leave me alone! Why do you pester me?’ ... he seemed to hear others: ‘I am your brother’” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 236). However, because it is through their colleagues that both Akaky and Macabéa relate to the world in a more expansive way, it is also through them that each ventures outside his or her

⁷ “Carioca”—as we Brazilians know well, but others might not—is the patronymic for people born in the city of Rio de Janeiro.

simplified, repetitive life. It is this “venturing out” that provokes their undoing.

And yet, the most immediate relationship the characters have is with the ever-present narrator. As we see, both Rodrigo S. M. and the unnamed narrator of “The overcoat” become the medium through which the characters see the world. Taking the narrative voice in “The overcoat” as a starting point, we can see that there are some similarities between this voice and the protagonist. As Rachel May writes, when the narrator says “You must know” that Akaky Akakyevich “expresses himself in prepositions, adverbs, and finally, the kinds of particles of speech that have positively no meaning whatsoever,” the narrator is establishing the insignificance of the character, and also, by the use of the unnecessary phrase “you must know,” the narrator identifies with Akaky (MAY, 1994, p. 57). And, indeed, as May goes on to demonstrate, “the narrator uses an abundance of fillers (you must know, for the most part; and, finally; positively; whatsoever)” (MAY, 1994, p. 57).

Rodrigo S. M., the narrator of *A hora da estrela*, seems to be doing something quite similar, equating himself to his creature from the very beginning:

The truth is that on a street of Rio de Janeiro I happened to see briefly the air of helplessness in the face of a girl from the Northeast. Without mentioning that when I was a child I lived in the Northeast (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 18).

From this first and important connection, Rodrigo too, like the narrator of “The overcoat”, lines up others: neither he nor Macabéa begs (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 19; 37), and, further, he reflects:

Are there thousands like her? Yes, and they are just a fortuity. Come to think of it, who is not a fortuity in life? As for myself, I only avoid being a fortuity because I write, and that is an act that is a fact (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 44).

Considering that Macabéa is a typist and also writes, she too is somebody for the same reason the narrator is somebody. On the same page, Rodrigo says that Macabéa never thought “I am myself,” and further ahead he explains that, “Yes, it is true, sometimes I too think that I am not myself” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 44). And, later, even in the most basic element of life, breathing, the two can be equated. The narrator says that Macabéa “only lives, inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling. Actually, who needs more than this?” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 44). Later, referring to himself, he says, “About me, the only thing that is known is that I breathe” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 47).

Of course, one can ask, at this point, what led the writers to create these narrators and characters who have so much in common with each other? Can it be that, in a sense, the writers see themselves in their creations and infuse them with their own reflections and anxieties? As we know from biographical information, Clarice Lispector was raised in the Northeast of Brazil, more precisely in Alagoas, where the Lispector family first landed after their long journey from Russia. And she, too, like Macabéa, came to live in Rio de Janeiro in her teenage years.

How about Gogol? Maybe the fact that he, too, was an outsider explains how we can connect his character’s alienation to his own. Coincidentally, Gogol, like Lispector, was born not in the big city where his character lives, but in the Ukraine. But how different could the Ukraine be from Russia, since they were all part of the same empire? Indeed, without trying to review the history of Russia and its neighboring countries, suffice it to say that the Ukraine, at the time Gogol lived, was a less-than-willing part of the Russian empire⁸. As an intellectual “from the province,” Gogol had to renounce his language, but, as the site “Welcome to the Ukraine” says, “his whole life was, to a certain extent, a spiritual resistance”⁹. As the Ukrainian site informs [us], in his letters to his close friend, Mykhaylo Maksymovych, Gogol wrote, “Let’s get the hell out of this Katsapiya [Ukrainian derogatory term for Russia– tr.] and

⁸ The Ukraine had fallen under the power of the Russian empire in 1654, when it had to ask for protection from invasions from Turkey and Poland. Although in the early Eighteenth Century Hetman Ivan Mazepa tried to free the country from Russia, the attempt failed. Indeed, only on August 24, 1991, proclaimed its independence.

⁹ <http://www.wumag.kiev.ua/index2.php?param=pgs20033/52>, accessed February 13, 2009.

go back to Kyiv... Who are we working for here?"¹⁰. This way, it is possible to say that Akaky Akakievich, a lonely outsider, embodies one of the possible faces of Gogol himself in his alienation from the prevailing Russian culture, the same way that Macabéa, the girl from the Northeast, with the name of a Jewish fighter, can also be seen as a representative of the writer Clarice Lispector¹¹.

And yet, no matter how much each of the writers can be associated with the protagonists, the stories have an internal logic whereby these same characters will be tempted, tested, and punished. But, since both stories attempt to be realistic depictions of the lives or the characters, the narrative has to find ways to propose the temptation and its dénouement in a way that they are believable. As the narrator of "The overcoat" says:

So passed the peaceful life of a man who knew how to be content with his lot on a salary of four hundred roubles a year; and it might have flowed on as happily to a ripe old age, were it not for the various calamities which beset the lives not only of titular, but also of privy, actual, court and other councilors, even those who give no counsel to any man, not take any from anyone, either (GOGOL, 1957, p. 240).

As we have seen, the calamity that befalls Akaky Akakievitch is St. Petersburg's northern frost, against which his coat cannot protect him anymore. So he takes the coat to the tailor Petrovich who, "in spite of the disadvantage of having only one eye and pock marks all over his face, carried on a rather successful trade in mending the trousers and frock-coats of government clerks and other gentlemen" (GOGOL, 1957, p. 241). Petrovich, we read, lives "somewhere on the fourth floor up some back stairs," the stairs leading to his flat "soaked with water and slops and saturated with a strong spirituous smell which irritates the eyes" (GOGOL, 1957, p. 242).

¹⁰ Same page as above.

¹¹ Every writing makes a statement, every writer writes from a personal space. As writers who know they are members of a minority placed in a subaltern position, in these two texts both Lispector and Gogol—I believe—use the fictional space to express the deep feelings about the condition

On the fateful day Akaky goes to visit Petrovich to ask him to fix his coat once again, the whole scene evokes a mysterious, fetid, smoky world that is frightening. Indeed, referring to Dmitry Chizhevsky's stressing that the devil makes an appearance in "The overcoat," Victor Brombert writes that "the tailor who tempts Akaky into buying the coat" has "diabolic earmarks" (BROMBERT, 2001, p. 28), exacting an exorbitant price from Akaky.

Indeed, all about Grigory Petrovich is suspiciously dark, including the wife who does not wear a kerchief, but a bonnet, which caused so much fear that "only guardsmen were ever known to peer under her bonnet when meeting her in the street, twitching their moustaches and emitting a curious kind of grunt at the same time" (GOGOL, 1957, p. 241). As already disclosed, Akaky saves for a long time in order to pay for the new overcoat. Even though he needed the coat in order to protect himself from the cold, he still feels it is an excess, and he knows that there is a price for this luxury. Hence, it is not too much for him to almost starve for so long, thinking everything will be paid up when he gives Petrovich the money and takes the overcoat to his house. He does not foresee, however, either what the effect the overcoat will have on his colleagues and on the way they see him, or the effect the overcoat will have on himself.

Macabéa is tempted in a different way, but the same "diabolic earmarks" that occur in "The Overcoat" are present in Lispector's text too. First, we learn that Glória has gone to a fortune teller to "break a bad spell," and that she reports that it has helped her obtain Olímpio. Then she tells Macabéa that she should go too, even offering to lend her money. The moment Macabéa decides to accept the money to engage in the audacity of trying to look into her future marks the beginning of her several "sins": she lies to the boss, saying she needs to miss work because she has a toothache, accepts Glória's money and decides to spend it carelessly because it is not hers, and for the first time in her life she takes a taxi, using money that is not hers.

In Madama Carlota's house, everything surprises Macabéa, who sees the plastic flowers, sofas, and armchairs in the little lobby as luxury. When she finally is allowed in the room to see the fortune teller, Madama Carlota herself is presented as the personification of something suspiciously inhuman, since she "looked like a big half-broken china doll" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 83). Stunned with so many wonderful things, so many demonstrations of affection, and so many words used by Madama Carlota, Macabéa follows the fortune teller's self-aggrandizing speech without a complaint. When Madama Carlota tells her to "cut" the card pile, Macabéa realizes that, for the first time, she is going to have a destiny. This is the moment in which, having decided to pick up the apple from the tree, Eve/Macabéa contemplates—even if for a split second—what was before and what will be from that point on: knowledge.

This knowledge does not come without pain: Madama Carlota reveals that her life has been bad. "What a horrible life you've had!" Madama Carlota exclaims, then informs her that "[a]s for the present, dearie, it is also awful. You are going to lose your job, and already lost the boyfriend, poor little you" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 87). But at this very moment, something really important happens, because, "at this moment (explosion) something suddenly happened: the madama's face lit up, all illuminated" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 87).

This is the moment of the highest temptation for Macabéa. After being made to see that the life she has led up to this moment is horrible, the fortune teller, not coincidentally all bright and lit up after an explosion, tells her about the wonderful future that waits for her and she thinks that "Jesus is finally paying attention to her" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 87). She believes everything Madama Carlota tells her, forgets Olímpio, and leaves the house ready to meet her wonderful destiny:

Macabéa was a bit stunned, without knowing if she would cross the street, since her life was already changed. And

changed by words—since Moses' time it is known that the word is divine. Even to cross the street she was already another person. A person pregnant with future (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 90).

This passage recalls the moment Akaky Akakyevich, after the first night out, returning from his colleague's party, sets off to go back to his house:

It was still light in the street. [...] Akaky walked along feeling very happy and even set off running after some lady (goodness knows why) who passed him like a streak of lightning, every part of her body in violent motion (GOGOL, 1957, p. 256).

It is clear in both passages that Macabéa, now in love with the foreigner Madama Carlota mentioned, and Akaky, flustered with the joy emanating from his overcoat, lose contact with their realities, and want for more than is their lot. The punishment, when it comes, is total: Macabéa is hit by a car driven by a foreigner and is thrown in the air, hitting her head on the sidewalk. Akaky loses his precious overcoat to two men who “gave him a kick that sent him sprawling on the snow” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 257).

Both characters eventually die, but not right away. The way the narrators resolve the matter is different, but a deeper relationship between the two stories resides in the details the narrator ... As soon as Macabéa is hit by the Mercedes “on that very instant, in some unique place in the world a horse responded raising itself on hind legs and laughed neighing” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 90). What can Lispector possibly mean by this sentence? Is she implying that the misfortune of Macabéa will provoke the happiness of a strong, male animal? Is she proposing some kind of interrelationship in a quantum level? We cannot know for sure, unless we observe closely the text following this scene.

As soon as Macabéa hits her head against the sidewalk, she “saw among the stones of the sewer the thin grass of the most delicate hue of human hope” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 91). The narrator had already equated Macabéa with grass earlier (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 35), and, once again, says that “she was subterranean and had never flowered. I lie: she was grass” (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 38). Now, at the end of her life, the narrator returns to the same trope:

Returning to the grass. For such an exiguous creature called Macabéa the great nature occurred only in the form of sewer grass... She stared, just for staring, at the grass. The grass in the big City of Rio de Janeiro (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 91).

At the moment of Macabéa’s death, the narrator wants to show that, even though close to the sewer, even though humble–exiguous–this life continues, in spite of the hunger, the hopelessness. This same grass–thin and close to the sewer–needs very little to survive, therefore it lives everywhere. Macabéa, because she is grass once again, is shown as one among thousands like her.

In the description of Akaky’s death, there is a split in the story. First, the description of his illness is very straightforward. After his mistreatment at the hands of the Very Important Person, he staggers home. When a doctor is summoned to see him, he tells the landlady to order a coffin for Akaky. It is not clear whether Akaky hears the words, “and, if he did hear them, did they produce a shattering effect upon him?” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 264-265). After a delirious time in which visions of the tailor and of the Very Important Person become mixed up:

he raved on and no sense could be made of his words, except that it was quite evident that his incoherent words and thoughts all revolved about one and the same overcoat. At length poor Akaky Akakyevich gave up the ghost (GOGOL, 1957, p. 265).

At this point, the narrator provides a side-bar conversation with the reader:

Who finally came into all his property, goodness only knows, and I must confess that the author of this story was not sufficiently interested to find out. Akaky Akakyevich was taken to the cemetery and buried. And St. Petersburg carried on without Akaky, as though he had never lived there (GOGOL, 1957, p. 265).

It seems that this is the end of Akaky, and he will never be heard of again. But the story takes a different, fantastic turn when “rumors suddenly spread all over St. Petersburg that a ghost in the shape of a Government clerk had begun appearing near Kalinkin Bridge and much farther afield” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 266). Indeed, the “ghost” even goes after the Very Important Person one night when he drank a few glasses of champagne with his friends, and is going to see his mistress (GOGOL, 1957, p. 269). In the snowy night, feeling very pleased, the Very Important Person “felt that somebody seized him very firmly by the collar. Turning around, he saw a small-sized man in an old, threadbare Civil Service uniform, and it was not without horror that he recognized Akaky Akakyevich” (GOGOL, 1957, p. 269-270). Was the ghost really Akaky Akakyevich? Are we to side with the critics who say that the fantastic ending of the story provides “poetic justice” to Akaky Akakyevich? Edward Proffitt refers to Leon Stilman, to Victor Erlich, and to Charles Bernheimer as examples of critics who say that in the fantastic aspect of the end of “The overcoat” there is the aspect of “poetic justice” in the fact that the ghost appears in the nights of St. Petersburg trying to steal coats off people’s back. Proffitt remarks that:

To be sure, Mr. Bernheimer’s “aptly” suggests that he holds such justice to be illusory with respect to Gogol’s story. But I would go much further: there is not even a specter of it in the tale itself (PROFFITT, 1977, p. 37).

As he goes on to demonstrate, in each of the episodes in which the “ghost” appears, there are circumstances indicating that people have been affected by the “rumors” in the town, and that even the episode in which the Very Important Person is “attacked” by the ghost, the man was clearly inebriated, and could not be sure of what he saw. As Proffitt sees it:

We are trapped by the conventionality of our own conventions. This Gogol conveys dramatically. He wishes us to desire poetic justice, indeed, to find it momentarily. But then we must see that the text does not allow for it, and in so seeing, feel how mere convention keeps us from reality. Should we persist in our superimposing, well the joke is on us (PROFFITT, 1977, p. 37).

Indeed, even if we desire poetic justice—and I believe that is something the writer leads the reader to—the story ultimately denies it. The fact is that Akaky Akakyevich dies, hallucinating about the Very Important Person, and the blow of the theft of his overcoat. But, in a sense, by leading the reader to desire “poetic justice,” is the writer not inciting in the reader precisely what the story wants to propose? Is it not true that the injustice committed against a poor, friendless, humble clerk reflects badly on everyone and on the system that gives so much power to people like the Very Important Person? Any reader, whether or not aware of the literary conventions, will be moved by the destiny of Akaky, the same way that a person reading Lispector’s text will be moved by the destiny of Macabéa.

And here, I think, resides the genius of both texts. Even though the narrator may not want to admit it—Rodrigo S. M. confesses repeated times that narrating the story costs him a lot, and the unnamed narrator of “The overcoat” purposefully provides a sense of “poetic justice” by narrating the “rumors”—both give us a clue to something

that may go beyond the text, landing themselves in the real world where people like Akaky and Macabéa live.

Of course, in the case of "The overcoat," taking into consideration that the "ghosts" end up taking the overcoat off the backs of all kinds of people, the fact is that the ruling class, or at least the class to which the Very Important Person belongs, will be on the lookout, because it knows that it is guilty. The "ghost" of Akaky, whether it is merely a figment of the Very Important Person's imagination or not, provokes one verifiable result: the "incident made a deep impression upon the Very Important Person. It was not so frequently now that his subordinates heard him say, "How dare you, sir? Do you realize who you're talking to, sir?" (GOGOL, 1957, p. 270-271). Of course, the transformation is not complete, because the system of privilege, as presented in the story, is a long-established one. That explains the not-complete eradication of the arrogant and imposing manner. But some progress is made because, as the text says, "if [the Very Important Person] did say so, it was only after he had heard what it was all about" (GOGOL, 1957, p. 271).

As for Macabéa, what difference does her existence make? In terms of the narrative, her death attracts the attention of those people who do not usually even see her. But, in terms of what the text does, it achieves something much wider: an awareness of what Lispector, in a 1977 interview says that he story is about, "inocência pisada," "innocence stepped on." This awareness, in itself, is for the writer to propose, but for the reader to act on. How can this be accomplished?

Early in the narrative, as he is setting up his story, Rodrigo says that he is tempted to use "splendid adjectives, fleshy nouns, and such thin verbs that they cross the air into action, since the word is action" (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 15). Lispector, by acknowledging the temptation of the elaborate language and renouncing it in favor of a simple tale in which all readers can see the reflection of a reality of Brazil, means that her action in the world is

accomplished through her word, her art. With the story of Macabéa, she is saying that, even at the moment of her death, after Macabéa hits her head on the sidewalk, having been run over by a car whose owner does not even stop to see what he has done, there springs

From her head a thread of a blood unexpectedly red and rich. And that meant that, in spite of everything, she belonged to a resistant, stubborn dwarf race that one day is going to demand the right to scream (LISPECTOR, 1984, p. 90-91).

How can this “race” demand the right to scream? If Lispector is indeed equating herself—after all, she was raised in the Northeast—with the character, her scream is this novel, the most overtly political of her career. If we return to “The overcoat” and ask the same question, the answer is physical and also metaphoric. After the episode of the Very Important Person’s encounter with the Civil Servant’s ghost, it completely ceased to appear (GOGOL, 1957, p. 271). But the effects continued, the text says, until one night, a policeman follows the ghost

in the dark until, at last, it suddenly looked round and, stopping dead in its tracks, asked, “What do you want?” at the same time displaying a fist of a size that was never seen among the living (GOGOL, 1957, p. 271).

The enormous fist imagined by Gogol in 1841, displayed to the abusive policeman in St. Petersburg, dialogues directly with the sentence Lispector wrote more than a century later. The dwarf race, stubborn, resistant, continues to exist. It is the race of the subalterns, of the persecuted, of those who are humiliated. But, as Lispector tells us, one day this race is going to demand the right to be heard, and respected. With his short story, Gogol utters his scream, which is repeated in Lispector’s novel. That is how writers act. Words are, after all, actions.

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