

*Thought and Image in Gonçalo M. Tavares: A Contemporary Writing*

Maria Lucia Wiltshire de Oliveira, Federal Fluminense University, Brazil

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2015  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

The paper is part of a project on Representation and Image, within the line of current research Literature, Theory and Literary Criticism. My goal is to investigate the image as the smallest unit of literary art, a special form of thinking. My question oscillates between pairs Text/Image, Real/Unreal, Poetry/Prose towards something I call the Body/Meaning in Literature. The concept of contemporary writing for me is something that is ahead of us and challenges our understanding: we are stunned in face of time and we ask for answers. The Portuguese-Angolan writer Gonçalo M. Tavares falls within this framework. Hence the choice of the book Mr Valery (2002) of which I selected a little tale or chapter, in which the proper representation of the real is placed under suspicion, the principle under the comical manner, which it puts in check our science or reason top (in truth, belief or habit). It's the Power of contemporary writing.

Keywords: image, body, representation, contemporary writing

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum

[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

Part of Gonçalo M. Tavares' work is characterized by an ostensive space and time indetermination, which is a marked distinction of his contemporaneity in the present panorama of literature produced in Portugal. He is a 45 year old writer, born in Angola, whose thought dates back to Nietzsche and his modern followers. To summarize, I would say the main idea is total disillusion but without nihilism. How is this possible? Through the belief in the written word and its ability to effectuate meaning, as we will attempt to explain.

The writer places us on the verge of a feeling which is to happen. His 'realism' does not mean the reality transfiguration at first, instead of this, his writing questions the reality itself and pursues other 'realities' that is to say, a practice which denotes a happy and tragic simultaneous cosmovision.

In order to discuss such contemporary writing, the piece has the following segments: a) the theoretical base; b) reading of the Work: "The sneeze", a short story of G. M. Tavares; c) analysis; and conclusion.

### a. The theoretical base

According to Immanuel Kant, we will never get to know things as they really are because they are always unknowable. However, we can get to know the way in which they appear to us – of which Kant calls phenomenon – for the way they appear does not depend solely on them, but also on us, of our body. The language establishes the separation between the order of the phenomenon and the order of the noumenon, which is the domain of things. The image or the sign, as a phenomenon, does not reach the thing, because, selon Lavaud (1999), "in it, it is the withdrawal of the thing which is announced, (...) [that is] it does not produce anything but an absent effect."<sup>1</sup>

The English empiricist philosopher David Hume (s.d.) says that the human experience is built upon strong impressions, followed by weaker ideas or images, which gives importance to the body. On the other hand, Jean Paul Sartre (1940) distinguishes image and perception saying that the former is an essential 'poor' framework of the world, while the latter is abundant for it contains a boundless reserve of matter. Selon Lavaud (1999) "[...] the given of the perception constantly overflows the conscience"<sup>2</sup> in addition to what we can observe with our conscience, keyword in sartrian thought, and "there is always more in the thing than what we can observe."<sup>3</sup>

For Charles Sanders Peirce (1974), image is a framework or a piece of the framework of the perceived object, a certain type of sign (cf. etymology of the word sign, from the Greek 'cut') which translates the intense original experience for maintaining the traits of the overwhelming and excessive perception which had been experimented by the body. For him there are three types of signs – iconics, index and symbols). In his proto-aesthetics there is a special place for what he calls 'image', a kind of hypo-icon, or almost-icon, stronger than diagram (type of index) and metaphor (type of

---

<sup>1</sup> "en elle, c'est le retrait de la chose qui s'annonce, elle ne produit qu'un effet d'absence." (p. 17)

<sup>2</sup> "[...] le donné de la perception déborde constamment la conscience". (p.65)

<sup>3</sup> "il y a toujours plus dans la chose que ce que nous pourrions en observer." (p.65)

symbol). Selon Pignatari (1974), for this North American linguist, “the artist and the scientist are creators of icons”(p.54) which preserve the delirious or chaotic (or superabundant, according to Sartre) quality of the matter (‘indetermination’) which becomes powerful as it goes through the bodies.

Peirce’s ideoscopy refers to a first type of experience (Firstness) marked by the ‘qualities of feeling’ (1974, p. 24) which houses the impressions (sense of Hume) which are received by the body. A second experience (Secondness) corresponds to the “conflict” (p.24) under the shape of a “reaction or shock” of the impressed body which is capable of sprouting images (sense of Hume, perhaps borrowed from Peirce). The third type of experience (Thirdness) marks the generalization of experience process with the rise of the sign which organizes and conducts the ‘sensation’ and the ‘shock’ constituting the scope of Semiotics.

Dissimilar to visual arts, in Literature image is defined as that which constitutes the literary text as a representation of reality, from which the metaphor and the metonym are examples. Expanding the concept, we noticed that the word image is part of the expression imaginary and that a writer’s production is the fruit of his/her imagination. On the other hand, it is part of a triadic relationship in which there exists a me, some things ‘outside’ of me and a line of communication between them both. In terms of semiotics, this characterizes the language that encompasses the ‘author’ or interpreting person; the ‘real’ or to whom it refers; and the word or linguistic sign.

To deal with this experience, the contemporaneous and recently dead Portuguese poet Herberto Helder (2006) refers to it as ‘energy beams’ (p. 130) which derives from the nature intensity and that ‘is seen as the world,/the power of an action of the imaginary’ (p. 31). These words express the elements of theoretical elements that were pointed out earlier: energy, intensity, nature, the world, power, image and the imaginary.

In this piece, part of a research paper, we aim at articulating the power of images in Peirce’s ideoscopy with Hume’s empiricist ontology as I notice, in both, the important place the body (perception and experience) has as the base of subjectivity, which, in principle, is open to strong impressions, to nature or to matter, providing them with the shape or articulation as images. This result is usually named as representation, a striking presence that marks the absence of the re suffix. This is an inevitable process for which man can provide meaning to the world and to himself by means of common language. In summary, here are our keywords and their applications: image, body (perception; experience), representation, contemporary writing.

Even so, what type of relationship is this when one is dealing with literary art? There are enigmatic or strange texts that leave us in total unease. What is the concern regarding the apprehension process of what is real?

When a text escapes the common representation of the world, it’s images escapes the world’s coded representation and is open to the freshness of what one may name as ‘delirious matter’ or devir selon Deleuze (2004). They agglutinate other bodily senses besides sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. In reality, in Literature, image is an open and unstable space which exposes the oscillation or ambiguity between words and things. Notwithstanding that literary art is a ‘third’ experience as it is a

representation and is under the linguistic sign, it remains faithful to the firstness of the 'quality of feelings' and to the secondness of the 'reaction-or shock' and that they provoke hypon-icons or almost-icon, named images and diagrams.

There is no doubt that Tavares is a producer of texts that go beyond and above the traditional representation in narrative prose (more inclined to the almost-icon named metaphor), his work surpasses the false dualism that opposes the real versus the non-real (fictional or imaginary). If literary theory has been using a lot of color to define these two fields, strictly speaking, they only exist within the classical concept of the thought. According to Hume and Peirce's empiricism, what we do have is the matter of the body in inter-relations, providing knowledge, subjectivity and the meaning of everything for humankind.

Despite being composed of recognized signs (for instance, a 'lady', a 'bucket', the 'rain'), the contemporaneous narrative introduces the questioning once the realist tradition elements are abandoned, disregarding the notions of character, narrator, space, time, etc. This comes closer to what Nancy (2005) names as poetry once 'there is more than one access to sense, it is the access of meaning' (p.12) or the possibility to make sense. Texts of this type refute identification 'of genre or poetic mode' (p. 13) and even when serving language, they articulate 'sense from the standpoint that there is no meaning if there is no articulation' (p. 17) or a language fold.

Withdrawn from the chaotic nature and result from the bodily experience of the subject, the image redefined here can help us read Works which are considered obscure, hermetic, strange, fantastic, surreal, etc., as those productions that propose new ways of understanding ourselves and that which surrounds us.

### **b. Reading "The Sneeze"**

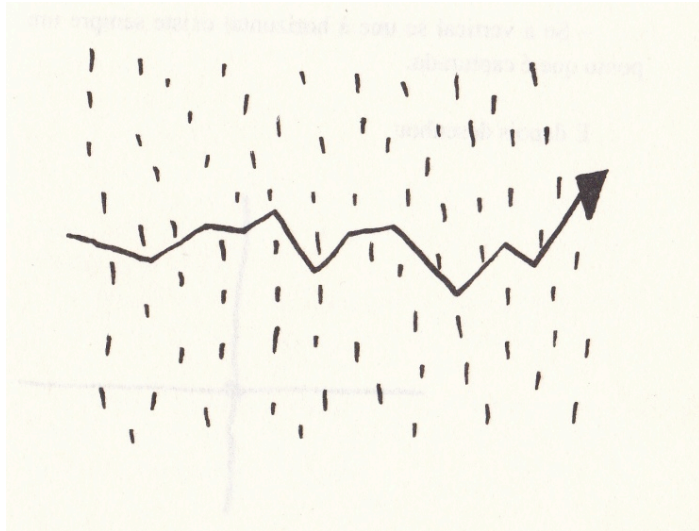
In more ways than the award-winning novel *Jerusalém*, awarded in 2005, the equally awarded is mystifying. What a small and awarded book is this Mr. Valéry (2006)? We cannot find, in our mental library, anything quite like it, except for juvenile literature due to its extremely accessible language. We are ahead of a small volume of short stories, mini-tales or chapters whose protagonist is always the same character Mr. Valéry. Let us read one chapter called 'The Sneeze':

Mr. Valéry was afraid of the rain.

For years he trained his swift pace to dodge the water that was falling from the sky. He became an expert.

He would say: This is how I escape the rain.

And he drew an arrow representing himself.



- In the end - Mr. Valery was proud of himself - here I am, dry and without an umbrella. I hate ugly objects, he would say.

One day, however, by accident, a lady who was cleaning the pavement threw a bucket full of water onto the street at the very moment Mr. Valery was passing by.

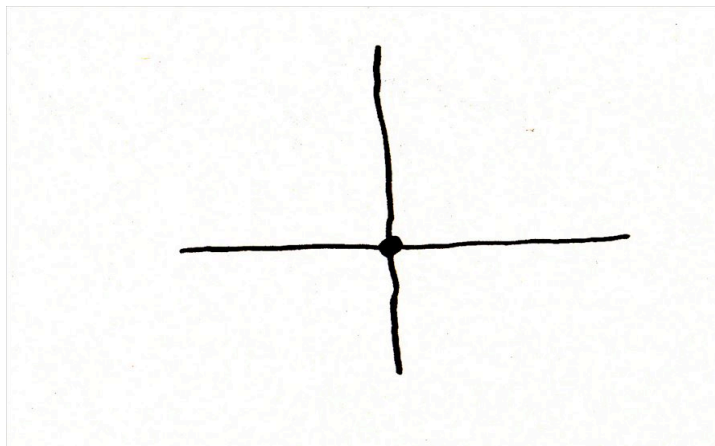
Completely soaked, Mr. Valery explained:

- I was looking at the sky when everything happened.

And he also added:

- When the vertical line joins the horizontal one, a dot is always captured.

And then he drew



- This dot - murmured Mr. Valery, with his hair still dripping - was me.

- The Destiny - said, finally, Mr. Valery - this is something unknown to me.

And it all ended with a heavy sneeze.

(Tavares, 2006)

### c. analysis

As we notice, any child used to reading fairy tales can understand this text from its naive and even absurd surface. However, the text is much more than a simple 'wonderful', 'allegorical' or 'metaphorical' narrative. It goes beyond.

Where is the difficulty in making sense of this text? Certainly the text requires meaning. Nancy (2005) says that 'the difficulty is in that what does not allow to be done' and that 'poetry turns the absolute difficult into ease' and as 'in ease, difficulty yields' (p. 11), what it does not mean is that the difficulty is removed.

Within this dialectic between the difficult and the easy, Tavares' micro-tale can be perceived as a poetic text that spreads itself throughout the pages' stains, encompassing almost-icons as iconic signs (the image of rain), index signs (the diagram of two lines) and symbolic signs (the metaphors as words). As a literary text, I could also state that it is formed by hypo-icons as image, diagram and metaphor, respectively. This set aims at two dramatic situations: the character's success and his failure in front of the events.

In the face of the predictable events (the rain), Mr. Valéry's 'science' seems to find a way to escape (success) by means of the first representation (drawing of rain), further from fate (the bucket of water thrown by the lady – a event), the previous solution does not work. What is left of him? He made a second representation (drawing of lines) and found a rational explanation with a sentence - "This dot [...] was me" - and a magic word also (Destiny) that brings comfort in the face of the imminent cold. From success to failure, he ends up surrendering to his powerlessness: 'The Destiny (...) - this is something unknown to me'. These procedures prove that it is not a text for children; it goes further beyond that as it presents a philosophical scope.

As for both situations Mr. Valéry brings laughter to the reader. In the first situation, that laughter is due to his naïve and over-inflated pride (cf. the comic character according to Henri Bergson, 1983): "- In the end - Mr. Valéry was proud - here I am, dry and without an umbrella". In the second situation, we laugh due to his exaggerated rationalism aiming to escape the frustration for having been 'caught': "- I was looking at the sky (...)" and "When the vertical line joins the horizontal one (...)". At the end of the text the reader gives a third laugh at the sneeze which works as a spontaneous expression of Mr Valéry's body, breaking down his boldness; the expression which gives the title to the tale as if a trophy is presented, a priori.

One cannot forget that events are recorded on a sheet of paper, under our eyes, they have nothing to do with reality. Let us remember the famous 'This is not a pipe' discussed by Foucault (2009). If reality is not there, everything that is presented there is part of the imagination, it is the imagery universe composed of signs or representamens using Peirce's terminology. Their qualities are combined with each other to different degrees to represent the object as an almost icon: images, diagrams and symbols.

The first drawing is an almost-icon image due to its resemblance with the represented object (the rain). The second drawing is an almost-icon diagram (or index) by the presence of graphic lines whose goal is to narrate the object (when the meeting

happens). But also the horizontal arrow we see in the first drawing is an almost-icon diagram of Mr. Valéry's route which keeps him dry. Finally, each word – 'Valéry' or 'Destiny' – just like every sentence – 'Mr. Valery was afraid of the rain' – is an almost-icon metaphor, as it is there where one finds the most arbitrary relationship between the sign and the objects that represent it. But if the symbolic and arbitrary signs control common language, in literary writing (poetry and prose to a smaller degree) the opposite takes place and the imagery and index hypo-iconic signs are abundant. For instance, the articulation syntax of the words in the sentence is an invisible diagram that equally demands meaning, despite the fact that each word by itself has already made sense previously, in the dictionary, pre-coded.

Further on from laughter, we can access an array of senses in the human condition which Mr. Valéry's character brings forth. In the hidden comic detail exists a tragic content, it may be the fragility inherent to human nature in this world. Thereafter, the text gains a thickness that is a result of each of the signs that compose it and from the assembly that matches them among each other.

The visual approach is transmuted into the verbal approach and vice-versa, in a process that encompasses a widened concept of image/idea to use Hume's expression. To this worthy bond between almost-icons in Arts according to Peirce we can associate Didi-Huberman's visual concept as 'poor' (en-deça) of representation, something that brings freedom from the substantial reality. For Didi-Huberman (1998) the image is the interruption of new modes of visibility that wrenches (breaks, 'déchire') the regular sight horizon and reverts the canonic categories of representation, as is common in poetry. Remembering Nancy, poetry is not a genre but a quality which permeates texts of all kinds, as it indeed does in Tavares' prose.

## **Conclusion**

What can we conclude from reading this text? First of all that the text has a very singular style, on the surface almost juvenile. Before saying that it comes close to poetry, it is necessary to say that it is a poetic text in the sense of that which was mentioned earlier: the difficulty which is apparent. But what is to be done? Nancy (2005) replies: 'It is to place on the being. (...) The poem is something done by the performance itself' ( p. 18). It is that something which is done and undone 'it is the access to the meaning' (p. 18). 'a sense that will always present itself' (p.10).

It is impossible to set apart the graphic symbols drawings as they are all articulated with the text in a way that they are contaminated in the same key of possibilities of sense/meaning. The drawings are neither simple illustrations of the text, nor ekfrasis, they are strong elements requesting a meaning in the articulation between each other. Gonçalo M. Tavares is part of a category of literary intellectuals who overcome the verb/image dichotomy without making one the supplement of the other.

Mr. Valéry's space and time indetermination leads us to appraise him less of a character and more of a behavior. This is the character trait – pride, naïf, pathetic – this is what is being focused on. Mr. Valéry is searching for a magical way to avoid the difficulties of ordinary natural thing such as rain, but also, he makes use of a mathematical diagram – the joining of the two lines – to comfort himself while faced with uncontrollable fate. At this moment, he still uses a symbolic language resource –

the linguistic sign 'destiny' – to regain his self-esteem which, soon after, is again thrashed by the event of the 'sneeze'.

For the time being we believe that the theme of Tavares' micro-tale is the questioning of the representation of what is real, which is placed under suspicion, at first under the comic profile by the nice Mr. Valéry, whose science or superior reason is not always powerful enough to control reality. And what is the actual sense of the text? According to Flaubert, we can say that 'Mr. Valéry is us ourselves!' who have no alternative, but to surrender to the unknown 'with a heavy sneeze'.

The author manages to articulate a paradox in this short narrative – total disillusion but without nihilism. How is that possible? Due to the faith in language itself – imagery, diagrammatic or metaphoric – capable of producing meaning and sense when confronted with any catastrophe. This Work reveals the fragility of humankind as well as its presumptively proud capacity in reverting tragic feelings. It couldn't be more Nietzschean!



## References / Bibliography

Bergson, H. (1983). *O riso*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.

Deleuze, G. (2004). *Diálogos*. Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.

Didi-Hüberman, G. (1998). *O que vemos, o que nos olha*. São Paulo: Editora 34.

Foucault, M. (2009). Isto não é um cachimbo. *Ditos e escritos III*; Estética:Literatura e Pintura, Música e Cinema. 2º. Ed. São Paulo: Forense Universitária, pp. 247-63.

Helder, H. (2006) *Photomaton & Vox*. 4.ed. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim.

Hume, D. (s.d.). *Resumo de um tratado da natureza humana*. s.l.: Editora Parapaula.

Lavaud, L. (1999). *L'Image; texts choisis & présentés*. Paris: Flammarion.

Nancy, J. (2005). *Resistência da poesia*. Viseu: Vendaval.

Peirce, C.S. (1974). Escritos coligidos. In: *Pensadores*, v. XXXVI. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, pp. 7-192.

Pignatari, D. (1974). *Semiótica e literatura*. São Paulo: Perspectiva.

Sartre, J.(1940). *L'imaginaire*. NRF-Gallimard.

Tavares, G.M. (2006). *O Senhor Valéry*. 3º ed. Lisboa: Caminho.

Contact email: [wiltshire.marialucia@hotmail.com](mailto:wiltshire.marialucia@hotmail.com)