CALVINO'S *CLOVEN VISCOUNT* FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

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The relation that Higgins and McHale discerned between modernism and postmodernism reappears between Italo Calvino's *Cloven Viscount* and its Brazilian stage version. Written by Cacá Brandão, the play *Partido* was staged by Grupo Galpão in 1998. While the Italian author worried about the moral responsibilities of humankind in postwar Europe, the Brazilian playwright focused on the essence of the human. Calvino's existentialist approach would place him within the epistemological perspective that characterizes modernism, while Brandão's concern with the condition of human beings would situate him along the ontological bias that marks postmodernism.

However true this may be, there is more to the picture. Calvino's and Brandão's texts share epistemological and ontological concerns, but the emphasis each author puts on either varies according to their personal project and the context in which they produced their works. *The Cloven Viscount* has two focuses: the nobleman split by a canon ball and his nephew, who tells the story. As the nephew witnesses and narrates the Viscount's adventures, he undergoes moral, intellectual, and psychological development. *Partido*, on the other hand, puts a stronger focus on the Viscount, who learns more about his condition than the boy does. Here, the nephew becomes a means to frame the theatrical dimension and emphasize its fictionality.

Following Calvino's lead when he set his story at the end of the 17th century and Brandão's references to Jesus, I will read the novel and the play using the fourfold method of interpretation. A favorite way of interpreting biblical passages during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the fourfold method proposes a reading on the literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical levels. Dante Alighieri explains that on the literal or historical level, we can read the Biblical Exodus as simply "the departure of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses" (121). On the allegorical or figural level, it would translate as "our redemption wrought through Christ." It may also mean "the conversion of the soul from the grief and misery of sin to the state of grace," if we look at the narrative on the tropological level. Finally, it becomes "the departure of the holy soul from the slavery of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory" on the anagogical level. For the purposes of this essay, I will say that the literal level gives us what happened; the allegorical refers to a character or concept taken symbolically; the tropological provides a moral truth, and the anagogical indicates a level "above."

The literal level

The first level of exegesis refers to the narrative taken literally, not, as we might suppose, to the historical context. Nevertheless, a sign depends on a context to signify; thus, a brief survey of postwar Italy will help to understand why Calvino produced his medieval tale. At that time, neorealism reached its peak, with a poetics that fostered the depiction of the multiple nature of reality. Art should follow mimetic procedures, digging reality out and representing its true aspects, be they degrading or miserable. There was the danger of description as an end in itself, of the mechanical, superficial, and submissive reproduction of reality. However, this was a period fraught with the jarring memories of war and fascism, which many wanted to replace with the ideal of a new, more just society. To

achieve this, a clear-minded, thoughtful, even corrosive attitude toward the world and the status quo was necessary. The hypocrisy, the false ideal of a collective redemption, and the surrounding misery had to be exposed. Thence the negative aspect of reality that neorealism focused on.

For art in general and literature in particular, the question was one of political commitment. Should the author address social, political, and economical topics, striving no longer for a consolatory but for a liberating literature? Writers such as Calvino, Pavese, and Moravia, to name just the best known, answered affirmatively, each in his way. They fought to replace pre-war literature and its cult of "good sentiments" with cultural action to liberate mankind from pain, want, misery, and exploitation. Neorealist intellectuals should work within society to change and improve it. For writers that meant to create a literature no longer aristocratic and elitist but a popular or "national-popular" form, an art that met historical and ideological demands.

Because Calvino could not accept passively the prevailing negative mood, he wrote *The Cloven Viscount* to express the suffering of the time and to propose an attempt to escape it ("Nota" 354). The story takes place in a recognizable period and place—the war between Austrians and Turks at the end of the 17th century—but that does not mean that he wanted to anchor it in reality. Rather, he wrote it as a medieval tale, "in which the game of the fantastic dissolves in a broader existential allegory" (Pampaloni 862). If anything, Calvino emphasized the importance of imagination in the process of growing up, out either of adolescence or of a postwar social trauma.

Medardo di Terralba, the Viscount of the title, and his squire Kurt join the Christian army against the Turks. Inexperience leads Medardo to the heat of the battle, where a cannon ball splits him in two. The Viscount's nephew, who narrates the story, tells us that Medardo's "confused feelings, not yet sifted, all rush into good and bad" (146). This bipolar worldview repeats itself in his physical

cleavage. Back home, the evil part begins a new life: he abuses his father and his nurse, and cuts his many victims in two, as if to remodel nature in his own likeness.

Contrariwise, Brandão's play, *Partido*, diverges from the political, existentialist approach the novel follows. After years of resistance to the military regime, Brazilian theater looks elsewhere for inspiration, and Grupo Galpão is not an exception. For the first time in decades, Brazilians have a stable currency, inflation is under control, and the intellectual and political discussion revolves around neoliberalism, globalization, and their effect on society. Concerned as they may be with the here and now, Grupo Galpão adapted plays by classical authors such as Molière, Shakespeare, and Nélson Rodrigues, for instance, that deal less with politics than with the human condition. Granted that their adaptation of those plays to their local scene is a political move, but their chief target remains universal: the circumstances under which we operate, regardless of time and space constraints.

Partido begins with a boy reading aloud the first lines from *The Cloven Viscount*. He concedes that he "would rather be a squire than a viscount: a squire has less responsibilities and lives the same adventures" (scene 2). Thus, the play introduces itself as metafiction; in what follows ontological barriers will crumble as characters from the book come alive on stage and the boy accepts the Viscount's invitation to become his nephew and squire. There is nothing new here, we may contend; Shakespeare had already done that in *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, for example, and so had Tom Stoppard in *The Real Inspector Hound*. That, nonetheless, is the novelty that Brandão brings to Calvino's allegory and that reflects Grupo Galpão's engagement with the creative act.

In the novel and play two groups living in Medardo's estate, the lepers and the Huguenots, reflect his division. Despite their malady, the lepers are happy. Their life "was a perpetual party:" the women "kept the licentious habits" of prostitutes; the juice of strawberry grapes "kept them the whole year round in a state of simmering

tipsiness," and "whiling away the time with sweet music, their disfigured faces hung round with garlands of jasmine, they forgot the human community from which their disease had cut them off" (176). The Huguenots made up the other group. The Viscount's "most stubborn enemies," they "kept guards all night to prevent [his criminal] fires" (178). "Inexpert in what constituted sin, they multiplied their prohibitions lest they make mistakes, and were reduced to giving each other constant severe glances in case the least gesture betrayed a blameworthy intention" (182). Old Ezekiel prodded them, "forever shouting with fists raised to the sky . . . 'Famine and plague! Famine and plague'" (182-83). The Huguenots' "active morality" is the opposite of the lepers' "decadent and arcadian" hedonism (Di Caprio 41), mirroring the fissure in Medardo.

In addition to those two groups, Grupo Galpão represents that division in a striking manner. Given the physical impossibility of halving an actor, Medardo appears whole, while the other actors impersonate two characters. They do that by making up their faces and dressing their bodies in longitudinal halves. Thus, when seen in profile, the actress who plays Pamela is also a Huguenot woman and her mother is a she-goat as well. The only other actor to perform a single role is the one who plays the boy. As the boy stands up against Medardo, who teaches him about the good and bad sides of humankind, he must learn to keep himself in one piece. A successful strategy, it reinforces the theme of the essential human division and the need to overcome it.

The allegorical level

Calvino locates his story in actual time and space coordinates, but they seem too restrictive for him. So he uses "the ethic-existential dimension of the fable and allegory" to portray contemporary man "split in his moral consciousness" (Di Carlo 18). Medardo's divided

nature frightens us because it is an allegory of our own. In the same way that we can bring about global warming, the pollution of seas, and the destruction of wetlands and forests, his evil side turns against his property and those who love him. The virtuous side irks people around him because his piety and righteousness too freely dispensed arrest their train of life. Both repel and threaten us not because of their physical impairment, but because their absolute moral condition defies nature.

Both sides of Medardo advocate that everybody should undergo a separation like theirs so that they gain another perspective on the world. Although one part is lost, the evil Viscount recommends the split because "the remaining half will be a thousand times deeper and more precious . . . because beauty and knowledge and justice only exists in what has been cut to shreds" (192). His opposite side preaches salvation through halving: "One understands the sorrow of every person and thing in the world at its own incompleteness" (216). While the evil Viscount recommends it so that we can see beneath the "outside rind", the good one sermonizes that it is a way to "learn to suffer with everyone's ills". From either point of view, being whole is a limitation that we are unaware of, because wholesomeness permeates us and prevents us from recognizing its impairing effects.

A similar emphasis pervades the play. When the boy tells Medardo, still a whole person, that he wants to find out his past to learn whom he is, the Viscount replies, "To fight is necessary. Moreover against ourselves. And even the war always wins, to leave is necessary" (scene 2). There is a pun in Portuguese with the verb *partir*, which means both "leave" and "cleave." Thus, to learn about ourselves, Medardo implies in *Partido*, we must leave whom we are and by doing this we cleave ourselves. Conversely and to the same effect, we must cleave ourselves to be able to leave ourselves. Distance becomes the necessary condition for self-knowledge.

Suppressed from the performance (*Partido*), scene 5 depicts the Viscount unable to refrain any longer from plunging into the battle.

As he fights, a Christian and a Turk batter each other with antithetical epithets: "Rational!," "Intuitive!," "Left!," "Right!," "Pleasure!," "Duty!," and so on, presaging Medardo's split. His cleavage, however sinister, carries a biblical import. The Viscount's words repeats Jesus' (Matt. 10:34-6) almost verbatim: "I came back to bring not joy but the sword. I bring the division between son and father, between daughter and mother. My life will be an occasion for hatred among men and each man's foes will be, chiefly, those of his own household."[1] Also echoing Jesus, the good half preaches brotherly love as a cure to all evil. He extols the benefits of being divided to Pamela: "this is the good thing about being split: to understand the sadness that each person and each thing in the world feel for being incomplete" (scene 31). To which she replies, "You are much too divided. Who are you? God?" More than his prose counterpart, who operates "under the sign of the halved man" (192), the theatrical Medardo acquires a messianic dimension on the allegorical level: he turns into Christ come to redeem humankind.

The tropological level

As Pamela discovers that what troubles her and the villagers is Medardo's split, whatever possible moralizing intent may lurk underneath the narrative "gives place to a global morality" and becomes a short tale that depicts life's multiplicity (Pampaloni 862). The Viscount's divided nature ceases to represent some abstract notion of modern man's divided nature to become a trope for the human condition, time and place notwithstanding.

When Pamela tells the good Viscount what she has found—that he is good in opposition to his bad half—he thanks her for what he takes as praise. She clarifies, "'Oh, it's the truth, not a compliment'" (215). Neither the villagers nor the two halves knew about their coexistence, which was a source of constant misunderstandings. If the bad Viscount went to extremes of cruelty

and perversion, the good one went too far in his zeal. He found that the Huguenots were not charitable and that the lepers were licentious, so he preached to both groups, ruining business on one side and bringing despair to the other. Thus, the villagers find themselves “lost between an evil and a virtue equally inhuman” (235). That is when the shepherdess realizes that her destiny is entangled with the Viscount’s—and theirs with the villagers’—and takes it on herself to find a solution to their predicament.

Pamela announces to each half of the Viscount that she intends to marry the other. That, of course, disturbs both of them: “wicked ideas in evil souls writhe like serpents in nests, and charitable ones sprout lilies of renunciation and dedication. So Medardo’s two halves wandered, tormented by opposing furies . . . ” (236). They duel and reopen their wounds, and a doctor can join them into a unity again. Pamela achieves her goal and marries the Viscount. Like Tiresias, who having taken turns at being man and woman was able to solve a dispute between the Olympians, Medardo having experienced good and evil is able to rule with justice and bring happiness to his estate.

In the play, however, the story takes a different turn. Pamela repudiates the notions the good half entreats her to embrace, because they “are too good to be of any help to men” (scene 31). To make sure he understands her point, she calls him a “lame saint” and wishes the devil would carry him. Because she wants to live her own life and have a whole man, she refuses to marry either part of the Viscount. She would accept the evil half if he agreed to have her in the woods, but she cannot tolerate the good moiety because of his prudish behavior. She rejects one’s lust and the other’s patronizing, as well as her mother’s advice to marry either of them because of social position. Thus, as she acts according to her conscience and not as her family or the villagers would like her to, Pamela becomes an existential heroine.

From her comes the example that will direct Medardo and the boy toward the final stages of their moral, psychological, and

emotional development. The Viscount realizes that the wholesomeness of the human nature depends on good and evil, that the exclusion of either gives rise to monstrousness. The boy learns that a person can act with dignity and needs not to bow unquestioningly to the dictates of the group or the authorities. He becomes aware that to dream that "a period of marvelous happiness would open" on account of the Viscount being entire again is foolish, because "a whole Viscount is not enough to make all the world whole" (245). Moreover, through Pamela's example they understand that every person has free will and can exercise it in private as well as in public affairs.

The anagogical level

The web of relations between fantasy, reality, story, history, and society that Calvino wove in his short novel goes beyond a mere allegory of postwar Italy. Nor does he strive just for realistic verisimilitude as he organizes the narrative while keeping in mind what happens between the literary work and the context in which it comes forth. Italy in the early 1950s tried to rebuild itself out of the ruins of fascism and the war by means of a rebuilding plan—the "ricostruzione"— based on an economic policy apparently progressive and democratic. Intellectuals, artists, and writers took it upon themselves to divulge a worldview of dehumanization, estrangement, cleavage, and non-belonging that came as an aftermath of war. Like most neorealist writers, Calvino represents and condemns the physical, spiritual, and moral fragmentation of modern man, the scientist's alienation from society, a decadent and arcadian aestheticism, and a religion devoted to expiation and punishment. To achieve this, Calvino creates a text that is historical and philosophical, satirical and epic, fantasy and allegory, fable and grotesquerie (Di Carlo 96).

The Cloven Viscount ends with the narrator "deep in the woods telling [himself] stories" and he suddenly realizes that his fictional creations had vanished leaving him "in this world of ours, full of responsibilities and will-o'-the-wisps" (246). That seems to be the proper attitude that Calvino advocates: a balance between the responsibility of founding a more just social order and the possibility of using the creative imagination to help reconstruct a world ravaged by war. Calvino understands that fantasy and reason must work together if we want to progress.

Pampaloni maintains that his hedonistic and critical rationalism explains, among other things, why he used the fable. In this literary form "moralism finds no place and makes room for a global morality, which precisely turns into fable the multiplicity of life, and in which the game of fantasy dilutes itself into a broader existential allegory" (862). Pautasso, too, claims that Calvino chose the fable not to escape the essentiality of the problem, but to face it employing the fantasy mode, which would exclude any moralistic intent. Moreover, of course, fantasy implies ontological questions.

Here *Partido* goes beyond *The Cloven Viscount* as it brings an explicit ontological concern to the discussion of the human condition. The play ends with the actor who impersonates the Viscount, now whole, addressing the viewers as himself. The theatrical illusion is broken—the fourth wall disintegrates and the audience becomes aware of a real person exposing his body and soul, his disjointed, multiple, shattered condition. The effect of alienation that Brandão aimed at by having the boy read Calvino's book reaches a climax at the same time that it brings to mind the narrator's accusatory, rousing voice in Eliot's *The Waste Land*: "You, hypocrite lecteur! Mon semblable, mon frère." An ontological barrier is torn down and the audience both stands critically detached—thus able to judge the play intellectually—and gets empathetically involved—thus able to recognize our common plight.

The Cloven Viscount and *Partido* focus on epistemological and ontological issues, but the novel and the play have a different

approach to either, according to their authors' particular intentions and the context in which they produced their works. Calvino's novel turns out to be a *Bildungsroman* for the narrator who, ultimately, would stand for the Italian artists and intellectuals during the national rebuilding. Brandão's play, conversely, brings the Viscount, who would take the place of a contemporary audience in its need to learn about its condition, to a central position. Both texts lead us to examine the means by which we experience the world and the role that we, shattered and incomplete, can have in it and in its constitution.

Note

1. "I came not to send peace but a sword . . . to set a man at variance with his father, and a daughter against her mother . . . And a man's foes shall be they of his own household."

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