

A STRATEGY FOR WRITING:
 CONTRACTING CONTEMPLATION
 IN *BUDAPESTE* AND *LEITE DERRAMADO*¹

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Resumo: Este ensaio discute o processo de construção da identidade de personagens em dois romances de Chico Buarque, o conhecido compositor e músico popular brasileiro da década de 1960. A discussão vale-se do conceito de contemplação contractante de Gilles Deleuze, relacionado também a teorias semióticas de autores como Umberto Eco e Julia Kristeva. Os romances de Buarque são relativamente recentes e vencedores de prêmios literários no Brasil, tendo sido traduzidos no exterior. O primeiro aborda o tema da escrita fantasma e biográfica e o segundo é um memorial fictício.

Palavras-chave: Chico Buarque; Gilles Deleuze; Contemplação contractante; Identidade; Romance.

Abstract: This essay discusses the process of identity construction in two novels of Chico Buarque, the celebrated Brazilian songwriter and popular singer from the 1960s. This is done with the help of Gilles Deleuze's concept of contracting contemplation, which is also related to semiotic ideas of authors such as Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. Buarque's novels are relatively recent ones, won literary prizes in Brazil, and have been translated worldwide. The first deals with the topic of biography and ghost writing, and the second is a fictional memoir.

Keywords: Chico Buarque; Gilles Deleuze; Contracting contemplation; Identity; Novel.

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1 Repetition, fluidity and contracting contemplation

In an interview given little after the publication of *Leite Derramado* (*Spilt Milk*, 2009),² Chico Buarque stated the following concerning his choice of the name for the narrator of the story:

Eulálio is a name that exists in my family, and repeats itself there. My great-great-great-grandfather and also an uncle I had were both called Eulálio. I didn't think about the name while beginning to write the novel, but those coincidences are riveting. When I find coincidences, I feel that I'm moving in the right direction. With the book way ahead, I discovered the meaning of the word eulalia.³ In regard to the narrative process, my concern was to make fluid the inexhaustible verbiage of this old man [the main character of *Leite Derramado*].⁴

In these apparently casual comments one might find a key to understanding an important feature of Buarque's writing style, not only the way he names a particular character (Eulálio), but the way he gives shape to many of them.⁵

The quotation has two interrelated elements. They are the notions of repetition and fluidity. When embedded in a family, the repetition is somewhat atavistic—Buarque traces it back to his great-great-great grandfather. The fluidity, on the other hand, is the result of giving, as he says, a beautiful, attractive shape to some kind of compelling excess. In the end, taken together, both notions, repetition and fluidity, cannot fail but to open up the process by which the identities of the narrator and other characters are constituted in Buarque's novel. The process is also equivalent to what Gilles Deleuze's calls contracting contemplation.

² The novel was translated into English by Alison Entrekin and published by Grove Press as *Spilt Milk* (2012). We use here the Portuguese original edition. Unless otherwise noted, all translations (from Portuguese and French sources) in this essay are my own.

³ Buarque means the word in its Greek meaning: (*eu + lalia*), "to speak well."

⁴ Interview given by Chico Buarque to Isabel Coutinho, *Ípsilon*, Portugal 17/07/2009. Accessed March 8, 2015, <http://ipsilon.publico.pt/livros/texto.aspx?id=236612>.

⁵ Although Chico Buarque is more widely known as a songwriter and singer, he had already written four novels before *Budapeste*, with which he won the Prêmio Jabuti (an important literary award in Brazil) in 2004. *Leite Derramado* won the Casa de las Américas prize in 2013. *Budapeste* was also adapted for the cinema. Both novels have been translated worldwide.

In *Différence et répétition* one finds the idea that individuation arises originally from a power of contraction of the imagination, which holds up to something that it feels repeating, or rather, unfolding in a continuum. Deleuze characterizes the process as a “passive synthesis,” which “is not performed by an individual, but rather performed in an individual who contemplates” (*Différence* 97). The process precedes every memory and thinking, and constitutes a kind of primary sensibility, which we rather are than merely feel:

We are water, earth, light and air contracted, not only before recognizing or representing them, but before feeling them. In its receptive and perceptive elements, but also in its guts [viscères], every organism is a sum of contractions, retentions and expectations [*attentes*]. (*Différence* 99, cf. 101)

That is, every organism emerges in a complex matrix of fluxes which it, while emerging, rather bends than really cuts up.

Thirty years after the publication of *Différence et répétition*, Deleuze and Guattari will write in *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie* (1991):

...a sensation builds itself by contracting what makes it up, and by making itself up with other sensations that it then contracts. Sensation is pure contemplation, because it is by contemplating that one contracts, contemplating oneself to the same extent that one contemplates the elements from which one comes. To contemplate is to create — the mystery of passive creation, that is, sensation. (199-200)

In agreement with the ideas developed by Deleuze in his previous works, here it is ascertained the primacy of sensation as contracting contemplation over consciousness, which emerges in a transcendental pool of interconnected fluxes, upon which it depends.

In a similar sense, the fluidity with which Buarque was concerned while writing his novel didn't involve rounding off the surface of a well-detached figure. It remained linked to the inexhaustible and convoluted verbiage of the narrator. As we are going to see, the identity of the narrator and main character of *Leite Derramado* is not strictly represented in the narrative, as if it could eventually stand apart from its discourse. It emerges only indirectly, together with the identity of other characters and elements,

through a process of equivocal repetitions, and invaginations in the discursive flux. And this seems to be an essential characteristic of Buarque's writing style, since it appears in others of his novels as well. Something genuinely musical might be at work here, since it manifests itself occasionally in ritornellos and refrains. The imprint in modern literature of musical forms going back to medieval traditions occurs also in other contexts. It is acknowledged, for instance, by Umberto Eco (*Sulla letteratura* 54), in his analysis of Gérard de Nerval's *Sylvie*. This is a point for further development, upon which we will not focus here, but which has been already hinted at by other authors specifically in relation to Brazilian literature.⁶

Our perspective in this essay is as limited as it is precise: the focus is on how the identities of the characters are constituted in certain textual passages. By radically limiting the scope of the discussion, we avoid the risk of misunderstanding. This is not a traditional analysis. It involves a difficulty concerning not only its interdisciplinary character (emerging in the interface of literature and philosophy), but also the status of its objects, which are not conventional novels.

Writing in the 1960s, Allain Robbe-Grillet complained that "literary criticism frequently reduces itself to the telling of anecdotes[...] the critic of a novel more or less enlarges on its [supposedly] essential passages: the knots and the outcomes of the plot" (34). Besides narrating a story, a genuine writer was then expected above all to develop a character, studying its environment and passions (Robbe-Grillet 145).

How much has the situation changed? Characters are still understood as exemplars of historical or sociological types, which they supposedly represent. But how are subjects constituted inside and outside the text? What kind of unity do they

⁶ Around the 1960s, the Brazilian concretist poet Augusto de Campos suggested that Brazilian composers and lyricists of the time (such as Caetano Veloso, who has been a friend with Chico Buarque) were modern troubadours. They would be the genuine inheritors of the medieval Galician-Portuguese tradition of poetry, written in the Península Ibérica during the 13th century, and which is well-known for its connection with music. See Campos' "Música Popular de Vanguarda," and Caetano Veloso's *Verdade Tropical* (217–219).

presuppose? These are questions authors such as Roland Barthes considered quite problematical (192-93). They concern puzzling processes at work not merely in literature (narrowly speaking), but in other cultural activities and in everyday life. They are the focus of this essay.

2 Contracting contemplation: philosophical context

Deleuze develops his theory in “La répétition pour elle-même,” a chapter of *Différence et répétition*. He starts by considering the concepts of imagination and contraction in reference to the philosophies of Henri Bergson and David Hume.

Bergson had himself used the term contraction in relation to perception and memory several times in *Matière et mémoire* (1939). In the section “De la selection des images pour la représentation,” he emphasizes that perceptive and motor mechanisms are intimately correlated. The body is like “a center of action” inside a complex system of “images,” which constitutes the world. In the following chapters, Bergson argues that memory stores up those mechanisms. It is affected by a virtual presence of the past, which is always breaking up into the present. One should understand that under this perspective, memory is not isolated inside one’s brain — it maintains a living connection to everything that is outside it. And the past coexists permanently with the present (what we call “past” had never really ceased to exist).⁷

Deleuze also avails himself of Hume’s associationist theory: “One must assign a soul to the heart, to muscles, nerves, cells—but a contemplative soul, whose role is to contract habits” (*Différence* 101, italics added). “We can only say ‘I’ [moi] through these thousand witnesses that contemplate in us; it is always a third who says ‘I’ [moi]” (Deleuze, *Différence* 103). In *Empirisme et subjectivité* (1953), his earlier book about

⁷ This is similar to what Deleuze says in *Différence et répétition*: the foundation of the world is “an immemorial Memory or pure Past . . . which was never itself a present, but which makes the present to pass.” In relation to it, “all presents coexist in circle” (351).

empiricism subtitled *Essai sur la nature humaine selon Hume*, Deleuze had already developed many of these ideas: the subject is constituted in a “flux of sensible things — a collection of impressions and images . . . perceptions . . . [and] appearances” (92). A mind [esprit] is not active, “it is activated.” It is an effect, an impression (*Empirisme* 9). It depends on a synthesis of affections (59). It is overflowed by an anonymous process of imagination which creates and surpasses it (69, 143, 145).⁸

The view is summed up again in *Différence et répétition*, in which this anonymous process is presented as follows:

A world of impersonal individuations, and pre-individual singularities—this is the world of oneself [on], the world of ‘they’, which is not to be reduced to the banality of everyday life. This is the world in which meetings and resonances develop: the ultimate face of Dionysius, [which is] the true nature of what is both deep [profond] and bottomless [sans fond], and overflows representation. (*Différence* 355)

Always against this background of impersonal individuations and pre-individual singularities, individuality arrives in a process of “contracting contemplation,” which constitutes organisms even before it “constitutes their sensations.” There is an I [moi] whenever there is “a furtive contemplation” and “a contracting machine, capable of extracting a difference from the process of repetition” (*Différence* 107). The world is rhizomatic, in a sense that will be further developed in Deleuze’s latter works such as *Mille plateaux* written with the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. Umberto Eco, relying on their work, uses the same metaphor in his explanation of semiotic processes in general. These processes occur in a rhizome, which has lines that intersect to create the possibility of individuation. In the rhizome, everything is connected, reversible and dismantable. The rhizome has, accordingly, no fixed inside or outside (Eco, *Dall’albero al labirinto* 65; cf. Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia* 112).

⁸ Other authors famously referred by Deleuze in his analyses of processes of individuation are Gabriel Tarde and Gilbert Simondon (*Différence* 104).

Julia Kristeva arrives at similar ideas, when she argues that semiotic processes emerge in “a differentiated infinity whose unlimited combinatory never reaches its limit [borne].” The literary text would take place in “a zone of multiple marks and intervals whose non centered inscription realizes practically a polyvalency that has no possible unity” (*Sèméiotikè* 12–13). Subjectivity, in general, is constructed inside these semiotic processes: “the subject doesn’t exist; it is done and undone along a topology... the configuration of the discursive space” (*Le langage* 272).

Similar ideas have been advanced also in contemporary anthropology. In her celebrated study about gender in Melanesian culture, Marilyn Strathern argued for a notion of “person” which is almost as flexible and complex: “Far from being regarded as unique entities, Melanesian persons are as dividually as they are individually conceived. They contain a generalized sociality within. Indeed, persons are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them” (13).

3 Budapeste and Leite Derramado

Chico Buarque’s *Budapeste* gives, in a nutshell, a clear and concrete example of the process of contracting contemplation. Before giving some more information about the content of the story, we will focus directly in this point, which concerns our argument. The main character, a Brazilian ghost writer, finds himself in Hungary, where a woman (Kriska) ends up teaching him the language of that country. The following passage describes his fascination with her skin:

Kriska suddenly undressed. I had never seen such a white body in my life. Her skin was so white that I wouldn’t know how to touch it... After contemplating it tirelessly, I desired merely to dab at her breasts, to dab at her small nipples, but I have not yet learn how to ask for things. Neither would I dare to move a finger without her consent. Discipline was very important to Kriska. During my first lessons she refused to quench my thirst, because I repeated water, water, water, and water, but always missing the right prosody. On another occasion, she paraded right in front of my nose with a pan full of delicious pumpkin breads, just to throw everything away, because I didn’t know how to call them. But before memorizing and correctly pronouncing the words of a language, we certainly start by distinguishing them, and by discerning their meaning: table, coffee, telephone, oblivious, yellow, sighing, Bolognese spaghetti, window, shuttlecock, joy, one, two, three, nine, ten, music, wine, cotton dress, tickling, mad, and one day I

discovered that Kriska liked to be kissed in the back of her neck. She then slipped out of her dowdy dress and I was bewildered by such whiteness. (*Budapeste* 45–46, italics added)

Formally, the passage develops around a refrain: this indefinite powerful sight of the whiteness of the woman's skin — a phanopoeia, as Ezra Pound would have called it (52). The sight unfolds duplicated, instead of being presented once and for all. The passage begins with the narrator referring to the whiteness of the woman. Then, in a movement of free association, he refers to the abstract concept of discipline. This gives him a connecting way to the past, through which he imperceptibly slides: “Discipline was very important to Kriska. During my first lessons [. . .]” The association of these ideas (discipline and whiteness) could be considered a cliché, but that is not our point.⁹ What is important to our argument is how, in the narrative, the concrete sensation of whiteness has occasion to appear, and then to move to the background, in a way that it apparently disappears till it comes up again unexpectedly (in the end of the passage). During the process, the sensation is intensified. The mechanism at work in the narrative is not an ordinary repetition, but a contracting contemplation. It is not something that could be isolated, but an echo, a double, sustaining the narrative.

The general structure of *Budapeste* as a whole is constructed in a similar way. The narrator travels at least four times from Brazil to Budapest. The book seems to open up in some indeterminate time of the second voyage, but on the very next page the narrative slides forward to the time of the third or last voyage (Buarque 2003: 6). The narrator then casually gives the reason for his first voyage to Budapest, to where the whole scene imperceptibly slides back. The next chapter opens in the time the narrator spends in Brazil, between the first and the second voyages. But after a few pages the

⁹ Brazil has a great ethnic diversity, and mixed-raced people were generally integrated into its society since the colonial times (Bethencourt 246). But the country is to the same extent pervaded by an ideology which correlates skin whiteness with the values of the elite. This happens to the point that, in Brazil, till nowadays, the acquisition of “middle-class status” “whitens” a person (Bethencourt 2). We will have the chance to see below that *Leite Derramado* is permeated by a restrained violence that connects with the issue of racism. The prejudice should not be attributed to Chico Buarque himself, who has the merit of not glossing over the shortcomings of his characters.

narrative recedes still further into the past, to a time when the narrator had never as yet left Brazil for any other country.

Still in the same chapter the narrative catches up with the time around the first voyage to Budapest, and then with the time around the second voyage to Budapest. The narrative moves more or less linearly from then on, but there are always some turns. For instance, chapter 3 settles on the time of the second voyage, but not on the beginning of the second voyage, and the narrative will have to move back a little in order for us to understand the situation the narrator is in. The same happens with chapter 5 in relation to the third voyage.

The narrator and the characters unfold in this process of sliding back and forth. In this way, their key features are intensified in a process similar to the one we analyzed in relation to Kriska's whiteness. In terms of its "ideological" content, the novel matches its formal outline. In *Budapeste*, the narrator is a ghost writer, who succeeds so well in his job that he feels not so much "deprived of his own writing" but as if he were "writing in the notebook of others" (18). He travels and learns to speak a difficult foreign language. At least in its beginning, his experience seems similar to what has been called "babbling." He cannot "distinguish" where words "begin or end" (8).¹⁰

Several themes in *Leite Derramado* are similar to those in *Budapeste*: the struggle to determine one's own identity and to make sense of one's own past experiences; the struggle to communicate with other persons in the process of learning a language, or of learning how to write. But here babbling meets aphasia. *Leite Derramado*'s narrator is an old man, probably an inmate or an inpatient who "speaks with the ceiling" (39), and could be in a coma. He "gasps more than speaks" (184), and seems to be unable to

¹⁰ One could say that as an adult, he is still able to experience language in a pre-symbolic level. A level that Julia Kristeva would characterize as genuinely semiotic, and which is generally lost after what psychoanalysts call the mirror stage and the stage of acknowledgment of castration (*La révolution* 22, 43, 112–16, 134).

enunciate clearly what situation he is in. The book should read like a memoir but it is more than that: it conveys the improbable process of writing and not writing them.

In *Leite Derramado*, the identity of each character is even less independent of the general discursive flux. This novel makes more extreme the narrative processes that were already at work in *Budapeste*. Important things unfold in repetitions, but when they are repeated, they are not only emphasized: their meaning becomes enriched, sometimes contradictorily. The narrator justifies this by saying that “in old age, people are fond of repeating old affairs, but never with the same precision, because (for them) each remembrance is a mockery of an earlier remembrance” (*Leite derramado* 136).

A passage whose structure is similar to the one we quoted from *Budapeste* can make this clear:

Who knows if Maria Eulália didn't feel guilty for having been born as a girl? [. . .] Be it as it may, she had already compensated me with little Eulálio. . . I brought him in shorts with me to the Senate House, and asked someone to take a picture of him standing on the rostrum from which my grandfather used to give so many speeches [. . .] And one day he [Eulálio] came to tell me that he had become a communist. Let it be! I said to myself. In case we were to be taken up by communism, Eulálio d'Assumpção Palumba will be a member of some important bureau . . . But instead of communism, we had the military revolution of 1964 [. . .] One night [Eulálio] packed up his shit, and my daughter threw up her hands in despair: he had run away to a clandestine life [. . .] As time went by, we were called to fetch a child in the Army Hospital: the son of Eulálio and one of his cronies who gave birth to the child in prison. I raised him as if he were my own son. . . and asked someone to take a picture of him in shorts in the Senate House. . . one day, he became a communist. My daughter says he died in prison, but no one is sure of that. What I know is that I was called to fetch my son in the Army Hospital. (*Leite Derramado* 125–127, italics added)

The small child who was brought by the narrator to the Senate House — twice and under the very same circumstances: to be photographed in shorts on a rostrum — is first the child of the narrator's daughter and then the child of the child of the narrator's daughter. And then, eventually, the child is unequivocally called by the same narrator “my son” (quite literally, not metaphorically). What we have here is a grandson, who slides into a great-grandson, who slides back into a son. The narrative of *Leite Derramado* as a whole turns around similar lurking knots, which work up the identities of the narrator and characters, not without enriching them, each time, with new, partially

contradictory meanings. The knots are specific situations that are restated several times in the book: a French engineer who arrives at the harbor, a father who is murdered, a mother who touches her son's elbow inside a church, and a wife who disappears. No one knows if these are facts, deliberate fabrications, or fantasy and moonshine. Because the situations are perhaps all these things at the same time, it is not clear how exactly they happened. But they pulsate with the same cogency — the effect of what we characterized above as a contracting contemplation, emerging inside a matrix of fluxes.

The book makes, however, trenchant references to what seems to be just very well-known hard facts of the Brazilian history of the whole 20th century: coffee exports, the repercussions from the New York stock exchange crash, weapon importation, the invasion of Rio de Janeiro by Southern politicians, the menace of communism, the military revolution of 1964, the political resistance to the dictatorship, the rise of the international drug traffic, and that of evangelical churches. But these facts are not objectively presented nor chronologically (linearly) narrated. They all emerge as afterthoughts of the narrator, and their relation to his own life and fantasies remains nebulous. More pungent is the permanent, restrained violence that sometimes becomes rampant and delirious, in the relation of the narrator with his parents, or with his wife. The violence connects obscurely with the issues of racism, bastardy, the heat of the country, and the orange color.

Availing ourselves of Deleuze's words, we could characterize this violence and the issues with which it is connected as "the turmoil of a fulfilling contemplation, which folds into itself cases of expansion [détente] and contraction" (*Différence* 102). Availing ourselves of Buarque's own words, we could say that the writer is here once again struggling to give a fluid shape to some kind of compelling excess he feels. The situation is the same as when he had to deal with the construction of the identity of Eulálio and of the other characters of his novels. This is not a mechanical process dictated from outside, but one that emerges from "inside" as an act of contemplation. The act is actually what grounds the ordinary notions of outside and inside. There is something here that

precedes memory and thinking, being part of a primary sensibility, which constitutes the writer himself.

Popular singer and songwriter, Chico Buarque was known for being handsome and magnetic. There is something sensuous and charismatic about him. He was a ravishing sight in the musical programs of Brazilian television of the 1960s, but only to the same extent that he conducted himself always shyly and reservedly. There is an anecdote about a TV producer coming with the idea of using the cameras from below, because Chico Buarque kept looking to the ground while in the studio. In the documentary by Renato Terra and Ricardo Calil, *Uma Noite em 67 (A Night in 1967)*, there is a scene in which he is abruptly pandered and then questioned by a reporter. For a few seconds Buarque remains as if dumb, overcome with fear. There is an alarming tension in his embarrassed countenance that will soon convert — or rather, be shaped— into an arresting smile, as if he were able to focus on and transfigure an overcoming emotion. A similar process would be at work in the novels we analyzed here.

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