

Body, Corporeal Perception and Aesthetic Experience in the Work of João Gilberto Noll

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

To:
Maria Luiza Pinheiro de Alencar Freitas
and
Christopher James Connolly

“em mim só reconheço o corpo”

João Gilberto Noll

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Abstract

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to examine the function assumed by the body and by corporeal perception in the works of the contemporary Brazilian fiction writer João Gilberto Noll. The first part of the thesis will situate Noll's narrative within the Brazilian cultural context of the 1970s and 1980s. The first chapter presents an overview of the socio-political environment in which Noll's literary project was conceived. The second chapter will take this further to examine how the contemporary discourses on sexuality and gender play a pivotal role in Noll's works. The third chapter discusses in particular how Noll's literary production distances itself from and even criticises the popular and commercially successful documentary genre known as *romance reportagem* which used literature as a form of political propaganda.

The second part of the thesis will focus on the importance given to corporeal perception in Noll's literature both as the ground upon which one becomes conscious of oneself, of the world and of others, as well as the medium through which the aesthetic experience can be realised for both the author and his readers. Chapter four will explore the way in which Noll appears to reject the rationalist view of consciousness as an abstract conception of the self, preferring a more phenomenological approach in which consciousness is the outcome of the perceptual experiences lived by the subject in a constant flow of physical interaction with the environment. The fifth and final chapter will discuss how Noll's narrators - and by proxy Noll himself - reflect upon their aesthetic creation and its reception and the foundation of this process in the sensorial experiences of the subject.

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Introduction

In a review for the book *Lorde*, João Gilberto Noll's most recent novel, the Brazilian magazine *Veja* described the writer as 'um dos ficcionistas mais originais da literatura brasileira dos últimos trinta anos'.¹ Since his literary debut in 1980 with the short-story collection *O Cego e a Dançarina*,² Noll has been awarded several literary prizes and his works have been acclaimed unanimously by Brazilian readers and literary critics as amongst the most significant contemporary literature produced in the country. The successful adaptation of his fiction to the cinema and the theatre are a further indication of the influence of Noll's narratives in other Brazilian artistic fields. The relevance of his works, however, has not been restricted to Brazil: João Gilberto Noll is currently one of the few Brazilian writers to have established his name outside his country. The different international programmes³ in which Noll has been invited to take part, the translation of some of his works into English⁴ and the publication of books about his works outside Brazil are some indications of the growing interest in Noll's narrative in the international arena. The positive response to Noll's literary production both in Brazil and overseas reflects the multifaceted aspect of his narrative, his innovative fictional style and the richness of his thematic elements

¹ Jerônimo Teixeira, "João Gilberto Noll lança o romance *Lorde* e revela que já passou por uma internação psiquiátrica," *Veja*, 11 de agosto de 2004. Available from http://veja.abril.uol.com.br/110804/p_113.html. (Web page accessed on 09/08/04) no pagination.

² In fact Noll started to publish his texts a decade earlier. At the end of the 1960s he contributed with some short stories and poetry to the Saturday literary supplement of the newspaper *Correio do Povo* in Porto Alegre. In 1970 he contributed with two short-stories "A invenção" and "Matriarcanjo" in an anthology introducing the new literary talents of Rio Grande do Sul (Carlos Jorge Appel, ed., *Roda de Fogo: 12 gaúchos contam* (Porto Alegre: Movimento, 1970). However, it was only after the publication of *O Cego e a Dançarina*, Noll's first sole book which brought his name to be nationally known, that the author started to dedicate himself to literature, publishing other works on a periodic basis.

³ In 1982 João Gilberto Noll was awarded a guest lectureship to take part in the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa in the United States. In 1982, Noll was also recognised by German academics as one of the newest revelations in Brazilian literature. His short story "A virgem dos espinhos" was translated into German and published in the anthology edited by Kay-Michael Schreiner, ed., *Zitronengras, Neue brasilianische Erzähler* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1982). In 1996, he was invited to assume the position of visiting writer at the University of California at Berkeley to where he returned in 1997 to assume a sessional position of lecturer in Brazilian literature. In 2002 he received a fellowship from the Guggenheim foundation. In 2004 Noll was the first Brazilian writer invited to occupy the post of writer in residence at King's College London.

⁴ The short story "Alguma coisa urgentemente" was the first work of Noll to be translated into English as "Something urgently," trans. David Treece. *Travessia: Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 2 (1993) pp. 5-13. followed in subsequent years by the translation of the novels *Hotel Atlântico* and *Harmada* into a single volume as *Hotel Atlântico*, trans. David Treece (London: Boulevard, 1997).

which allow his works to be approached from a wide range of perspectives, as presented in this introduction.

In my analysis I will argue that Noll's narrative can be read both through placing it in the context of the Western philosophical tradition and epistemology as well as in relation to the more immediate framework of contemporary Brazilian society, all the while bearing in mind that

despite the marked presence of recognizably Latin American, even Brazilian scenarios in his work the authenticity of Noll's narrative cannot be reduced to their denunciation of local or social realities, although neither can he be accused of an indifference to the pressing concerns of the immediate social world.⁵

However, before embarking on a more detailed presentation of each chapter of my thesis and how my propositions can contribute to a hitherto unexplored reading of Noll's works, I will briefly set out some of the multiple aspects already highlighted by the author himself and his literary critics, which demonstrate the innovative character of Noll's fiction and its relevant position not only in Brazil but also beyond it.

I. Noll and the context of his work

I. 1 The influence of music and cinema in Noll's literary technique

In describing his own writing Noll asserts that his literary production is largely influenced by elements from other artistic fields, mainly from music and cinema:

[p]arto de manchas, imagens, coisas muito mais cinematográficas, visuais, do que verbais. Tenho a impressão que escrevo com o desejo de estar fazendo cinema e música, quer dizer: estar escrevendo imagem

⁵ David Treece, "'It could all be different': an introduction to the fiction of João Gilberto Noll," *Portuguese Studies* 14 (1998) p. 270.

e música... Comecei a escrever, mas sempre invejando um pouco o trabalho do cineasta e sobretudo do músico.⁶

The reiteration of themes throughout his literary production leads Noll, when talking about his narrative, to establish a connection between his work and that of the musician: '[a]t times I think that my novels have a rhythm, a tone that's rather chanting, like Gregorian chant, repetitive, that turns back and back on itself, turning over the same questions'.⁷ The repetitive, incantatory character of the musical notes responsible for creating the melody of music is for Noll a source of inspiration that triggers the process of literary production: '[ouço m]uita música, música clássica, porque a música clássica instiga em mim um sentimento de [sic] sublime. E eu persigo muito o sublime'.⁸ The influence of music in Noll's narrative is also manifested through the alliterative use of words which delineate the rhythmic flow of the author's sentences. Commenting on *A Fúria do Corpo*, Noll associates the narrator's voice with that of a recitalist of chant and poetry: '[é] uma voz embriagada a voz do narrador. Sempre transbordante. E essa voz embriagada às vezes canta. 'A fúria do corpo' está repleto desses cantos como se fosse um poema'.⁹ As an artist who uses language as his primary creative tool, Noll emphasises the fundamental link between aesthetic experience and the pleasure generated by the acoustic perception of words: 'gosto do som. É essa coisa que estonteia, que te tira de você mesmo'.¹⁰ Surprisingly, although Noll has emphasized the influence of music in his writing, there is to date no research that elucidates this relationship between literature and music in his work.

Cinematic language has also been recognised as having a significant influence on Noll's literary style. His narratives not only make explicit allusion to movies, film actors and cinema directors but are developed as if they were scripts written to be staged by actors: 'quando eu hoje sonho com o próximo livro... o que eu vejo é quase

⁶ Moacyr Scliar, "A busca do romance sinfônico," *Leia* 100 (fevereiro, 1987) p. 17.

⁷ David Treece, "Interview with João Gilberto Noll," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6:2 (1997) p. 127.

⁸ Maria Flávia A. Bueno Magalhães, *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito* (Unpublished MA Dissertation, Campinas: UNICAMP, 1993) p. 312.

⁹ "A literatura é às vezes uma voz embriagada que canta," *Copo de Mar* 17 (2000). Available from <http://www.copodemar.com.br/joao.html>. (Web page accessed on 12/09/04) no pagination.

¹⁰ Bueno Magalhães, "Entrevista com João Gilberto Noll," *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito*, *op. cit.*, p. 311.

que uma câmera diante de alguém falando'.¹¹ Unlike the absence of research on the musical aspect of his works, the impact of cinema in Noll's literature has been extensively discussed by literary critics. Flora Sussekind suggests that Noll's success in incorporating the experience of cinema into the literary text is twofold: firstly through the proliferation of images with no significant function in the narrated event and secondly by the relevance given to sounds in the narrative environment, which are intermingled with the discourse of the narrator:

[a]núncios luminosos de filmes e *shows* de *strip-tease*, o som de uma tv ligada, um rádio, o barulho de uma máquina de cigarros, *video-games*, *outdoors* servem de cenário aos seus textos. Mas não apenas cenário. Às vezes, a referência cinematográfica interfere a tal ponto na ação que esta se interrompe e a narrativa passa a se ocupar exclusivamente da citação.¹²

Caught in the midst of a turmoil of images and sounds, Noll's protagonists and characters become no more than 'another image' hardly distinguishable from their background, their voices only 'another sound' constantly intertwined with their fictional environment, emulating, for the reader, the same perceptual experience of a movie spectator who is exposed to a multitudinous variety of audio-visual stimulations.

Sussekind also identifies another important intersectional point between Noll's narrative and cinema. As the critic suggests, Noll's protagonists and characters always appear to be aware of their fictional existence and behave almost like actors who are self-consciously 'representing' a specific character to the reader, i.e. their audience: 'o sujeito [ficcional]... é apenas uma espécie de objeto passível de visitaç o p blica... ele parece se definir mesmo como **picture at exhibition**, figura numa vitrine'.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.* 306.

¹² Flora Sussekind, "Ficç o 80: dobradiças e vitrines," *Pap is Colados* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1993) p. 242.

¹³ Flora Sussekind, "Mais vir o, ver s - o mundo como par dia e representaç o: os novos narradores," *Leia* 95 (setembro, 1986) p. 18.

Marinyze Prates de Oliveira has also raised interesting points when discussing the cinematographic aspect of Noll's works. Looking at the constituent elements of Noll's narrative (the construction of the story, the description of background images, the presence of auditory effects and the constant transitional position of narrators and characters) Prates de Oliveira places Noll's literary technique in relation to the three stages of a film production: 'um roteiro cinematográfico, a filmagem de um roteiro [e] um filme pronto que vai se projetando durante o processo de leitura'.¹⁴ For the critic the short length of Noll's novels parallels more or less the time duration of a typical movie which seldom exceeds two hours of projection. The preference for brief dialogues with a stress on colloquial language is also used by Prates de Oliveira to compare Noll's fiction to movie scripts. Furthermore, the critic suggests that the abundance of verbs relating to sight and the constant description of images of no substantial relevance to the plot transform Noll's narrators into cinematographic cameras which capture almost indiscriminately the visual elements of the fictional scenario, constantly shifting focus between characters and objects. Noll's preference for a narrative style with the use of 'orações coordenadas assindéticas (semelhantes a planos curtos), plenas de verbos de ação' in association with the transitory point of view of the narrator-protagonist juxtaposes, as in the projection of a movie, the multiple visual images captured by a narrator/camera in constant motion. In short, Prates de Oliveira stresses the importance of Noll's works because of their innovative literary technique, which amalgamates in an original way literature and cinema:

[m]ais que simples referências ao cinema, presentes de forma abundante em seus textos, ele [Noll] traz para a página uma escrita que se efetiva por meio de recursos e técnicas buscadas conscientemente no mundo do filme, concretizando um estilo em que palavra e imagem se associam para criar um universo lítero-cinematográfico.¹⁵

¹⁴ Marinyze Prates De Oliveira, *E a Tele Invade a Página: laços entre literatura, cinema e João Gilberto Noll* (Salvador: SCT, FUNCEB e EGBA, 2002) p. 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

I. 2 Noll's fiction in the light of the mass media

Visual images in Noll's narrative have been also discussed from the perspective of the mass media, emphasising the effects of television on the audience. Edu Teruki Otsuka argues that Noll's narrators re-enact the experience of television viewers who are daily exposed to a visual diet ranging across soap-operas, movies, news, documentaries, advertisements, etc., with no clear connection between one on another. The viewers, assuming a passive role in the face of the kaleidoscopic character of television, are unable to concatenate the different images captured by their sight into a coherent narrative. They become incapable of discriminating between fiction and reality, staged performance and lived experience. These three characteristics (lack of discernment, the inability to find any substantial meaning behind the images apprehended by the eye, and impassivity in face of the world) are for Otsuka the central attributes around which Noll's narrator-protagonists are constructed:

as descrições aleatórias do mundo externo fornecem indícios da opacidade de todas as coisas, cujas significações não são diretamente apreensíveis ao narrador-protagonista. O mesmo se dá com a descontinuidade dos acontecimentos que não se relacionam nem se desenvolvem, o que leva o personagem a apenas transitar entre um quadro e outro, sem nada compreender. O olhar lacônico do narrador capta os objetos e os eventos despidos de significados dados... A linguagem parece não dar conta das significações... [que] só podem ser reconstruídas por meio de hipóteses geradas na consciência definhada do narrador.¹⁶

Other critics share Otsuka's view that Noll's narrative, with its emphasis on a world inhabited by diffuse images which are more than a simple reference to cinema, stands for the experience of contemporary man who perceives his environment in a way similar to that of a television viewer, passively capturing the images exposed on the screen without establishing a connection between them. For Ravel Giordano Paz, the

¹⁶ Edu Teruki Otsuka, *Marcas da Catástrofe: experiência urbana e indústria cultural em Rubem Fonseca, João Gilberto Noll e Chico Buarque* (São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2001) p. 196.

uncontrolled flux of images conveyed by the mass media has transformed contemporary man by immersing him in an uninterrupted fluctuation of images so that he loses his own self-image. This state of schizophrenia, as Paz argues, has shaped Noll's literary production, something that could be interpreted as a 'metáfora do esvaziamento da consciência dos indivíduos, e, ainda, do 'esvaziamento do sentido' operado pela mídia e pela informação'.¹⁷

Looking at the subjective representation of Noll's narrator-protagonists, Nizia Villaça points out that there is an eradication of stabilized identities in Noll's literature. As the critic argues, Noll's narrators, despite their constant recounting of images which convey their impressions of their external world, do not offer the reader any relevant information about their own physical aspects, internal thoughts or personal history. This lack of subjective information, though, is a direct consequence of the narrator's own deficiency in shaping his ego into a coherent narrative able to concatenate all the different and unpredicted experiences that he undergoes. Writing about the narrator-protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico*, Villaça concludes that

este personagem não se constrói nem como herói, nem mesmo como anti-herói. Caracteriza-se pela ausência de traços que comporiam um sujeito pleno. De pronto o personagem não tem nome, não tem bagagem, não tem filhos ou mulher, não tem destino... A estas faltas começam a somar-se novas perdas, que levam à dissolução final. O personagem vai caindo em armadilhas, e nem ao menos sabe o porquê de sua mutilação e morte.¹⁸

Likewise paying attention to the frenzied proliferation of images in Noll's narrative, resulting in a crisis of verbal representation and a sense of subjective disintegration or loss of identity for the narrator-protagonists, some critics have contextualized Noll's works within current discussions on postmodernism, although, as I will argue later, Noll himself has expressed reservations about the nomenclature of 'postmodernism',

¹⁷ Ravel Giordano Paz. "Esquizofrenia, simulacro e identidade: tensões dialéticas na ficção brasileira contemporânea," available from <http://www.terraviva.pt/Copacabana/6677/esquizo.html>. (Web page accessed on 29/11/2001) no pagination.

¹⁸ Nizia Villaça, *Paradoxos do Pós-Moderno: sujeito e ficção* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UFRJ, 1996) p. 108.

especially when applied to his work. Supporting their arguments most often through a cultural analysis of contemporary thinkers, several critics have established a parallel between Noll's narrative and the theories of 'postmodern' scholars such as Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson.

For Baudrillard the proliferation of images without substance that permeates the media has initiated an 'era of the simulacrum' in which illusion and reality become increasingly undifferentiated. The condition of man in the 'era of the simulacrum' has been identified by some critics as the *leitmotiv* to shape Noll's literature. Alexandre Faria, like Otsuka and Paz, underscores Noll's achievement of transposing into his fictions this contemporaneous experience of man who, living under the relentless circulation of televisual and cinematic images, ends up losing his own reference point. For Faria, Noll's texts are

montados a partir de imagens que emergem de um espaço difuso entre a imaginação e a realidade; nunca fica bem claro se a narrativa tem origem no que o narrador vê ou no que ele sonha. Essa diluição de fronteiras entre visão e imaginação revela apenas o que realmente sobreviveu na narrativa: a imagem.¹⁹

Frederic Jameson, also considering the widespread diffusion of images stripped of coherent meaning by the media, has diagnosed a 'new sensibility' which explains the experience of contemporary man, a sensibility which 'we can today identify with postmodernity itself (the free play of masks and roles without content or substance)'.²⁰ For Jameson, visual advertisements have contributed significantly to the creation of a 'postmodern sensibility'. Capitalism, with its devotion to consumerism, has developed a logic of visual imagery, through the mastery of advertising and media imagery, which links subjective identity and individual achievement with the idea of consumption. For the subject overwhelmed by advertising images and the incessant promotion of new products through the media, it has become impossible to acquire a

¹⁹ Alexandre Faria, "Do flâneur ao 'zappeur': as técnicas de reprodução e produção de imagens em João do Rio e João Gilberto Noll," available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/est6.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination.

²⁰ Frederic Jameson, "The antinomies of postmodernity," *The Cultural Turn: selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1998* (London and New York: Verso, 1998) p. 60.

stable identity in face of the fragmentary models which seek to represent 'reality' through the media. This aspect of the individual's fragmented existence in a highly developed consumer culture has become, for Jameson, the convergent theme which attracts current writers both in the social sciences and literature: '[the] valorization of schizophrenic writing and schizophrenic experience (Deleuze), may in the present context be taken as symptoms of our testimony to a modification of the experience of the subject in consumer or late monopoly capitalism'.²¹ Based on the socio-cultural interpretation elaborated by postmodernists such as Jameson, Francisco Caetano Lopes Junior proposes that Noll's literary production confronts the reader with a clear example of this 'postmodern sensitivity', with a deliberate accent on the 'dinâmica de uma sociedade capitalista orientada para o consumo, na qual a produção de imagens é um produto sempre posto à mão do indivíduo de forma acrítica e deliberada'.²²

The classification of his narrative as 'postmodern' has often been questioned by Noll: 'some people classify me as post-modern. I've nothing against that classification, but it bores me, because post-modern is something that to a degree legitimizes cynicism. I am in no way at all cynical. I'm tragic the whole time, I take everything in strict seriousness, that's why I don't consider myself post-modern'.²³ Although acknowledging the central role played by the mass media in contemporary society and constantly employing visual elements in his literature, Noll strongly denies any intention of producing his works in accordance with ideas postulated by postmodernist thinkers. As he argues,

[w]ithout doubt we are living a moment where there is a second order, that of the language of images. So often you think that you're talking about reality, when of course you're actually talking of that reality after it's already been filtered through the mass media. And I guess that

²¹ Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: narrative as a symbolic act* (London: Routledge, 1983) p. 124.

²² Francisco Caetano Lopes Jr., "A questão pós-moderna vista da periferia: o caso João Gilberto Noll," *Hispania* 74 (1991) p. 602.

²³ Treece, "Interview with João Gilberto Noll," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6:2 (1997) p. 129.

one of the interesting functions of literature at a time like this is to offer perspectives of a certain escape from that reality... These days I'm very concerned with this question of escape, of distraction, because they want our attention to be fixed on such uninteresting things, on the whole conveyed through the mass media, that often all I can say is this, escape is actually what it's about.²⁴

We could conclude following the above statement that rather than sharing the attitude of the postmodernist theoreticians or trying to mimic in his fiction the current 'apathy' of man under the influence of the mass media, Noll seems to be more interested in producing a literature able to incite the reader to re-conceptualize his own existence outside the mere universe of 'empty images' or simulacra. When discussing his aesthetic ideas, Noll has frequently emphasized the importance of a literary project which could offer to his readers a different view of the world, a world excluded from the incessant turmoil of images and information so characteristic of the contemporary era. For him literature needs to become

an agent of transformation. I believe very strongly in art as a renewing, revitalising potentiality, if only to escape from this world of images codified *ad nauseam* by television, etc. That's to say, a novel that might bewilder you, dazzle you, mix you up a bit with the more instinctive forces of the universe, and not just be a chronicle of a few given social situations.²⁵

Consequently, I will seek to replicate or parallel Noll's own efforts to escape, through his fiction, the restraints of a media-saturated society. I will do so by shifting my perspective from that of Noll's critics who attempt to interpret his works through the theories of postmodernism and contemporary media imagery. Rather than reading Noll by referencing the ubiquity of images in his narratives with all of the concomitant intellectualisation this brings, I will pay attention to the immediacy of the experiences conveyed by his narrators, their acts of perception and their descriptions of the process of their subjective apprehension of the world.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

1.3 The political and historical critique

In addition to those who stress the abundance of visual images in Noll's works, a third group of critics has preferred to analyse Noll's narratives within the socio-historical context in which they have been produced. Malcolm Silverman suggests that the impossibility of Noll's narrators establishing a coherent narrative about their personal experiences in the fictional world could be associated with the political climate of Noll's own generation under the rule of a military dictatorial state. The short sentences uttered by the narrator and the emphasis on everyday situations without adding any substantial meaning for the development of the plot are indicative, for Silverman, of a way found by Noll to represent the fearful behaviour of a population who, forbidden from expressing its own thoughts during the time of military repression, has lost the potential to verbalize its own feelings and experiences:

[o] quadro sem destino e corrosivo do Brasil dos anos 70 ganha, se não ímpeto, pelo menos parâmetros de alguma forma mais estruturados nos romances posteriores de Noll. Mesmo assim, ainda predominam ocorrências triviais, aparentemente sem significância – e o autor continua a tentar atingir a compreensão de si próprio, de sua geração (a mais traumatizada pelo Golpe de 1964) e do país.²⁶

A similar approach to Noll's narrative is taken by Idelber Avelar, who situates the writer's production within the context of post-dictatorial Latin American literature. Comparing Noll's narrative to the works of other contemporary writers in the Southern Cone, Avelar posits the emergence of a new narrative taking the form of a political allegory which 'engages a mournful memory that attempts to overcome the trauma represented by dictatorships'.²⁷ In his chapter on Noll, Avelar suggests that Noll's works are a clear example of a 'poetics of negativity' conceptualized as 'a critique of all instrumental, pragmatic conceptions of language'.²⁸ The shortness of Noll's novels and the narrator's lack of words to express his emotions and thoughts

²⁶ Malcolm Silverman, *Protesto e o Novo Romance Brasileiro*, tradução de Carlos Araújo, 2a. ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2000) p. 215.

²⁷ Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: postdictatorial Latin American fiction and the task of mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

are, for Avelar, signs of a traumatic experience wherein the traumatized subject cannot remember the factual reasons for his personal disturbance nor can he find in language a proper frame of reference for expressing the traumatic event. Unable to evoke his past in order to create a logical narrative about his life, the narrator can only refer to his present, offering the reader ‘the banal sequence of events [with an attempt to foment] a reflection on the crisis of the narratability of experience’.²⁹ Another interesting point raised by the critic is the connection he establishes between Noll’s narrative and the Brazilian *romance de fundação*. For Avelar, Noll’s literary project takes an opposite direction to that of Brazilian foundational narratives and their effort to construct through fiction an integrated image of the different historical, social and economic aspects of Brazil which justify the country’s existence as a nation and its homogenous Brazilian identity. As the critic suggests, Noll’s anonymous narrators, unable to refer to their past let alone create a narrative of identity, ‘unveil the melancholia and unresolved mourning buried underneath the heroic myths of identities and foundations’.³⁰

Without intending to offer a complete or exhaustive revision of the multiple readings which have been made to date on Noll’s narrative, the foregoing constitutes an attempt to give a brief exposition of some of the main points put forward by critics who have given their attention to the literary production of João Gilberto Noll. In so doing, I have sought to present them in their own right as well as create a place from which to move beyond and develop my own particular reading of Noll’s work. The value of these readings is significant and will continue to offer a source of information and insight as I seek to elaborate the propositions of this thesis.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

II. The body and corporeal perception in Noll's fiction

Another group of critics have already addressed the important role played by the body in Noll's narrative, but in so doing have raised different arguments from the ones I propose to develop in this thesis. Before introducing my own ideas on the significance of corporeality in Noll's fiction, I will briefly present the arguments of those critics who have emphasised the position of the body in Noll's narrative. I will then contrast their interpretation with the ones I will seek to put forward in my hypothesis of work.

In his analysis of *A Fúria do Corpo*, Silviano Santiago directly focused on the more 'grotesque' characterisation of the body in the novel which stands in marked contrast to the contemporary and widely propagated emphasis on the 'healthy' or 'athletic body' so prevalent in the media in the 1980s, as typified by Jane Fonda aerobics, fitness training, the popularisation of plastic surgery for the masses, etc., as well as an opposition to the image of the healthy body as an indication of political power. For Santiago, *A Fúria do Corpo* could be read as a direct attack on the commodification of the body in capitalist societies as well as an open rejection of the moralist ideology of communist countries, particularly in the area of sexuality: '[e]sse romance fala, indiretamente, do nosso hoje e da Polônia distante e percebe a trama universal e sutil dos vários autoritarismos militares no poder. Todos eles finalmente irmanados no cume dos dois blocos hegemônicos e nas cordilheiras do Terceiro Mundo, onde se dança ao ritmo das aulas de musculação'.³¹

Norberto Perkoski also takes the body as a point of departure for his analysis of Noll's fictions. Comparing Noll's text with Georges Bataille's work on eroticism, Perkoski proposes that the strong accent given to sexuality in Noll's narrative assumes a transgressive function: a linguistic rebellion against the over-elaborate language employed in the majority of literary works and a resistance to the exclusivity of political themes which had dominated the Brazilian literary scene during the 1970s and 1980s. Similarly to Santiago, Perkoski asserts that the emphasis given to the scatological aspects of the body in Noll's narrative (sweat, urine, faeces, etc)

³¹ Silviano Santiago, "O evangelho segundo João," *Nas Malhas da Letra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989) p. 64.

transgresses the image of the ‘aesthetic’, healthy and desirable body marketed by the consumer society:

[t]ransgressores, os personagens e narradores de João Gilberto Noll em sua maior parte se rebelam eroticamente... [e] instituem o **corpo** como elemento apto a se opor a essas restrições [sociais]. Não esse corpo de moda e de alienação – ginásticas e discotecas, tão bem disseminados pelos dominadores na década de 70 [author’s emphasis].³²

Having proposed the transgressive role of the erotic body in Noll’s literature, Perkoski concludes, (without fully developing his argument) that the bodies of the protagonists and characters in Noll’s works become the physical indicators of their own failure as human beings: ‘muitos dos personagens e narradores de João Gilberto Noll instituem o **corpo** e a **errância** como possibilidades ultimas de epifania existencial, que se revelam, na maior parte das vezes, como fracasso’ [author’s emphasis].³³

The proposal of this thesis is, however, to contribute a different approach to interpreting Noll’s literary production from those summarised above. My central focus will be on the role played by the body and corporeal perception in Noll’s narrative and in so doing I will seek to draw philosophical and aesthetic implications from the corporeal dimension of experience in Noll’s work. As opposed to reading Noll’s work as a simple critique of our contemporary culture in its worship of the body and its obsessive search for the perfect corporeal image, I propose that the emphasis given by Noll to the corporeal aspects of his narrators and characters raises some pertinent epistemological, philosophical, socio-political and aesthetic issues in the literary sphere.

³² Norberto Perkoski, *A Transgressão Erótica na Obra de João Gilberto Noll* (Santa Cruz do Sul: Editora da UNISC, 1994) p. 123.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

II. 1 Part I: The body in the social and literary context of Noll's work

In the first part of this dissertation, I situate Noll's narrative within the Brazilian cultural context immediately before and during the time the writer started to publish his narratives: a temporal framework which coincides, respectively, with the height of military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1970s and its gradual dissolution in the 1980s. Without engaging in a direct discussion of the crucial impact of the country's dictatorial government on Noll's production, a point which has been discussed proficiently by Idelber Avelar, I contextualize Noll's narrative within another political background: the issues raised by social minorities concerning the body. My intention here is to present, briefly, how the politics of the body, mostly involving sexuality and gender, had been introduced in Brazil and how these issues were addressed by groups of social minorities in the country as an activist critique both of the major national political tendencies at the time: the *situacionista* (the right-wing fraction which supported the military regime) and the *esquerdista* (the left-wing segment which stood against the dictatorial regime and which defended the implementation of a socialist government in the country). However, despite my initial emphasis on the specific political climate in Brazil and its echoes in Noll's writings, I do not intend to restrict my analysis of Noll's narrative to the Brazilian context only. The main purpose of this part of the thesis is to offer an interpretation of Noll's writings in the context of the pervasive annulment of sexual pleasure in capitalist societies and the types of violence, physical and cultural, imposed upon women: both of which have been the subject of extensive discussion in contemporary Western societies as a whole, and to expound how Noll seems to elaborate through his literature a critique of the *romance reportagem* genre in its use of literature aimed at commercial success.

In the first chapter I shall explore how Noll's literary production can offer a response to the reciprocal attacks aimed at each other by the Brazilian left-wing and the social minority groups of. In my arguments I will elucidate the original way in which Noll seems to work out the concept of 'alienation' employing the original denotation of the term as it is used in two of Karl Marx's early works: *The Grundrisse* and *The Philosophical Manuscripts*. Extricating the word alienation from its more vulgarised connotation – the experience of a specific class, the proletariat, in capitalist society –

as in the case of both the Brazilian left-wing Marxists as well as their opponents, Noll appears to offer a broader significance for the term 'alienation' to describe the dehumanization of all individuals in capitalist society independent of the class to which they belong. In my analysis I will show, for example, how prostitution appears in Noll's narrative as a genuine illustration of man's alienation in the capitalist system through the annulment of the body as a source of sexual pleasure. I shall also discuss in this chapter the way in which Noll's narratives draw attention to the difficulty raised by the categorization of homosexual relationship within the parameters of heterosexual relations.

In the second chapter I analyse the role played by female characters in Noll's narrative in the light of the propositions raised by feminist theoreticians such as Gayatri Spivak, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and others. The aim of this chapter is to highlight the various levels of oppression experienced by women in a socio-cultural context dictated by phallogentric values and to show how Noll's literature casts light on different aspects of women's oppression ranging from physical violence and sexual abuse to more subtle forms of gender repression perpetuated in society through male cultural conventions. I will start my analysis by reviewing how Western societies have been built on the supremacy of masculine values and how the female body has been represented within the values promoted by their male counterparts. Following this argument, I shall discuss how female characters in Noll's works appear to be compelled to incorporate the male order ingrained in culture and how his narratives seem to promote an evaluation of the negative repercussions that such an assimilation has for women who are consigned to experiencing their body as an existential ordeal. I will conclude the chapter by illustrating the predominance of male representation in language and how women in Noll's fictions try to articulate their experience of oppression within the restricted linguistic universe which legitimates and is legitimised by male supremacy.

In chapter three I will seek to demonstrate how in some of his texts Noll promotes a critique of the *romance-reportagem* novels and their publishing success in Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s. I will centre my attention initially on Noll's opposition to this merged genre of documentary/fiction: both the novels themselves which sought to denounce contemporary social and/or political crimes as well as their author-narrators,

who employed a journalistic style in order to present their readers with an ‘objective’ description of the events as described in the novels, thereby fulfilling the role of an ‘impartial’ detective in their ‘neutral’ account and final denouement of the political crimes revealed. In a subsequent part of this chapter, I will discuss Noll’s (oblique) critique of the autobiographical accounts of ex-political prisoners who during the time of military dictatorship were subjected to the most extreme forms of physical and psychological suffering in the defence of the democratic programme of their left-wing political movement. I will show how Noll’s work could be read as a critique of these expositions of persecution, incarceration and torture which began as a form of political resistance but developed into a form of ideological propaganda that moved beyond its political agenda to propagate a self-aggrandising image of the Brazilian left-wing militants as justice-seeking heroes. In my analysis I discuss how Noll’s texts seem to highlight the manipulative character of *romance-reportagem* narratives in which authors make use of literature to disseminate their ideological beliefs and to persuade the reader to identify the image of the author-narrator with that of the hero.

II. 2 Part II: Corporeal perception and aesthetic experience in Noll’s work

In the second part of this thesis I shall draw on the importance given to corporeal perception in Noll’s literature both as the ground upon which we become conscious of ourselves, of the world and of others, as well as the medium through which the aesthetic experience can take place both for the artist and his audience. As Noll has indicated on several occasions, his literary project is not concerned with offering an abstract or mental reflection upon the fictional world but with enhancing for the reader the importance of corporeal perception in our everyday experiences even when we are experiencing a ‘imaginative’ world portrayed through fiction: ‘a minha ficção é mais feita com as mãos do que com a cabeça e só sei escrever com este sentido orgânico’.³⁴

³⁴ Sheila Kaplan, "Bandoleiros, entre Boston e Porto Alegre," *O Globo*, 17 de junho de 1985. Reprinted in Bueno Magalhães, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

When describing his thematic preferences in developing his narrative, Noll has very often expressed his aspiration to bring philosophical concerns into the literary arena: ‘o que eu realmente mais gosto da narrativa romanesca e mesmo do conto, são as paradas de reflexão... Eu acho vital para a narrativa as lufadas filosóficas, de reflexão mais filosófica’.³⁵ Taking as a point of departure Noll’s stated interest in producing a literature with a philosophical dimension, I dedicate the fourth chapter of this thesis to a reading of Noll’s works in the light of major philosophical works such as those produced by Plato, René Descartes and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. My purpose is to show how each of these thinkers has referenced the body in their philosophical production and how their epistemologies appear to be refuted (in the case of the two first philosophers) or corroborated (as in the case of Merleau-Ponty’s proposal) by Noll’s writings. While the broad brushstrokes of this approach could be taken to be overly ambitious, I limit the discussion to the use of certain aspects of the epistemological models of these philosophers to elucidate the work of Noll rather than the converse. Centring my attention on Noll’s *Canoas e Marolas* I discuss how this novel seems to subvert the Cartesian dualism of body/mind in which the narrator’s certainty of his own existence is achieved not through his capacity for metaphysical thought but, on the contrary, by his physical contact with the world. My aim here is to offer a new insight into the way Noll seems to work out the conceptions of ‘self’ and ‘consciousness’ in his narrative. Distancing myself from these critics who propose that Noll is depicting in his literature the ‘lack of consciousness’ or the ‘existential failure’ of contemporary man, I will defend the idea that Noll actually is working on a different approach to consciousness and subjective existence. My hypothesis here is that, like Merleau-Ponty, Noll rejects the rationalistic view of consciousness as a unified and coherent narrative of the self in order to embrace a more phenomenological model of consciousness which can be understood as the outcome of the direct experiences lived by the subject in a flow of constant interaction with his environment.

In the concluding chapter of my thesis I shall consider the self-referential aspect of Noll’s narratives through which his protagonists and characters overtly discuss their process of literary creation. Focusing my analysis on *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*

³⁵ Bueno Magalhães, “Encontro com João Gilberto Noll,” *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito*, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

and Noll's two latest novels *Berkeley em Bellagio* and *Lorde*, I will examine the obstacles encountered by the writer-protagonists when subjected to a rational/intellectual environment that does not allow for their inability to separate their subjective experiences and emotional feelings from their aesthetic production. In this chapter I shall also discuss how Noll's narrators reflect upon the process of aesthetic creation and reception as an experience performed through our physical bodies. Furthermore, I will indicate the relevance of music and poetry in Noll's literary style which demonstrates a preference for prosodic sentence structure over semantic logic. The final aim of this chapter is to show how Noll succeeds in developing a narrative technique in which the reader becomes capable, during the act of reading, of a sensual response to the perceptual experiences and situations lived by the narrator.

III. Concluding remarks

As a final observation, the divisions proposed above for this thesis do not mean that I will be dealing with discrete themes in Noll's works. In fact, the three categories chosen to compound my analysis – the socio-political, the philosophical and the aesthetic – are a methodological strategy to structure my discussion of the central relevance of the body and corporeal perception in Noll's works. Furthermore, I should stress that the heterogeneous theoretical propositions which appear in this work will not be discussed in all their multiple aspects, a project which would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. My main purpose in discussing them is to establish, through their exposition and theoretical frameworks, certain articulations and insights into a reading of Noll's literary work from the perspective of the body. Nor is it my intention to engage in an analysis of all the elements present in Noll's literary production – another impossible task within the restrictions of this dissertation. My objective in this thesis, as I have presented above, is to shed light on Noll's narrative from the perspective of the body and corporeal perception and to add a new interpretive path into his works which will expand on and complement the readings already offered by other critics.

Chapter 1

Noll and the new politics of the body

In this chapter, I shall situate Noll's writings within the socio-political context of Brazil in the 1970s and 1980s. Initially, I shall present how the emerging political discourses on the body raised by the social minority groups have exerted a thematic influence on João Gilberto Noll's literary production. My main objective here is to argue how Noll's work seems to distance itself from the widely accepted interpretation of Marxism among leftists, particularly in the use of the concept of 'alienation' to describe the condition of the proletariat in capitalist societies. For Noll, as I will seek to demonstrate throughout this chapter, while basing my arguments on Karl Marx's early works (*Grundrisse* and *The Philosophical Manuscripts*), the term 'alienation' refers mainly to the 'dehumanisation' of the subject through the negation of our sensory and sensuous lives under capitalism. An additional point I shall briefly discuss in this chapter is the way that same sex intercourse is approached in Noll's work and how it highlights the problematic tendency of categorising homosexual relations according to heterosexual conventions. My analysis in this chapter will be particularly centred on two of Noll's novels: *A Fúria do Corpo* and *A Céu Aberto*.

1.1 Social minority groups and the politicisation of the body

The gradual dissolution of the rigid military regime in Brazil, initiated by the process of '*abertura política*' in 1979, marked the beginning of a significant historical epoch in the country. Among the significant measures taken by the military rulers to control the transition between dictatorship and democracy were the relaxation of the fierce censorship which had prohibited all forms of criticism levelled against the dictatorial regime, a political amnesty for the many citizens who had been forced to leave the country and had had their political rights annulled for opposing the system, and finally the approval of the official formation, even to a limited degree, of oppositional political parties.

In the political and cultural arena, many Brazilian artists and intellectuals who were sympathetic with the left-wing cause started to analyse and criticise the strategies of political resistance and the militant actions carried out by left-wingers in their opposition to the military regime. In his analysis of the history of the left in Brazil, Jacob Gorender, (himself a member of the Brazilian Communist Party, PCB), stressed that one of the main reasons for the failure of left-wingers to promote a viable opposition to the military rulers was the growing disarray within the left itself. The constant *rachas* (splits within the leftist opposition), the formation of multiple left-wing movements with divergent proposals of political resistance and the political inexperience of young left-wing militants contributed, along with other factors, to the ‘wreckage of the Left’¹ during the 1980s:

[a]s organizações de esquerda se revelaram débeis no duelo contra os dispositivos da repressão policial, assim que se deu sua centralização pelo comando das Forças Armadas. A clandestinidade mais profunda estancou a fonte de novos combatentes. Sucessivas cisões impediam esquemas racionais e estáveis de compartimentação e de montagem de aparelhos. Pelo exame das trajetórias individuais, verificam-se numerosos casos de militantes que passaram por três organizações, alguns por quatro ou cinco. Uma vez aprisionados e torturados, podiam fazer denúncias sobre todas elas. Sem falar na inexperiência e nas incríveis imprudências, que facilitaram a tarefa dos órgãos repressivos.²

In the wake of internal criticism, some activists also started to re-evaluate their own ideological commitment by fomenting a debate about the authoritarian values and positions held by left-wing militants in Brazil. At the end of the 1970s, for example, the periodical *Opinião*, one of the most important left-wing publications in the

¹ The term ‘wreckage of the Left’ was coined by Jean Franco in her book *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America and the Cold War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2002) to indicate the growing disagreements among left-wing political parties in the southern hemisphere during the 1980s and which led the left to a progressive weakening in its political unity.

² Jacob Gorender, *Combate nas Trevas - A Esquerda Brasileira: Das Ilusões Perdidas à Luta Armada* (São Paulo: Ática Editora, 1987) p. 220. For a comprehensive assessment of the political divergences and successive splits experienced by the Brazilian left-wing political groups see also: Antonio Ozai da Silva, *História das Tendências no Brasil: origens, cisões e propostas*, 2a ed. revista e ampliada (São Paulo: Proposta Editorial, 1987) and Emir Sader, *O Anjo Torto: Esquerda (e direita) no Brasil* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1995).

country, was raising pertinent questions about the authoritarian role of the leftist ideological programme. At the same time, it favoured a revision of the traditional concept of socialist political practice following the growing number of denunciations of arbitrariness and repression coming from socialist republics such as China, the Soviet Union and Cuba. As Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda indicated, 'surgem pelo *Opinião*, novos dados para a discussão da ortodoxia e do autoritarismo marxista, com a divulgação do problema das dissidências nos países do leste europeu e de entrevistas e trabalhos de intelectuais preocupados com as novas opções de análise e prática política'.³

As a result of the re-evaluation of its political programme, the Brazilian left became divided into two main opposing groups: the more 'traditional' left-wing supporters who sustained the same political ideas and moral principles in the defence of the 'interesses das classes trabalhadoras e os objetivos dos seus partidos',⁴ and a 'vanguard' faction formed by those left-wing dissidents who launched a fierce critique of the orthodoxy of leftist political-ideological programmes. 'Traditional' left-wingers began to be denounced for promoting an authoritarian, dogmatic and irrefutable model of political discourse that could not truly represent the totality of social phenomena in their diverse manifestations. By reducing social interactions to an economic model based on class, the traditional left believed that all forms of oppression could be reduced to the exploitation of labour, failing to recognise other forms of oppression experienced by women, homosexuals, and black people.⁵

³ Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, *Impressões de Viagem: CPC, Vanguarda e Desbunde: 1960 / 70* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1980) p. 94.

⁴ Antonio Ozai da Silva, *História das Tendências no Brasil: origens, cisões e propostas*, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

⁵ The emergence of ethnic, gender and sexual related issues dividing left-wing militants was not restricted to the Brazilian socio-political context only. In fact, as Paul Berman indicates, these issues have been integrated within the political agenda of the new left-wing groups which appeared in Europe and the United States from the end of the 1960s. As the author comments: '[t]he basic notion of putting together a revolutionary coalition among groups deemed to be innocent of imperialist crime implied a system of defining people by their historical grievances: the grievances of blacks,... of women and of homosexuals... Deep within those several founding notions from 1969 you could already see, in germ, the fateful idea of ascribing everyone's personal traits and beliefs about politics and culture to a historic grievance... There was already the expectation that with sufficient pity and piety all around, the many victimized ethnic-and-gender personalities would form themselves into their respective 'cultures,' and the communities would generate a movement for a new society that was eventually pictured not as worldwide Marxist-Leninist liberation or even as libertarian socialism but as a democracy of communities. Not liberty in the old sense but 'diversity' in the new sense'. Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: the Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997) p. 156/7.

Following the increasing criticism of the traditional left, new forms of social and political protest started to emerge in the country amongst the social minority groups,⁶ who sought to create an awareness among those who felt the effects of sexual and/or racial discrimination in society and whose issues were treated as obsolete in the political agenda of the traditional left. Consequently, the new social movements that emerged in the country in the 1980s expanded the meaning of the term ‘oppressed’ beyond the concept of proletarian oppression by the capitalist class to involve all those marginalized social groupings which had been silenced by theoretical and political ideologies. As Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo rightly observes, the proposal launched by the social minorities groups:

coloca em evidência a tentativa de formulação de um novo conceito de política – pautado na crítica (pela esquerda) à experiência marxista, na crítica à idéia da representação, na valorização do aspecto subjetivo da experiência política (valorização do cotidiano, politização das relações pessoais) e na afirmação das experiências particulares de vida. Esses movimentos criticavam a noção de representação política (representação partidária ou sindical), alegando que as formas de representação mais gerais diluíam as especificidades dos grupos

⁶ The term ‘social minority groups’ is employed here to designate those groups formed by women, black people, gays and lesbians who advocated a politics that proceeded directly from their subjective experiences as oppressed or underprivileged groups deprived of representation within political parties. Despite the use of the term ‘social minority groups’ to describe the social, cultural and political groups suffering from discrimination (homosexuals, women and black people in the main), it is important to emphasise here that these groups did not always share the same values and that each specific group constantly faced internal disagreements among its own members. As Edward MacRae comments, ‘se repet[ia] com freqüência as desavenças entre grupos muito parecidos, sendo que quanto mais próximo est[avam], maior parec[ia] ser a agressividade que um volta[va] contra o outro. Assim, embora os brancos homossexuais tenham se dado razoavelmente bem com os militantes heterossexuais do movimento negro, eram freqüentes as brigas destes com militantes negros homossexuais. Igual fenômeno se repetiria entre militantes dos movimentos homossexual e feminino. As feministas heterossexuais, embora se dessem bem com homens homossexuais, freqüentemente se desentediavam com as militantes lésbicas’. Edward MacRae, *A Construção da Igualdade: identidade sexual e política no Brasil da 'abertura'* (Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP, 1988) p. 100. Many people involved with the social minority groups welcomed the divergences and occasional ruptures that occurred within each specific group as a valid form of democratic dialogue which reflected the political practices of the minority groups. Judith Butler, for instance, when referring to the divergences within the feminist movement, affirms that ‘[t]he program of feminism is not one in which we might assume a common set of premises and then proceed to built in logical fashion a program from those premises. Instead, this is a movement that moves forward precisely by bringing critical attention to bear on its premises in an effort to become more clear about what it means and to begin to negotiate the conflicting interpretations, the irrepressible democratic cacophony of its identity... it is precisely in the course of engaged political practices that these forms of internal dissension emerge. And I would argue

minoritários... falava-se ‘enquanto negro’ ou ‘enquanto homossexual’, sendo posta em questão uma noção de identidade pública e política diferente da do ‘cidadão’ e do ‘proletariado revolucionário.’⁷

By revising left-wing partisan programmes and political strategies, social minority groups were also offering a new dimension to the concept of political practice. The body became a central focus for discussion by these groups: it became the site where repressive social values were seen to be imposed under the variants of gender, race and sexual choice.⁸ The truly victimised body (due to oppression) was no longer that of the exploited proletariat or the political prisoner who resists torture in defence of his political ideals, but the bodies of those individuals who were destitute of any form of representation: those who had been deprived of their own right to act or speak. On the whole, the body was rediscovered as a revolutionary emblem, an essential instrument through which subjective experience and political practice became indistinguishable. Any left-wing programme which did not include the body and

emphatically that resisting the desire to resolve this dissension into unity is precisely what keeps the movement alive’. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004) p. 175.

⁷ Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo, *A Utopia Fragmentada: as novas esquerdas no Brasil e no mundo na década de 1970* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2000) p. 18.

⁸ During the 1960s and 1970s an increasing number of cultural movements, political manifestations and theoretical approaches placed an emphasis on the body as the ultimate victim of social oppression. Wilhelm Reich’s *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927), Herbert Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1956) and Norman O. Brown *Love’s Body* (1966) were some of the main works which influenced the political and cultural thought of the young generations of the 1960s and 1970s in Western countries. Through reconciling Marxist and Freudian theories, the various cultural manifestations that appeared in the United States and Europe, especially the hippie movement and the student upheaval in France in 1968, were founded on the belief that social oppression was intrinsically related to sexual repression. The French epistemologist Michel Foucault was perhaps one of the most important intellectual advocates of the ideas of this new generation for which a true social revolution could only be attained through the overthrow of the established cultural stigmas concerning the use of the body aimed at individual pleasure. As Foucault states, ‘the rough outline of a future society is supplied by the recent experiences with drugs, sex, communes, other forms of consciousness and other forms of individuality. If scientific socialism emerged from the *Utopias* of the nineteenth century, it is possible that a real socialization will emerge, in the twentieth century, from *experiences*’. Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: selected essays and interviews*, edited with an introduction by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) p. 231. The new ideas concerning the revolutionary potential of the body and subjective experience started to be disseminated among young Brazilians, especially in the artistic field, through the works of groups such as the *Tropicalista* movement in music. As Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda suggests, the *Tropicalista* movement ‘começa a pensar a necessidade de revolucionar o corpo e o comportamento, rompendo com o tom grave e a falta de flexibilidade da prática política vigente... As preocupações com o corpo, o erotismo, a subversão de valores e comportamentos, apareciam como demonstração da insatisfação com um momento onde a permanência do regime de restrição promovia a inquietação, a dúvida e a crise da intelectualidade. O circuito fechado e viciado em que a classe média informada juntava-se para falar do ‘povo’ não produzia mais efeito. Era preciso... [u]m *agito*, uma movimentação com o corpo, que começará a ser tomado criticamente em relação à tradição nominalista e ‘literária’ da esquerda tradicional’. Buarque de Hollanda, *op. cit.*, p. 61-63.

corporeal pleasure as a source of radical resistance to the various forms of social oppression thus became criticised for corroborating the same values it proposed to attack. As Buarque de Hollanda postulated at the time:

[a] fé no marxismo como ideologia redentora é abalada pelo sentimento de que a única realidade seria o poder. Instala-se a desconfiança em todas as formas de autoritarismo, inclusive os que são exercidos em nome de uma revolução e de um futuro promissor, promovendo a valorização política de práticas tidas como alienadas, secundárias ou pequeno-burguesas. O moralismo comunista é recusado como uma atitude de ‘salão’ que resguarda o corpo, teme as forças revolucionárias do erotismo e evita pensar as próprias contradições.⁹

The ‘political rebellion’ promoted by social minority groups against the authoritarian ideological models of the left also encountered stiff opposition amongst some Brazilian social thinkers. Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, for example, identifies in the movements of social minorities the cultivation of a naïve, and therefore ineffective, form of political protest. For Rouanet, the demands raised by social minority groups which did not follow a specific theoretical model (an objection used by the writer to dismiss the political relevance of the minority groups and to accuse them of the ‘cultivation of irrationality’), could only result in being dissolved into a form of ‘anarchy’, lacking valid political proposals. Rouanet’s critique of the political and social demands of the social minority movements is based on their alleged confusion of ‘irrationalism’ and ‘politics’:

[é] uma das atitudes mais fundamentais ao processo democrático, não somente no âmbito da política clássica, em que ela significa oposição aos regimes ditatoriais, como no âmbito dos chamados movimentos sociais – o feminista, o negro, o dos homossexuais –, em que ela significa oposição à opressão sexista ou racial. Por isso mesmo sua infiltração pelo irracionalismo é especialmente grave, porque pode privá-lo de toda sua eficácia crítica. Há um certo risco de que essa

⁹ Buarque de Hollanda, *op.cit.*, p. 69.

tendência, arrastada pela gravitação do irracionalismo, acabe por estimular o ativismo puro, isto é, a recusa de toda teoria.¹⁰

For Rouanet, any form of criticism against social and political systems could only be valid if it were supported by a rational theoretical background. Echoing a Cartesian logic in which body and mind are dissociated from each other, Rouanet considers the body to be a representative of chaos and anarchy thus a threat to the 'rationalised order' of a logical mind. In disagreeing with Rouanet's position, we could argue that by challenging the revolutionary effectiveness of left-wing ideologies, the movements of social minorities did not in fact promote the defence of irrationalism. The new importance given to the body did not call for the abnegation of reason, and its replacement by a more 'primeval' and 'preposterous' existence that would precede all forms of rational thought. In contrast, the struggle led by groups of social minorities sought to highlight the way the body had been dismissed in theoretical discussions and how Western intellectual discourse had become implicated in a practice of corporeal oppression. For social minority groups, the body was not only the place in which subjective experience encountered social oppression, but also the *modus operandi* through which a new form of discursive practice could take place. As Terry Eagleton has rightly observed when discussing the politically rebellious discourse of the social minority groups, '[p]leasure has returned with a vengeance to plague a chronically puritanical radicalism...[and t]he body – so obvious, obtrusive a matter as to have been blandly overlooked for centuries – has ruffed the edges of a bloodless rationalist discourse'.¹¹

Movements formed by social minorities were also criticised by the more traditional members of the Brazilian left who pointed to the absence of a genuine political engagement by these groups. In this period in Brazil, where to assume a political position meant to be identified either with Marxist belief system or to corroborate capitalist ideology through a connivance with State rule, the struggle promoted by social minority groups was considered to be apolitical. It was condemned as being reactionary by the left who believed that it was the shattering of the hegemonic

¹⁰ Sérgio Paulo Rouanet, "O novo irracionalismo brasileiro," *As Razões do Iluminismo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998) p. 126.

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) p. 25.

interests of the proletariat, and as being illicit by the right wing, including here the Catholic Church, for corrupting the moral values of society. Members of social minority groups refused to be caught in this dichotomy and insisted that their demands were political, firstly because they were formulated out of the subjective experience of oppressed groups, and also because they were legitimately subversive in focusing debate for the first time in the country's history on subjects which had been ignored or declared taboo. To sum up, the discursive practice mobilised by the social minorities shed a new light on Brazilian society, exposing its concealed mechanisms of repression. Furthermore, it offered a radical model of political militancy attacking both the moral values of bourgeois ideology and the reductionist application of the concepts of labour oppression and social revolution defended by 'traditional' Marxists. As Darcy Penteado expressed in *Lampião da Esquina*, one of the main publications dedicated to discussing the position of homosexuals and other groups who were discriminated against in Brazil, movements formed by social minorities were introducing a genuinely subversive model of political practice which was able to confront and refute the ideological propositions sustained by the left wing:

[é] evidente que a nossa situação, *que é e deverá ser sempre política*, só poderá resultar num movimento de esquerda, levada pela própria condição de marginalidade que a nossa preferência sexual se afigura perante qualquer poder constituído, seja ele de que facção for. Mas se é para determinar colocações, *direi que estaremos sempre à esquerda da esquerda* [my italics].¹²

1.2 The body as a social symbol in Noll's work

Following this brief overview of the debates which emerged in Brazil during the period of *abertura política* and the birth of new political practices giving relevance to the subjective experience of sexual, gender and racial discrimination as an common

¹² Darcy Penteado, "Convergindo: da Mesopotâmia a Richette," *Lampião da Esquina* nr. XXXI (dezembro, 1980) p. 14.

form of social oppression, I shall now discuss how the new issues concerning the body appear to be reflected in the literary production of João Gilberto Noll. Distancing himself from mainstream Brazilian artistic production of the 1970s, the *arte engajada*, which was trying to express a political message through embracing a left-wing ideology,¹³ Noll defines his literary project, in part, through the new ideas concerning the body as they became the central agenda of political and cultural discussion in the 1980s. As Noll himself affirmed:

[a] minha literatura é muito preocupada com as forças expressivas, com as forças excretivas, excretoras, do corpo. Não é só a urina. Os meus personagens suam muito, ejaculam, defecam. Pôxa, mas por quê? Porque, como já falei antes, acho que a literatura deve mencionar questões vistas como periféricas pelo pensamento hegemônico, a ideologia do cotidiano.¹⁴

The body appears in Noll as the material reality in which all forms of social oppression, including here that of economic oppression, can be identified. As Mary Douglas has observed, the body and its biological functions can provide us with a much deeper comprehension of the way a specific social system is structured:

[t]he body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures. We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.¹⁵

The increasing attention given to the body as the place in which social and economic repression can be identified, was often criticised as a hedonistic (and, therefore, ‘irrational’) proposition meant to attack traditional models of social, economic and

¹³ I will expand on the concept of ‘arte engajada’ in the third chapter of this thesis in which I discuss the literary production of Brazil during the period of military dictatorship.

¹⁴ Moacyr Scliar, "A busca do romance sinfônico," *Leia* 100 (fevereiro, 1987) p. 18.

¹⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Ark Paperbacks, 1984) p. 115.

cultural explanations (see, for example, Paulo Sérgio Rouanet's critique, above). In fact, this new emphasis on the body has different political implications, having also expanded the concept of political practice beyond something exclusively related to party programmes and their ideological proposals to that of a more personal level of experience in the world. However, this shift in the notion of political practice from ideological beliefs to actual experience did not necessarily invalidate the theoretical framework which had been used by political parties to support their ideological commitments. The new discourse about body politics not only revised traditional political and economic theories but also proved that these theories could be interpreted through different paradigms from those reductive explanations offered by some political ideologies. Marxist theory seems to be one of the most illustrative cases used to demonstrate the difference between traditional left-wing ideology and the new conception of political practice linked to the body. Some theoreticians, grappling with the socio-cultural implications of the issues raised by groups of social minorities, supported the opinion that Marxist theory had to be re-evaluated in the light of the new political and historical context of the 1960s. Patricia Waugh, for instance, affirms that:

[t]he Marxist labour-capital matrix has been challenged not only through the failure of working class revolution, but also, for example, as a consequence of the shift towards new forms of production and consumption; the challenge to class analysis from new social movements representing concerns of race, gender and eco-politics; the rise of new technologies and new relations between work and leisure.¹⁶

The works of Michel Foucault played an important role in the re-evaluation of Marxism in that he claimed that the experience of oppression was not restricted to the economic model of class relations in capitalist societies but was, in fact, historically determined by the multifarious levels of power exerted by different groups and/or individuals in society. For Foucault, it was this relationship between power and the individual body that needed to be addressed in the reconsideration of Marxist political theory and social practice:

¹⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism / Reading Modernism* (London, New York, Sydney and Auckland: Arnold, 1992) p. 41.

[a]s regards Marxism, I'm not one of those who try to elicit the effects of power at the level of ideology. Indeed I wonder whether, before one poses the question of ideology, it wouldn't be more materialist to study first the question of the body and the effects of power on it... And while there are some very interesting things about the body in Marx's writings, Marxism considered as an historical reality has had a terrible tendency to occlude the question of the body, in favour of consciousness and ideology.¹⁷

It is on this relation between Marxism and bodily repression in Noll where I will centre my attention in the following sections of this chapter. As I shall argue here, Noll's literary project seems to reintroduce Marxism as a model for elucidating the social forms of oppression within the new context of body politics.

1.3 The body and the experience of alienation

A great part of the literature produced in Brazil during the 1970s and first half of the 1980s, which was influenced by the left-wing conceptualisation of social and economic oppression, was engaged in denouncing the oppression suffered by the proletariat under the capitalist system as well as the persecution experienced by left-wing activists in their opposition to the military dictatorship. The novelistic genre which had dominated the literary scene during this period, the *romance-reportagem*, which I will analyse in more detail in the third chapter, was particularly keen to expose, through images of corporeal violence and torture, how resistance to physical pain had become synonymous with political struggle. Ascribing a new symbolic dimension to the body, an increasing number of authors during the 1980s started to shift their attention to the experience of marginalised groups and to view the body as a place where social, cultural, historical and economic oppression could be exerted. As a consequence, literary narratives started to show a growing interest in themes which

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Body/Power," *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York and London: Prentice Hall, 1980) p. 58/9.

had been neglected in the previous decades, such as the position of women and homosexuals as well as racial issues, in addition to other previously neglected examples of oppression.

The emergence of a new literary aesthetic viewing the body as both the source and target of all forms of oppression was not exclusively limited to the Brazilian context. In fact, in Latin America as a whole, novelists started to focus particularly on the lives of some women, homosexuals and blacks who were condemned to live in 'ghettos' due to their condition as 'social minorities'. This new literary movement or '*novela de ghetto*' was particularly interested in exposing the close relationship between socio-economic oppression and the individual's body (the limited rights of women, the poverty of blacks, discrimination against homosexuals, etc.), and how many of these individuals who were at a distinct disadvantage in relation to others (men, white people and heterosexuals) had to transform their bodies into exchange value in order to supply the demands of their oppressors. As Mudrovcic argues:

la base de la novela de ghetto es, en cualquier caso, el dinero (o, mejor, su ausencia); y en relación inmediata con el dinero, el cuerpo, que actúa como espacio privilegiado donde luchan los valores que desata la transacción comercial de la cual el cuerpo es objeto... En la medida en que rige la dominante del dinero, estas novelas formulan sus conflictos en términos de relaciones materiales y ponen en marcha una economía centrada en el 'interés' a partir de la cual es posible explicar la fascinación que manifiesta la neo-picaresca por tópicos como la prostitución (femenina y masculina), el cuerpo en venta o la porno-violencia social.¹⁸

As a writer who started to publish his works in the 1980s, Noll appears to assume a prominent place in this 'literature of the ghetto'. Centering his literary narrative on characters normally excluded from social, political and economic analysis, Noll seems to propose a revision of the Marxist concepts of alienation, exploitation and oppression. This connection can be seen if we revisit some aspects of Marxist theory

¹⁸ María Eugenia Mudrovcic, "En busca de dos décadas perdidas: la novela latinoamericana de los años 70 y 80," *Revista Iberoamericana* 59:164/165 (1993) p. 462.

and return to Marx's own writings, reclaiming themes which had been neglected by Marxist analysis hitherto. The prevailing, orthodox interpretation of the Marxist method had reduced the complexity of human social existence to a structural model of economic relations, in which proletarian oppression and revolutionary potential were privileged. They had proposed a concept of social justice emerging exclusively from the perspective of the worker whilst not considering other oppressed constituent groups in the social sphere. It was Karl Marx himself who criticised the exclusion of the 'unproductive' or 'marginalised' people from the analytical models proposed by economic theoreticians to explain social interaction. As he observed:

[p]olitical economy, therefore, does not recognise the unoccupied worker... The cheat-thief, swindler, beggar, and unemployed; the starving, wretched and criminal working man – these are *figures* who do not exist for *political economy* but only for other eyes, those of the doctor, the judge, the grave digger, and bumbailiff, etc.; such figures are spectres outside its domain [author's italics].¹⁹

For Marx, political economy does not take into consideration the relationship between man and his nature, that is, man's existence as a physical body in constant interaction with other bodies: '[m]an *lives* on nature – which means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die'[author's italics].²⁰ The oppressive character of the capitalist economic system, with its worship of wealth accumulation and commodity fetishism, is not limited to its effect on the proletariat. In fact, the oppressive aspects of capitalism extend to all elements in a capitalist society independent of their socio-economic status as proletariat, non-worker, self-employed, small businessman or factory and land owner. It is from the idea of a masked oppression exerted by capitalism on all human beings that Marx developed his concept of alienation. When applied to the specific context of capitalist societies, the term alienation does not refer exclusively to the class situation of the worker who sells his labour in exchange for money. The alienated man, as exposed by Marx, includes all those who, in order to have access to capital, annul their own human

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. by Martin Milligan, edited with an introduction by Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1972) p. 120/1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

nature: '[t]he *alien* being, to whom labor and the product of labor belongs, in whose service labor is done and for whose benefit the product of labor is provided, can only be *man* himself' [author's italics].²¹ We shall now turn an examination of how Noll explores this concept of alienation, which designates the condition separating man from his subjective needs in a money-based society, with an analysis of two of his novels: *A Fúria do Corpo* and *A Céu Aberto*.

1.3.1 *A Fúria do Corpo*: The revolutionary task of pleasure

The transformation of the body into a commodity for sale in the marketplace is a recurring theme in some of Noll's novels, where prostitution is presented as the ultimate form of alienation imposed upon the human body.²² In *A Fúria do Corpo*, we are presented with the testimony of an anonymous narrator and his partner, Afrodite, whose dedication to the search of corporeal pleasure, in some sense, defines their position as social outcasts. For the main characters in the novel, the present embodies the experience of existence as an ongoing form of personal liberation: 'ela também não gosta que se fale do passado, nisso nos confluímos, os dois, temos junto um curso que começa aqui'.²³ This potential for personal liberation is further expressed by the characters' freedom in exploring their bodies as a source of sexual pleasure and as the full realisation of bliss. Hence the narrator's constant mention of his body and his sexual contact with other characters as the place where he can experience his true condition as a human being: 'meu pau subia e nisso estava a minha dignidade, não a minha dignidade de macho ou qualquer coisa que significasse minha cidadania há

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²² Scholarship about prostitution (especially female prostitution) as the exemplary form of alienation in capitalist societies is extensive. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I shall limit my discussion to male prostitution as it appears in the fiction of João Gilberto Noll and the early works of Karl Marx without referring to other secondary sources. For a more detailed analysis on the socio-cultural implications of prostitution in capitalist societies see: Raymon Bellioti, *Good Sex: perspective on sexual ethics* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) and Julia O'Connell Davidson, *Prostitution, Power and Freedom* (London: Polity Press, 1998).

²³ João Gilberto Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) p. 29.

tanto aviltada... eu era a natureza que quando menos se espera se revela como um cão faminto diante de uma posta de carne'.²⁴

The sense of freedom lived by the narrator, experiencing in his body the immediacy of his existence as if in an extended moment of sexual bliss ('eu quero permanecer aqui agora assim com este pau em riste contra o amplexo de Afrodite... até que eu gozo e me extermino'²⁵ as the protagonist proclaims), is destroyed when he starts to worry about his future and the urgency of finding work in order to finance his livelihood: 'quem sabe de amanhã é o miserável deus dos homens, mais antes que este deus miserável saiba demais penso que devo trabalhar, procurar alguma coisa pra fazer de onde possa extrair alguma nota'.²⁶ Changing the perspective of his life, anticipating his future through his present, the narrator ceases to experience his body as a source of pleasure. The loss of pleasure is augmented at the moment when the narrator decides to work as a prostitute, using his body as a source of income. Sexual intercourse, now submitted to the laws of the capitalist market, undergoes a radical shift in its function from pleasure to pain. Describing his sexual experience as a male prostitute, the narrator comments:

doía aquele dedão no meu cu, mas logo vim a mim e pensei o homem tá me pagando o que pedi, me dá o dinheiro gritei um pouco alto demais para a ocasião, o homem se assustou e procurou no bolso da calça as três notas de mil e lá vieram elas, novinhas pra minha mão, ah assim que eu gosto, falei isso me sentindo um pouco ridículo, parecia uma velha putona desembaraçada no seu mercantilismo... Eu nunca tinha sido puto nesse sentido mais ortodoxo da palavra. Puto, ter dado o buraco que eu tinha em troca de grana, o comprador fez do meu rabo o que bem entendeu, enfiou nele a pica dura, poderia ter enfiado um porco-espinho e eu não poderia reclamar, o comércio é assim, eu estar ali era trabalho, o trabalho cada dia mais difícil na cidade, entre estar num escritório com ponto batido quatro vezes ao dia e dar o cu não

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

havia duvida: dar o cu; o cu legítimo, não o cu figurado e sordidamente eufemístico que damos pela vida afora até morrer.²⁷

The violence suffered by the narrator is transmitted to the reader by the words he chooses in his descriptions. Repeatedly employing colloquial terms such as '*pica*', '*cu*' or '*puto*', which are words normally excluded from literary discourse for being obscene, the narrator 'violates' the aesthetic expectations of his readers. The contrast between pornographic language and aesthetic narrative experienced by the reader symbolically re-enacts the divergence between prostitution and sexual pleasure lived by the narrator.

The violence inflicted on the body when it becomes subject to the laws of the capitalist market is not restricted to that experienced by the individual who offers his body in exchange for money. In fact, Marx suggests that those who use money as a way to acquire sexual gratification are alienated from their own bodies as a potential source of pleasure. Alluding to prostitution as an appropriate metaphor for the function of money in mediating subjective contact in capitalist societies, Marx concludes that: '[m]oney is the *pimp* between man's need and the object, between his life and his means of life. But *that which* mediates *my* life for me, also *mediates* the existence of other people *for me*' [author's italics].²⁸ Experiencing sexuality as an economic transaction, the bidder denies his capacity to sexually attract the other and to provide sensual gratification to his partner. The reduction of sexual interaction to a commercial activity demonstrates the way that money operates in capitalist societies as the primary mechanism by which human beings direct their lives. In prostitution, sexual contact is transformed from a spontaneous activity into a calculated performance by different subjects. In this performance, the prostitute assumes the role of a soulless object; his body becomes a piece of property for anyone wishing to pay for it. The 'money owner's body is also experienced by the prostitute as an object, a

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90/1. The allusion to prostitution as the true condition of the labourer in the capitalist system was made by Marx himself, who comments that '[p]rostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *general* prostitution of the *laborer*' [author's italics]. Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

²⁸ Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 165/6.

medium through which he can have access to a further form of pleasure: the pleasure of possessing money.

The annulment of sexual pleasure in exchange for pay reappears in another passage in *A Fúria do Corpo*. This time, however, the narrator assumes the role of the bidder, offering his money in exchange for sexual gratification:

Chamo o mendigo como quem acorda um companheiro... pergunto se ele quer ganhar uns trocados para cachaça...me viro de costas com a bunda arrebitada e peço que ele me coma o cu, por me comer o cu pago mais três copos de cana... o maior caralho do mundo me penetra me penetra me penetra, *o mendigo geme na esperança das mil doses de cachaça e me esporreia em litros* o cu e caio espatifado entre ferros velhos, o mendigo de olhos grandes pega meu pescoço, e antes que aperte procuro no meio da sunga e pelo chão moedas e algumas notas amassadas e dou tudo prá ele, vá tomar toda cachaça que puder, o dinheiro tá aí pra você tomar um banquete de cachaça, vai [my italics].²⁹

The pleasure experienced by the beggar during sexual intercourse does not derive from his contact with the narrator's body. Instead, the only gratification he can genuinely experience in the sexual encounter is the hope of having access to money and, consequently, purchasing power. This idea is suggested at the very moment when the beggar reaches orgasm, concentrating his attention not on the sexual act but on the payment to be received by his performance which will enable him to consume *cachaça*. For the narrator, his sexual experience is equally corrupted by the money relationship. Assuming the role of the bidder, he can take possession of the other's body by deciding how to use it according to his own wishes. His pleasure does not originate from the sexual encounter with another body but from the possession of money; he has the power to rule over another body in the same way that he controls all his material property. As Marx states:

²⁹ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

the power that each individual exercises over others' activity or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange values, money. Thus both his power over society and his association with it is carried in his pocket... In exchange value, the social relations of individuals have become transformed into the social connections of material things; personal power has changed into material power.³⁰

Once integrated into the laws of the capitalist market by offering their bodies in exchange for money, the narrator and Afrodite are unable to recover the same personal freedom that they had once experienced at the beginning of the novel. Their bodies, now transformed into a profitable commodity, have lost their potential as a source of sexual pleasure. The narrator's attempt to engage in sexual intercourse with Afrodite is doomed to failure: 'meu caralho não ficava duro e a congelação de Afrodite era total, músculos da boceta rígidos, fechados, ostra se negando. Mais de meia hora tentamos, nada além do suor vindo do esforço inútil: estávamos irremediavelmente consumidos os dois'.³¹ After leaving behind their mendicant lives on the streets of Rio de Janeiro, the protagonist and Afrodite become confined to a domestic existence deprived of any spontaneity or excitement. The apartment in which they now live, rented thanks to the money acquired through selling their bodies, becomes the material symbol of their oppression, an oppression which is reflected in their own 'alienated' bodies, deprived as they are of the possibility of generating pleasure: '[n]os trancamos no apartamento com a janela fechada... o calor ali fechado supura o ar, mas eu e Afrodite estamos frios. Estar frio é não ter a refeição do corpo, é viver a fome mais brutal que a fome... Nada portanto nos poderia abalar mais que a fibra sexual se atrofiando... Os corpos no escuro e no silêncio'.³²

It is only after withdrawing from the illusory promises of capitalism, and its equation of money with personal fulfilment, that the narrator can recover the sensuous aspect of his body both in its capacity to produce as well as to receive pleasure:

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Marx's Grundrisse*, text translated, selected and edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1980) p. 66.

³¹ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

sei que é preciso então aguardar pacientemente a hora sem aturdir-me voluptuoso sobre essa mulher que há tanto me espera e me confia seu corpo... excitado com a promessa de ser dilacerado pelas minhas mãos... ofereço a Afrodite as mãos vazias... mãos que ainda não tocavam como tocam estas... e só assim encarno no corpo vivo que me ama.³³

As the passage seems to suggest, the gradual process by which the narrator's body becomes 're-eroticised' is achieved by the rediscovery of basic sensual feelings such as touch, which links the narrator's body to the body of others. The term 'mãos vazias' employed by the protagonist is dense with textual allusions. It refers in the first instance to the colloquial expression used to describe someone deprived of capital or any other material commodity. It also designates the attitude assumed by the protagonist when rejecting the societal and cultural values which repress his capacity to experience pleasure and which inhibit the potential of his body as a source of sensual gratification. Once 'emptied' of the cultural norms and economic laws regulating interpersonal relations in society, the narrator can be openly engaged, through his body, in contact with the other.

The novel concludes with the description of a communal bath that assumes the characteristics of a social uprising. The narrator and Afrodite decide to join a group of beggars occupying a public space, a water fountain, where they experience a collective sense of fulfilment, an ecstasy which is achieved not by the implementation of a political ideology but by the communion of bodies in contact with the water and with each other:

os mendigos saltam alegres, correm molhando uns aos outros...gargalham o banho que os une na festa privativa... todos fazemos batalhas d'água... entre algaravia e corpos mendigos em farta farra admiro Afrodite que me admira toda molhada sob o chafariz reluzente de sol, admiro Afrodite e me achego como se da primeira vez...³⁴

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

The passage seems to represent an implicit alternative to the revolutionary guerrilla strategy of the 1960s and 70s, which hailed armed struggle as the only viable option for the implementation of a just social system. The splashing and the water fights described in the scene seem to suggest an alternative to the bloody combat proposed by the left-wing guerrilla movement in which the meaning of 'social revolution' is transferred from violence to corporeal pleasure. For the narrator, an effective and radical resistance to the dictatorial government would not derive from a left-wing military struggle, precisely because such a struggle, based on violence, could only perpetuate the same atrocities of the system it proposed to attack. To sum up, the conclusion of *A Fúria do Corpo* seems to suggest that a true revolutionary practice must not only challenge the capitalist system but should in effect encompass a critique of the conventional and oppressive values of Western societies in relation to the individual. As Shirley Carreira comments when discussing the way in which the body is portrayed in Noll's narratives:

[a]s personagens de Noll, desde o primeiro romance, parecem estar em conformidade com a busca do sentido da vida, através da experiência diária e da visão de si mesmo como matéria... [o] corpo [na obra de Noll] ensaia um grito contra tudo aquilo que a sociedade constrói sob a forma de discurso de repressão.³⁵

In fact, the behaviour of the beggars at the end of the novel becomes an alternative form of social protest not because they are remotely in any position to seize political power, but because they recognize their bodies as the material means through which they can transgress the repressive values of society. The aim of the gathering is not to defend an ideological cause but instead to celebrate the body and corporeal pleasure as the revolutionary force which brings human beings into communion with each other.

³⁵ Shirley de Souza Gomes Carreira, "A Céu Aberto: a poética da transgressão," *Lucero: A Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies* 11 (2000). Available from http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ucluero/a_ceu_aberto.html. (Web page accessed on 14/07/04) no pagination.

1.3.2 *A Céu Aberto*: money and the alienation of the body

The prime importance of capital in determining interpersonal relationships and the violence perpetrated by money on the body are two central themes in the narrative of *A Céu Aberto*. The novel opens just as the narrator decides to search for his father in order to obtain money to save the life of his brother, who is suffering from a mysterious illness:

o corpo do meu irmão ardia em febre. Lembrei que acordávamos mais uma vez com aquela bruta fome. E hoje eu não poderia rondar pelas ruas da cidade pedindo dinheiro aos passantes... vamos procurar o nosso pai no campo de batalha, vamos lhe pedir algum dinheiro, com o dinheiro na mão vamos à primeira farmácia comprar todos os medicamentos para você.³⁶

Money is, thus, the main factor shaping the relationship between the novel's characters. After arriving on the barracks where his father is based as a soldier, the narrator befriends Artur, an old friend of his father, who decides to take care of the young protagonist. Artur, who is utterly sceptical about the capacity of the body to seduce and be seduced by others, confesses to the narrator that:

vejo que homem nenhum poderá se interessar verdadeiramente por mim... (eu é que já não acho muita graça no corpo de ninguém, tá bom, olho, pego, inspeciono para sentir se devo conduzir a minha sagrada boca até ali – a genitália seja da beleza que for me parece agora um corpo meio cômico quando não um digníssimo representante da tonta atribulação da carne entende?), mas eu continuo querendo o garotão lá no fim das minhas madrugadas e pago o garotão que de outra maneira não me procuraria nem espetaria sua barba para fazer no meu pescoço como peço, mas você não, em você nunca tocarei, em você eu vejo apenas o filho do velho Nicolau... nesse ponto de sua fala Artur

³⁶ João Gilberto Noll, *A Céu Aberto* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 584/5.

tocou no meu corpo pela primeira vez com alguma vagareza, no ombro, e disse que ia me dar um sapato novo.³⁷

As the passage seems to suggest, money (or material goods) becomes for Artur irremediably associated with all sort of activities, ranging from sexual intercourse to the manifestation of affect, involving physical contact with other bodies. When touching the body of the narrator, for instance, Artur immediately brings up the subject of money (the acquisition of new shoes for the protagonist) as if trying to ‘compensate’ his urge for corporeal contact with others by offering a material reward to them. This intermediation of money in personal relationships is further permeated by psychological conflict and physical violence. Artur himself becomes a constant victim of this ‘commercial trade’ of the body: on one occasion he has to bribe the police in order to escape the accusations made against him for offering money to underage boys in exchange for sexual services; in another passage Artur brings home two young men, probably male prostitutes, to have sex with him in his apartment only for them to steal his wallet. Later in the narrative, the protagonist comments how Artur ‘chega no apartamento bêbado e todo ensangüentado, pedindo uma cama, só isso. Deixo-o sobre a cama todo ensangüentado, os lençóis já manchados de sangue, de vez em quando ele geme de dor’,³⁸ which seems to suggest that Artur has again been the victim of his ‘rented’ lovers. Physical and psychological violence seem to have become a daily routine in Artur’s life. This situation, however, appears to be intrinsically connected to the commercialisation of the body since the descriptions of violence in the narrative revolve overwhelmingly around money and sexuality.

In the development of the novel, the protagonist starts to use his body as a source of financial income. The description of his sexual relations is interspersed with images of corporeal violence and monetary greed. Such is the language used by the narrator when commenting on his sexual intercourse with Artur’s son:

cuspi fundo na palma da mão, untei meu pau de saliva, o pau entrou de um golpe, o rapaz berrou... Quando eu próprio gritei enfim olhei para o meu púbis e o vi todo banhado em sangue, no começo não entendi

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 593/4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

mas logo me dei conta de que eu arrebetara o cu do garoto que na certa não era dado a permitir que enfiassem aquelas rijas postas de carne pelo seu ânus.³⁹

The violence that permeates the sexual relation between the narrator and the boy presents a dual character: it alludes to the ferocity of the narrator with the infliction of pain on the boy's body whilst at the same time it relates to the narrator's abdication of his own sexual pleasure which becomes subjugated to monetary value. Utilising his body for the sole aim of earning money, the narrator 'sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities'.⁴⁰ After his sexual encounter, the narrator reaches for the boy's wallet and takes possession of the money he believes he deserves for having sexually 'served' (not necessarily pleased) his client, assuming the role of a professional who delivers his services in exchange for capital. The hand he uses to lubricate and insert his penis into the boy's anus, in other words, his '*mão-de-obra*' (labour-power), is the same one that he uses to withdraw money from the boy's wallet, '*mão-leve*' (robber): 'Enfiei a mão num dos bolsos da frente... havia sim a carteira... tirei-as do bolso... as notas do dinheiro bem estendidas... Tirei quase tudo'.⁴¹

Initially, after placing the money in his underwear, the narrator describes the physical discomfort caused by the contact between the notes and his pubis: the same place where traces of the boy's blood have been left following anal intercourse. The corporeal displeasure caused by the money touching his body ceases when, with the anticipated pleasure of a consumer, he plans how he will spend the money now in his 'possession':

pus a mão ali onde escondera o dinheiro, perto do pentelho. Cocei, não para fazer a minha encenação não, mas porque o dinheiro ali realmente comichava... Ali dentro eu escondia o dinheiro com que compraria um presente para a minha mulher, talvez desse para um CD em promoção, uma camisa preta que eu vira numa vitrine, um incenso para acender

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 639.

⁴⁰ Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁴¹ Noll, *A Céu Aberto*, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

entre os bichos no paiol, um livro de mantras, um coração de veludo vermelho que surpreendi na rua dentro de um carrinho de bebê, eu vou também comprar o amor de alguém: chego ali, convido para um cruzeiro pelo Mediterrâneo, acendo todo o dia a chama com um novo agrado, me dissolvo me prosto me reaqueço em altas labaredas, os dois em combustão, depois só cinzas, mais tarde lá pela meia-noite peço um uísque, sacudo as pedras de gelo, me reanimo, e vou até o convés para ver se encontro uma aventura.⁴²

The possession of money alienates the narrator from his own body which, transformed into a commodity to be exchanged in the marketplace, becomes diverted from its function as a potential for pleasure. His body, in this sense, is no longer the source of sexual satisfaction aimed at connecting him to other subjects: money becomes for him both the medium through which sexual intercourse can occur and the extent of other forms of personal and affective relationships. It is based on the desire to make his demands effective, at both material and spiritual levels, that the narrator of *A Céu Aberto* can ignore the physical discomfort caused by money when it is in contact with his body. Possessing money, and therefore power, is for him correlative to experiencing freedom. The narrator's experience of freedom, however, is ephemeral: it can only be guaranteed as long as he possesses money. The narrator, now in the position of 'money owner', can afford to literally change his self into another being:⁴³ to be able to take possession of a wide range of choices oscillating from material goods to 'metaphysical luxuries' such as love and sexual pleasure. He is driven by the omnipotent behaviour of the capitalist who 'want[s] to conquer, not love'.⁴⁴ Money, and therefore power, will circulate along the same paths it has taken before falling into the narrator's hands. Able to exercise his purchasing power, the narrator wants to

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 639/40.

⁴³ As Marx has indicated, the power of money is overwhelmingly present in capitalist societies to the point in which our selfhood becomes defined in relation to the possession of capital: '[t]hat which is for me through the medium of *money* – that for which I can pay (i.e., which money can buy) – that am I, the possessor of the money. The extent of the power of money is the extent of my power. Money's properties are my properties and essential powers – the properties and powers of its possessor. Thus, what I *am* and *am capable* of is by no means determined by my individuality. I *am* ugly, but I can buy for myself the most *beautiful* of women. Therefore I am not *ugly*, for the effect of *ugliness* – its deterrent power – is nullified by money'. Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "One of the things at stake in women's struggles," *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Cambridge and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989) p. 114.

buy the love of someone, using money in place of sexual pleasure and repressing the capacity of his own body as the medium through which he can be erotically involved with another subject. As the Mexican poet Octavio Paz suggests, the preponderance of money in capitalist societies ‘deconsecrated the body; it ceased to be a battlefield for angels and devils and became a work tool. The conception of the body as a tool led to its degradation as a source of pleasure... Pleasure is a waste, sensuality an embarrassment’.⁴⁵

The narrator’s project of spending his money on a love affair (in other words, exercising his power over someone else’s body), having as a scenario a cruise through the Mediterranean, turns out to be a very different reality. At the end of the novel, deprived of money or any other form of material possessions, the narrator decides to trade his body, which is the last resort at his disposal to help him escape from his war-stricken country. In order to be allowed to travel clandestinely on a ship, the narrator has to submit his body to the sexual wishes of the ship’s captain: to effectively become his ‘sexual slave’:

No fundo, eu estava era exaurido com a minha condição de escravo sexual. E eu era outra coisa?... Quantas vezes no meio do sono ferrado ele [the captain] chegava, me sacudia, queria chupar meu pau mas que estivesse duro, pronto para secretar seus óleos de ardência, que desse uma esporrada monumental bem na sua garganta; ele sempre dizia que sua boca sem os dentes da frente poderia me servir *como uma vagina*, as minhas gengivas são tão macias toca aqui – eu tocava meio arrepiado –, a minha língua fará cócegas por baixo do teu prepúcio, o empurrará para trás para que o cabeção fique inteiro descoberto e acaricie minha garganta ou quem sabe *a arrebente e dilacere* [my italics].⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: modern poetry from romanticism to the avant-garde*, trans. by Rachel Phillips, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 169.

⁴⁶ Noll, *A Céu Aberto op. cit.*, p. 663/4. I will comment on the symbolic relation between the vagina and wound in the next chapter when discussing the role played by female characters in Noll’s narratives.

Alienated in a body he cannot recognize as his own ('eu não me olhava no espelho havia tanto tempo, na cabine dele não entrava espelho, só isso ele me pediu, que não trouxesse espelhos comigo'⁴⁷), a body which, transformed into material property, has been taken possession of by another (the ship's captain), the narrator cannot integrate his notion of 'self' with his body. This feeling of alienation between body and self worsens after the narrator's escape from the captain's governing power. His successive attempts to find freedom (first from the coercive rules of his war-stricken country and later from the imposing control of the ship's captain) are all doomed to fail. After fleeing the ship, the narrator finds himself in a foreign land where he believes for the first time that he belongs: 'Não me sentia estrangeiro entre eles, eu estava mais em casa do que no próprio lar que durante tanto tempo fora a cabine do navio'.⁴⁸ However, this initial feeling of familiarity and freedom experienced by the narrator in his new environment suddenly changes to one of desperation. Considering the long period of time spent on the ship, where he was kept isolated from any contact with other people apart from the ship's captain, the narrator realises that he has lost his human ability to coexist with other human beings:

considerarei que sozinho como estava em pouquíssimo tempo eu começaria a definhar. E que só me restaria assistir impassível à minha própria agonia. Não sabia a língua do país... Depois daqueles tempos todos no navio, eu parecia agora atrofiado para conviver com uma cidade. Precisaria aprender como chegar às pessoas de novo, precisaria de tanto... nenhum habitante dali adivinhara até então a minha existência... eu precisava de uma força que sentia faltar; aí me sentei no chão do terreno baldio e chorei, chorava e contava as notas do dinheiro que afanara do bolso da calça puída do comandante, e pensava até quando poderia viver com aquelas poucas notas e de súbito tudo passou e saí do choro para uma risada, assim, abrupta vadia incosequente interminável vã...⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 668.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 667/8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

Feeling entrapped in a world that he does not recognize anymore as his own, the narrator recovers his experience of liberty after counting the stolen money he carries with him even when he knows that his liberty will last only as long as he can keep his money: 'Como era feliz novamente, meditei. Eu parecia estar dando os passos finais na direção do abismo, concordo, mas era preciso esquecer qualquer outra coisa que não a minha nova liberdade'.⁵⁰ It is only by reassuring himself about his possession of money that the narrator can feel secure again in his new environment: money represents for him the sole factor which can guarantee the preservation of his life.

Used to his new ontological status as 'money owner', the narrator no longer recognises himself as an individual who is alien to the reality of his environment. Unable to express himself through the language spoken in the country, he soon realises that his money can actually perform the role of a universal language which makes communication possible, even if in a very rudimentary form, between him and the other characters. After discovering that money's function does not become reduced to the simple act of material purchase, but also extends to other realms of human activity such as bringing people together as a viable form of communication, the narrator decides to make use of his communicative tool:

No caminho para o hotel vi uma puta enconstada num poste. Perguntei no meu inglês sujo *quanto era*. Ela disse o preço em dólares e fomos para o hotel onde eu estava. Sentei-me na cama, lhe paguei na moeda estrangeira que eu carregava. Ela não reclamou, pareceu acostumada com moedas estrangeiras. Perguntei se notara a cor engraçada do abajur. *Era a primeira vez que eu dizia mais de duas palavras a uma pessoa daquela cidade*. Ela deu de ombros, o ar de quem não entendia a minha pronúncia ou talvez aonde eu quisesse chegar com a observação [my italics].⁵¹

Just as it alienates man from his physical body, money intercedes in what is probably the most human of all man's activity: the possibility of communication through the use of language. At the end of the novel, however, the narrator realises that more

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 672.

profound communication between him and other characters in the new land is an impossible task to bring to fruition. Reducing his sentences to the use of several lexical terms ('quanto é', 'quanto custa', 'cem dólares' etc.) all related to monetary transactions, the narrator becomes aware that his speech has also fallen prey to the contingencies imposed by money. Whenever he tries to utter anything which falls beyond the capitalist model of a 'supply and demand' dialogue, he is incapable of being understood.

Having lost the capacity to express himself independently from his relation to capital, the narrator experiences his own dehumanisation. The feeling of alienation experienced by the narrator, in which he is unable to recognise his own self, is intensified in the final pages of *A Céu Aberto*. The novel concludes with the narrator being identified by the police as the prime suspect of terrorist acts, a suspicion aroused by his physical resemblance to a terrorist being sought by the police. After being detained for interrogation, the protagonist is allowed to return to his hotel where he witnesses a bomb explosion in the same police station where he was held some hours before:

De repente um estrondo descomunal, trepidando tudo. Fomos até à janela. O prédio do Comissariado de Polícia em chamas. Na calçada em frente dois homens à paisana, parados, olhavam fixamente para a minha janela. Na parede da cabeceira da cama havia um cartaz chamando a atenção da população para um perigoso terrorista internacional. Na parte superior do cartaz, um tosco retrato falado de alguém que poderia passar por mim... Nessas alturas se o homem do cartaz era ou não eu já não fazia a menor diferença.⁵²

Alienated from his own self, that is, unable to recognise his own body image, the narrator cannot be certain whether or not he is the person responsible for the terrorist attacks nor does he know if what has happened was the result of coincidence or even a plan designed to incriminate him. The only fact he can be sure about is that if he is unable to prove his innocence, he will be sent to jail. However, the certainty of being

⁵² *Loc. cit.*

imprisoned no longer seems to worry him. The utopian project to live under an open sky and to thus experience an unlimited sense of subjective freedom is a hope that the narrator stops pursuing or believing in. In a society controlled by the power of capital, which promotes man's alienation from his own self, the only answer to those who look for emancipation is to conceive freedom not as an aim to be achieved by money, but instead to rediscover the body as the only material reality which has the potential of a true revolution against the impositions of capital. As Silviano Santiago observes: 'o corpo é o lugar da descoberta do ser... e o erotismo é a energia que impele o corpo a um comportamento não-racional e não-reprimido; o corpo é o lugar da liberdade, de onde sai o grito do indivíduo contra as sociedades repressivas'.⁵³ Freedom, so understood, distances itself from the conception of material and symbolic possessions (possession of money, possession of the other's body, possession of truth, possession of certainties, etc.) to become, first and foremost, a question about the subject's own materiality in order to discover the potential of the body as a tool of social transformation. For the narrator, caught in the impossibility of experiencing his liberty as a human being, the last human action he is allowed to perform is to laugh, providing his body with an experience of subjective pleasure even when the narrator acknowledges that this experience will not last forever:

Me perguntei se para onde eu estava indo havia silêncio consternação júbilo símbolo destino, essas coisas. Ou se para onde eu estava indo não havia nada que eu pudesse ter conhecido até ali, quem sabe?... Eu parecia de fato me encontrar na passagem do estado bruto da vida para uma espécie de existência mais difusa e elementar... Eu podia aprender a rir no que me faltava de tempo... *Rir, dar uma boa gargalhada como se estivesse a céu aberto*, logo ali, perto do mar [my italics].⁵⁴

⁵³ Silviano Santiago, "Prosa literária atual no Brasil," *Nas Malhas da Letra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989), p. 28.

⁵⁴ Noll, *A Céu Aberto*, *op. cit.*, p. 672/3.

1.4 The thematisation of homosexuality in Noll's work

The description of (male) homosexual relations, although a recurrent theme in Noll's fiction, has received very limited scholarly analysis. On the whole, studies dealing with the thematisation of homosexuality in Noll's narratives have been fairly descriptive, reflecting the attempts of some critics to classify the fictional production of João Gilberto Noll within the homoerotic literature produced in Brazil and/or Latin America.⁵⁵ In this last section of the present chapter, I shall argue how homosexual relationships in Noll's fiction⁵⁶ seem to reflect the debate initiated by gender theoreticians, who have stressed the problematic character of the classification of homosexual conduct according to the parameters of heterosexual behaviour.

1.4.1 Rethinking same sex relations in *A Céu Aberto*

As some critics have stated, homoeroticism assumes a central position in the narrative of *A Céu Aberto*.⁵⁷ Marcelo Fonseca Alves discusses the homoerotic aspect of the novel, drawing attention to the fact that homosexual relations are portrayed in the narrative through acts of violence and power abuse. For Fonseca Alves, *A Céu Aberto* conveys a negative image of homosexuality, since the allusion to same sex intercourse in the novel:

é sempre permeada por atos extremamente violentos, configura-se invariavelmente como um ato onde um força o outro, ou, dito de outra maneira, onde o desejo do outro não é jamais reconhecido... [a

⁵⁵ See, for example, Denilson Lopes, "Notas para uma história de homotextualidades na literatura brasileira," available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/est10.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination, and David William Foster, "Spanish, American and Brazilian literature," *Hispania* 75:4 (1992) p. 966-978.

⁵⁶ Due to the restrictions of this thesis, my discussion on the thematisation of homosexuality in Noll's works will be centered on the novel *A Céu Aberto*.

⁵⁷ As Denilson Lopes observes, "[n]o quadro geral de uma pan-sexualidade, fica a questão [na obra de Noll] se os encontros entre homens e rapazes ou meninos, como em "Alguma Coisa Urgentemente" (in *O Cego e a Dançarina*, 1980), em *Rastros de Verão* (1986), no desejo exacerbado de *A Fúria do Corpo* (1981) e mesmo no jogo de duplos masculinos, no espaço entre Brasil e Estados Unidos, em *Bandoleiros* (1985), implicam a constituição de uma homotextualidade, mas certamente seu último romance *A Céu Aberto* (1996), constrói um universo onírico, elíptico, decisivamente homoerótico." Denilson Lopes, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

narrativa] denuncia a perspectiva homossexual masculina não como uma simples opção de gozo... chamando a atenção para a hipótese de uma divisa destrutiva, negativa do homossexualismo enquanto aniquilação do desejo do outro, associando-o com a arbitrariedade, o autoritarismo e a violência do poder.⁵⁸

Adopting a different position from that proposed by Fonseca Alves, I propose that what seems to be at stake in the violent character of homosexual relations in the novel is not as much the denial of homosexual desire as a valid sexual option but rather, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of the body in a commercial transaction where money, rather than physical attraction, becomes the main motivation for sexual intercourse. Once deprived of its pleasurable aspect, sexual intercourse, whether heterosexual or homosexual, can only become, as in the case of rape, an act of corporeal violation. What is more, if homosexual desire appears intrinsically related to forms of physical violence and sexual coercion in Noll's narratives, we might assume that such a representation of homosexuality in the texts seems to reproduce, and therefore to expose, the violence committed against homosexuals in a socio-cultural system where heterosexual values prevail as normative.⁵⁹

Shirley Carreira points out that the descriptions of same sex intercourse in *A Céu Aberto* along with the use of a coarse register of language, seem to be intentionally employed by João Gilberto Noll as a literary strategy aimed at shocking the reader. As the critic comments:

⁵⁸ Marcelo Fonseca Alves, "Sem nome, lugar e destino," available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/est5.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination.

⁵⁹ As Judith Butler rightly observes, 'the international gay and lesbian community... [is], as a community, subjected to violence, even if some of us individually have not been. And this means that we are constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies, we are constituted as fields of desire and physical vulnerability, at once publicly assertive and vulnerable'. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 18. According to the critic, the political claims raised by the groups of sexual minorities includes, in a great proportion, the enforcement of laws by the state to protect homosexuals against physical aggression, a behaviour which translates the broader and more implicit violence perpetrated at the social sphere through sexual discrimination: '[t]o be part of a sexual minority means, most emphatically, that we are also dependent on the protection of public and private spaces, on legal sanctions that protect us from violence, on safeguards of various institutional kinds against unwanted aggression imposed upon us, and the violent actions they sometimes instigate. In this sense, our very lives, and the persistence of our desire, depend on there being norms of recognition that produce and sustain our viability as human. Thus, when we speak about sexual rights, we are not merely talking about rights that pertain to our individual desires but to the norms on which our very individuality depends'. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[a] forte presença dos impulsos sexuais, na maioria das vezes satisfeitos, fisicamente ou mentalmente, em relações homossexuais, é acompanhada de um vocabulário prosaico, que, ainda que faça parte do cotidiano das pessoas, agride, quando incorporado ao texto. Essa sensação de choque nos parece proposital.⁶⁰

For Carreira, *A Céu Aberto* engenders a 'poetics of transgression' presenting forms of sexual behaviour and linguistic codes to the reader which are normally excluded from literary works by which 'Noll faz do espaço do corpo o *locus* de onde emerge a palavra... transgredindo a forma e os códigos da ficção'.⁶¹ Complementing Carreira's reading, I suggest that the descriptions of same sex relations between male characters in Noll's works, rather than transgressing the codes of literary production, seem to contest the classification of homosexual behaviour in terms of a imposed socio-cultural (heterosexual) dichotomy of male/female. This serves to legitimise the models and roles to be assumed by the individual according to his gender.

When referring to the homosexual and incestuous relationship maintained with his transvestite brother, the narrator tries to conceive of this relationship in terms of a heterosexual, husband/wife parameter: 'cheguei a pensar que ele [meu irmão] poderia ser a mulher com quem eu sempre sonhara... naquela penumbra descobri de vez que era o meu irmão sim a minha mulher, e me debrucei e beijei seus cabelos e enfurnei a mão por entre suas pernas'.⁶² While ascribing a female identity to his brother, the

⁶⁰ Gomes Carreira, *op. cit.*, no pagination. The transgressive aspect of *A Céu Aberto* within the literary arena is also highlighted by the critic Beatriz Resende who comments on her participation in a jury to choose the best Brazilian novel published in 1996. Resende's choice for *A Céu Aberto* was dismissed by the other members of the jury who considered the novel inappropriate for a prize due to its lack of ethical and moral judgement. As Resende puts it: '[e]ste romance [*A Céu Aberto*], minha derrotada sugestão, foi considerado por quase toda a crítica uma narrativa excessiva, violenta, *demasiadamente homossexual*. A ausência de julgamentos éticos e morais incomodou. Na realidade, tais afirmativas não são infundadas. O livro é tudo isso. Mas não é só isso, como gostaria de mostrar... Por que continuar com uma leitura como essa? Justamente porque ela nos provoca, nos incomoda, mexe conosco e porque a escrita de João Gilberto Noll atinge aqui uma beleza despojada que beira a perfeição, e, em extremos de sensibilidade, evoca uma simplicidade esquecida que parece impossível no universo globalizado da pós-modernidade' [my italics]. Beatriz Resende, "O súbito desaparecimento da cidade na ficção brasileira dos anos 90," *Semear* 3 (1997). Available from http://www.letras.puc-rio.br/catedra/revista/3Sem_11.html. (Web page accessed on 03/10/04) no pagination.

⁶¹ Gomes Carreira, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

⁶² Noll, *A Céu Aberto*, *op. cit.*, p. 620/1. As this passage seems to suggest, the 'effeminacy' of the brother does not simply refer to his 'feminine' attributes or homosexual identity but implies the position that he, conceived as a woman, is expected to assume in society by allowing his body to be 'passively' manipulated by the (male) other. The passage further evokes the idea that gender differentiation, to the extent that it is implicated in social regulations, is intrinsically connected with the cultural legitimation of male power.

narrator is confronted with a series of quandaries. The incongruity of mirroring his homosexual relationship within a gender differentiated context results in the narrator being unable to discern which identity he must ascribe to his partner:

o meu irmão estava diante do fogão aguardando a subida do leite que fervia. Ele vestia uma camisola azulada que lhe vinha até os pés descalços. Transparente a camisola, e do outro lado do tecido fino havia o corpo de uma mulher. Precisarei romper com esse negócio de pensar nessa figura aí como meu irmão, pensei dentro de mim... Dentro daquele corpo de mulher deveria existir a lembrança do que ele fora como homem, e boliná-lo como eu fazia naquele instante deixava em mim a agradável sensação de estar tentando seduzir a minha própria casa, onde eu encontraria meu irmão quem sabe em outro momento. Não, o meu irmão não morrerá naquele corpo de mulher, ele permanecia lá dentro esperando a sua vez de voltar, e eu beijava um pedaço de seio à mostra e desamarrei a camisola e disse que queria um filho dela e disse que não queria um filho dela pois que estava bom assim sem filho nem nada, para que uma criança entre nós dois se uma outra poderá ressurgir daí na pele do meu irmão?⁶³

The narrator's description when trying to correlate discrepant identities such as brother/wife, male/female, is marked by a sense of confusion and indeterminacy. The feminine identification ascribed to his brother is constantly under threat of being negated. The image of a female body and the desire to have a child with this man who he believes to be a woman is contradicted by the brother's masculine essence and his inability to generate a child. Furthermore, the narrator seems to live under the threat of having his certainties contradicted: his brother might refuse to fulfil the female role (culturally) ascribed to him by deciding to recall at any moment his male identity. To sum up, the passage highlights that the stigmatisation of homosexual identity based on

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 622. The same confusional state is experienced by the narrator when trying to shape his homosexual relationship with Artur's son in accordance to the prevailing binary conception of two opposite gender: 'o filho de Artur colocou o pano de prato na cabeça e cobriu a cara deixando apenas um olho de fora, é ela, é a mulher do convés... [p]uxo lentamente o pano de prato para um ombro dele, a sua cabeça com os cabelos arruivados aparece descoberta, tento pensar mais uma vez se devo beijá-lo... Tento então esquecer a minha mulher e volto a olhar com intensidade a face do rapaz'. *Ibid.*, p. 640.

the binary model of heterosexual representation and its implicit symbolic oppositions (man/woman, strong/fragile, active/passive, production/ reproduction, etc.) appears to be unviable, asserting the fact that '[f]ew identities are so paradoxical as sexual identities... They are like relay points for a number of interconnected differences, conflicts and opportunities'.⁶⁴

The attempt to understand homosexual identity from the perspective of a heterosexual paradigm has been contested by those theoreticians who have drawn attention to sexuality and gender differentiation as cultural constructs aimed at regulating subjective behaviour and social roles, which are expected to be culturally imposed on the individual in relation to his or her biological function and sexual anatomy. In his study on the treatment of sexuality in Western societies, Michel Foucault indicates how, since the Greeks, sexual intercourse has been determined by oppositional roles of 'activity' and 'passivity'. As he comments:

in the practice of sexual pleasures two roles and two poles can be clearly distinguished, just as they can be distinguished in the reproductive function; these consisted of two positional values: that of the subject and that of the object, that of the agent and that of the 'patient' – as Aristotle says, 'the female, as female, is passive, and the male, as male, is active'.⁶⁵

This ancient dichotomy between activity and passivity, which has served to ascribe the position assumed by male and female both in sexual intercourse and to determine the social roles based on gender distinctions, has also shaped the 'code of sexual conduct' employed to categorise homosexual relations. Following the analysis initiated by Michel Foucault, many contemporary theoreticians have further expanded on the implication of sexuality in social regulations. Judith Butler, for instance, has drawn attention to the problematics of a binary classification of gender ('masculine' and 'feminine') according to sexual difference ('male' and 'female') and sexual desire

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, "History, desire and identities," *Conceiving Sexualities: approaches to sex research in a postmodern world*, ed. Richard G. Parker and John H. Gagnon (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) p. 36.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1985) p. 46.

(‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’). Supporting her arguments within the framework of queer theory, Butler suggests that:

This form of reducing gender to sexuality has thus given way to two separate but overlapping concerns within contemporary queer theory. The first move is to separate sexuality from gender, so that to have a gender does not presuppose that one engages sexual practice in any particular way, and to engage in a given sexual practice, anal sex, for instance, does not presuppose that one is a given gender. The second and related move within queer theory is to argue that gender is not reducible to hierarchical heterosexuality, that it takes different norms when contextualized by queer sexualities, indeed, that its binariness cannot be taken for granted outside the heterosexual frame, that gender itself is internally unstable, that transgendered lives are evidence of the breakdown of any lines of causal determinism between sexuality and gender.⁶⁶

The ingrained association between sexual role (‘active’ and ‘passive’) and sexual difference (‘male’ and ‘female’) is, as Richard Parker shows in his study about contemporary sexual culture in Brazil, what determines the social image of homosexuals which replicates the male/female model of sexual differentiation:

The structure of male/female relations in Brazil has therefore also served as a model for same-sex interactions as well. A sharp distinction between culturally defined ‘active’ and ‘passive’ partners in anal intercourse has been central to the traditional understanding of sexual relations between men... [t]he ‘active’ partner in same-sex relations... is nonetheless able, thanks to his sexual activity, to maintain an essentially masculine identity. The *viado* or *bicha*, the ‘passive’ partner in such exchanges, on the other hand, is unavoidably transformed... through his sexual role, [into] a symbolic female [author’s italics].⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁶⁷ Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasure and Passions: sexual culture in contemporary Brazil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) p. 46.

In one of the most prominent anthropological analyses of the formation of the Brazilian culture, *Casa Grande & Senzala*, Gilberto Freyre suggests that the physical and social control exerted by the young master over his male slave companion in colonial Brazil could have helped to shape the sexual attitude shown by colonial men towards women: ‘[o] sadismo de homem para mulher [foi] não raro precedido de senhor para muleque. Através da submissão do muleque, seu companheiro de brinquedos e expressivamente chamado *leva-pancadas*, iniciou-se muitas vezes o menino branco no amor físico’.⁶⁸ Freyre’s comparison of the sexual position assumed by women and male slaves in Brazilian colonial society is enhanced by the implicit overtone of ‘sexual passivity’ to designate those who were penetrated in sexual intercourse: ‘[q]uase que do muleque *leva-pancadas* se pode dizer que desempenhou entre as grandes famílias escravocratas do Brasil as mesmas funções de *paciente* do senhor moço que na organização patrícia do Império Romano o escravo púbere escolhido para companheiro do menino aristocrata: *espécie de vítima*’ [my italics].⁶⁹ In an euphemistic elaboration, Freyre broaches the theme of homosexuality between young teenagers in colonial Brazil by justifying the role played by the master as always that of who ‘penetrates’ the slave. Freyre’s equation of Master = penetrator does not take into consideration homosexual intercourse where the one who assumes a position of domination desires to be sodomised by the person over whom he can exercise his power.

Following this brief discussion on the problem of classifying same sex intercourse within the framework of heterosexual relations and, by proxy, the relationship between ‘gender identity’ and power, what we observe in the narrative of *A Céu Aberto* (and, on the whole, in all of Noll’s narratives) is precisely the inversion of this logic which ascribes ‘power’ to those who exert an ‘active’ role in the sexual relationship. In the homosexual relations portrayed in the novel, those who assume power over another’s body are individuals who possess money and are able to control the body of the other person independently of their position as ‘active’ or ‘passive’ during sexual intercourse. Taking into consideration a sexual relationship in which

⁶⁸ Gilberto Freyre, *Casa-Grande e Senzala: introdução à história da sociedade patriarcal no Brasil*, 43ª ed. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 2001) p. 122.

⁶⁹ *Loc. cit.*

two subjects come voluntarily together for the same objective which is the pursuit of pleasure, the antinomy of an active/passive position is no longer valid. In this case, both subjects involved in the sexual act could only be considered as 'active agents', in the sense that they are both 'acting' in providing and acquiring pleasure for and from each other. It is only when sexual contact becomes determined by the rules of the capitalist system, which transforms the human body into a commodity, that the terms 'active' and 'passive' seem to acquire some relevance to indicate the 'relations between men and queers and men and women [in terms of monetary] dominance and submission, rather than of sexuality per se'.⁷⁰

1.5 Concluding remarks

As I have discussed in this chapter, the body is the focus of Noll's narrative as the ultimate victim of social and cultural oppression. Reflecting the political debate among left-wing supporters during and after the period of *abertura política* in Brazil, Noll seems to express through his fiction a reading of Karl Marx's early works in conjunction with the ideas proposed by social minority groups. Such an approach differs substantially from the widely diffused interpretation of Marxist theory which considers alienation as a state exclusively related to the situation of the proletariat under capitalism. For Noll, as seems to be the case for Karl Marx in his early works, the condition of 'alienation' is not limited to members of the working class in capitalist societies but refers to all those individuals, proletarian or capitalist, who have their human essence reduced to one single objective: the possession, accumulation and utilisation of money as a way of defining intersubjective relationships. Presenting prostitution as an example of alienation, Noll illustrates how capitalism detaches the human body from its sensual nature to transform it into a numb materiality.

Another topic discussed in this chapter while still contextualising Noll's works within the ideas proposed by social minority groups, especially the gay movement, is the

⁷⁰ Roberto Reis, "Representations of family and sexuality in Brazilian cultural discourse," *Bodies and Biases: sexuality in hispanic cultures and literatures*, ed. David William Foster and Roberto Reis,

problematic classification of homosexual identity following the categories of 'activity' and 'passivity'. This classification mirrors gender differentiation, which has served to determine heterosexual norms of behaviour for men and women in society.

trans. by Dário Borim and Ann Fifield-Borim (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. 107.

Chapter 2

The feminine body and the experience of oppression

This chapter will continue the discussion on gender and sexuality which began in the last chapter by exploring the ways in which women are portrayed in Noll's work, specifically in some of the short stories from *O Cego e a Dançarina*, and in the novels *A Fúria do Corpo*, *Bandoleiros* and *Harmada*. Expanding on the discussions raised by social minority groups as was presented in the previous chapter, I will show how Noll's literary output in the 1980s displays an increasing engagement with the issues raised by feminist groups in their attempt to unmask the physical and symbolic violence committed against women in a male dominated cultural system. My objective in this chapter is twofold. I shall initially examine the different forms of social and cultural violence experienced by Noll's female characters, highlighting, concomitantly, how these forms of violence, which can range from overt physical aggression to more subtle forms of oppression, constitute the everyday experience of women in Western societies. Subsequently, I shall discuss the ways in which Noll's female characters rebel against their oppression and how they become engaged in the search for new forms of self-representation which differ radically from the prevailing cultural models that give primacy to phallogocentric values.

2.1 The representation of women through phallogocentric values

Noll has shown a predilection in his narratives (with the exception of a number of short stories) for writing from the perspective of male narrator-protagonists. This choice, however, should not suggest that Noll uncritically reproduces masculine social values but instead it could be said that he exposes and reflects upon the close connection between men and power. As the author himself has affirmed:

[tenho] muito desejo de aprofundar uma relação masculina na ficção. Sinto que há uma insuficiência grande nela. É uma relação onde o discurso é o do poder,

da política, da licenciosidade... O homem tem uma forte resistência a discutir isso porque significa a desestabilização da cúpula do poder.¹

Using the position of power assumed by men in Western societies as the starting point in his literature could, in some ways, explain the almost complete absence of female narrator-protagonists in Noll's works, as if Noll were conscious of the difficulties in representing female narrators without reproducing the phallogocentric values which would legitimise the socio-cultural oppression experienced by women. The problem of portraying women outside of a male-oriented framework has become a growing point of discussion among art and literary critics. John Berger, a prominent art critic who specialises in the pictorial representation of women in Western artistic expression, suggests that male painters have depicted the female body as an object revealed by the masculine gaze. The term 'masculine gaze' as employed by Berger extends beyond the visual activity of male subjects. It indicates in a broader sense an introjection of phallogocentric cultural dominance which shapes the way that both men and women perceive themselves. Berger proposes that in Western societies, women are required to simultaneously assume two antagonistic states in relation to their bodies: the position of an observer (subject/active/masculine) and the place of the observed (object/passive/feminine):

*men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.*²

¹ João Gilberto Noll, "Um escritor que não precisa de perguntas," *Jornal da Tarde*, 1986. Reprinted in Maria Flávia Armani Bueno Magalhães, *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito* (Unpublished MA dissertation, Campinas: UNICAMP, 1993) p. 325.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1997) p. 47. Following the same line of arguments proposed by Berger, Craig Owens highlights the attempt of some contemporary artists of representing women in an 'innovative' approach which would criticise and, at the same time, destabilise the normative order imposed by the 'masculine gaze' on the female body. This attempt, Owens suggests, is in itself subjected to a series of contradictions: '[w]hat can be said about the visual arts in a patriarchal order that privileges vision over the other senses? Can we not expect them to be a domain of masculine privilege – as their histories indeed prove them to be – a means, perhaps, of mastering through representation the 'threat' posed by the female? In recent years there has emerged a visual arts practice informed by feminist theory and addressed, more or less

The male-centred parameters which, according to Berger, shape the representation of women in visual art are also prevalent in the Western literary tradition and is a factor that has been observed by many critics. Lúcia Vianna, for example, examines the way that female characters have been depicted in a number of canonical works produced by male authors during the nineteenth and twentieth century.³ According to Vianna, there is a repeated pattern of phallogentric values conveyed in these narrative. Those female protagonists who question or challenge their submissive role in relation to a male authority, which consisted in most cases of either maintaining, or being accused of maintaining, an extramarital relationship, are inevitably condemned to pay for their transgression as a result by being ostracized in society, a price which, in many cases, is paid with their own lives. As Vianna asserts,

[h]á uma tradição no romance de autoria masculina... que insiste em representar a mulher como vítima de seus próprios atos e desejos de transgressão. No final elas sempre pagam com a morte... Se por um lado pode-se acompanhar através dos textos literários a história da opressão feminina, por outro também se pode avaliar por meio deles o quanto contribuíram para sedimentar idéias como a do mito da resignação da mulher e sua destinação à infelicidade, resultado indiscutível das relações de gênero.⁴

explicitly, to the issue of representation and sexuality – both masculine and feminine... [W]omen have begun the long-overdue process of deconstructing femininity. Few have produced new, ‘positive’ images of a revised femininity; to do so would simply supply and thereby prolong the life of the existing representational apparatus. Some refuse to represent women at all, believing that no representation of the female body in our culture can be free from phallic prejudice. Most of these artists, however, work with the existing repertory of cultural imagery... It must be emphasized that these artists are not primarily interested in what representations say about women; rather, they investigate what representation *does* to women’ [author’s italics]. Craig Owens, “The discourse of others: feminists and postmodernism,” *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985) p. 71.

³ Among the authors discussed by the critic are José de Alencar (*Iracema*), Visconde de Taunay (Inocência), Domingos Olímpio (*Luzia Homem*), Machado de Assis (the short story “Missa do Galo” and the novel *Dom Casmurro*), Graciliano Ramos (*São Bernardo*), João Guimarães Rosa (*Grandes Sertões: Veredas*), Gustav Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), Leo Tolstoi (*Anna Karenina*) and Eça de Queirós (*O Primo Basílio*). Clarice Lispector is also included in her study, but only from the perspective of the account of male narrators as they appear in *Perto do Coração Selvagem* and *A Hora da Estrela*.

⁴ Lúcia Helena Vianna, *Cenas de Amor e Morte na Ficção Brasileira: o jogo dramático da relação homem/mulher na literatura* (Niterói: Editora da Universidade Federal Fluminense, 1999) p. 144. The relation between women and death in literature is also analysed by Ruth Brandão who asserts that: ‘[a] morte do feminino, na literatura, tem diversas qualidades, é feita de várias metáforas: a da imobilidade, a da fixidez, a da petrificação ou a da morte literal. Enquanto delegada de voz alheia, enquanto produto da literatura das sociedades patriarcais, a personagem feminina é uma construção, uma fantasia, que só pode ser efeito de escritura e só pode esclarecer alguma coisa a respeito daquele que a enuncia. Presa de um sistema de representações viris, a mulher se lê anunciada num discurso que se faz passar pelo

The resistance to 'represent' women through a first-person narrative voice would appear to reflect Noll's awareness of the general misrepresentations of female protagonists by male authors. The primary example of this tendency to avoid the creation of a female narrator who would be subordinated to a male imagination is best articulated by the writer-protagonist of *Bandoleiros*. Setting out his plans for a future novel in which his wife Ada would appear as the central character, the writer reflects upon his role as the producer of a textual context in which Ada occupies the opposite end of the continuum, thereby becoming a textual product inexorably shaped within the symbolic constraints of phallic domination:

No silêncio da biblioteca armo intrigas para meu próximo romance. De alguma forma Ada será a personagem central. *A mulher do escritor é uma infeliz*. Vive sendo sugada por ele. Bastou um gesto, uma palavra, um certo olhar, que pronto!, lá está a infeliz mulher do escritor transposta para o papel. *E o pior que geralmente é sugada em seus pormenores mais submersos, naquilo que ela nem mesma sabe de si*. Quer roubo mais torpe? [my italics].⁵

Ada, the fictional protagonist of his planned book, is referred to as 'a mulher do escritor' (the 'writer's wife' or, in a more literal translation as the 'woman of the writer'): a play on words which implies Ada's position as an object possessed by the narrator at two different levels of appropriation: through her marital status and as the 'creation' of a male writer. This representation of a female character by a male author is, as the narrator himself comments, irremediably doomed to *roubo* (theft). It is a representation inexorably alien to the real experiences lived by women who, defined for and by men, are confined to the straitjacket of a discursive model which cannot express women's true experience and feelings.

discurso de seu desejo'. Ruth Brandão, *Mulher ao Pé da Letra: A Personagem Feminina na Literatura* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, 1993) p. 230.

⁵ João Gilberto Noll, *Bandoleiros in Romances e Contos Reunidos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) p. 244.

In fact, the representation of women through phallogentric values seems to be one of the central themes developed in *Bandoleiros*. Narrated by a male protagonist, this novel contains a large number of female characters. These characters, however, seem to reproduce uncritically, but not without psychological conflict and physical violence, the same phallogentric values which pervade their milieu. The authoritarian position assumed by Ada and her friends in their defence of the Minimal Society project seems to illustrate how the female characters in *Bandoleiros* are caught in the reproduction of phallogentric representational models without engaging in a critique of the cultural norms sustaining the disadvantaged position of women in society. Promulgating segregation according to the gender or sexual choice of its members ('[s]ó na Califórnia temos setecentos e dezesseis núcleos mínimos gays',⁶ explains Mary), the Minimal Society project seems to reflect the contemporary 'fraccionamiento articulado del mundo, que [reordena] las diferencias y las desigualdades sin suprimirlas',⁷ reinforcing and even institutionalising the already discriminatory norms of a sexist, male and heterosexual oriented society which isolates the 'different' (woman, blacks, homosexuals, Third-World citizens, etc.) in order to initially discriminate against them before promoting their (disguised) oppression.⁸

The structural models imposed by the Minimal Society project appear to relate unfailingly to the phallogentric and authoritarian socio-cultural practices of Western societies, which constrain the voice of the socially oppressed in order to articulate – albeit in innovative language – their personal experiences of coercion. In the specific case of women, Ada and her female companions appear to be constantly denied the right to articulate their position as women within the broader context of the Minimal Society project. The phallogentric, misogynist and coercive values of the project are introjected by its female followers, who develop contradictory feelings towards each

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁷ Néstor García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada* (Buenos Aires, Barcelona, Mexico: Paidós, 1999) p. 49.

⁸ Once segregated by their differences as determined by a male and heterosexual normativeness, homosexuals and women are further divided into small communities, like the one consisting of Ada and her friends, in relation to their function within the Minimal Society project and in accordance with the socio-economic background of its members. Ada's small Minimal Society group, for example, not only consists of women per se but also includes Third-World female intellectuals. And despite living in the United States, Ada and the other members of her group do not seem to share their lives with any other North American members of the Minimal Society project.

other in the narrative. In one instance, Ada's closest friend, Alicia, in totally unexpected circumstances, attacks and tries to kill Ada by asphyxiation:

Alicia tinha enfiado um saco de plástico na cabeça de Ada. Ada acordou sufocada. Não conseguia atinar com o que estava acontecendo... Ada conta que sem ar levou as mãos ao rosto... Alicia estava pronta para desferir uma tesoura no rosto de Ada... De um golpe Ada virou-se, dobrou a perna e arremeteu um violento pontapé na cabeça de Alicia... Ada conta que com o pontapé e o choque na parede Alicia sofreu um acidente cerebral irreversível. Não acordou mais. Diz que vive o tempo todo na inércia em cima da cama.⁹

In this context where both characters involved in the violent scene are women, there seems to be a ferocious, although suppressed, atmosphere of personal conflict which finally erupts into a murder attempt. Assuming and replicating the same degree of violence imposed on them by a patriarchal society, these women are separated by misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Ada cannot come to terms with the violence committed against her by her best friend while Alicia, who has tried to kill Ada, ends up 'incarcerated' in a coma, something that replicates the 'fate of women' whose death or social seclusion is perpetuated in the Western literary tradition, as argued above by Lucia Vianna. What is more, Alicia's unexpected murderous behaviour emerges as a symptom symbolising her own social condition as a woman who, repressed or 'asphyxiated' by male-centred domination, is unable to express her female identity. While Alicia is condemned to 'live' in an irreversible coma, Ada returns to Brazil in an emotionally disrupted state, 'espantosamente magra e branca. Não falava, seus olhos parados'.¹⁰

Later in the narrative, Ada comes to realise that violence is the natural condition of those women who, like herself and Alicia, do not find an authentic form of subjective expression that may enable women to explore and articulate their own feelings and experiences in the established social discourses of male-centred societies. It is only

⁹ Noll, *Bandoleiros*, *op. cit.*, p. 263/4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

through a literary novel entitled ‘Steps of the Horror’, written by an Irish female author, where Ada discovers a point of reference for her own experience as a woman. The novel’s title seems to refer to the symbolic violence experienced by the author herself, who is unable to find a discursive model through which to express her subjective (female) experience in a positive light.¹¹ ‘Steps of the Horror’ ends at the very moment when its author is asphyxiated by her own search for the right words to liberate herself from the imposition of a phallogocentric language:

Ada encontrou a página que procurava. Diz que nesse ponto o romance passa a ser qualquer coisa que não ele. O primeiro livro onde vê isso. Nesse ponto a irlandesa cansa de seu engenho narrativo e simplesmente muda de assunto. Cai num completo descontrole. Parece que de repente a irlandesa resolveu ficar histérica, e aí bai-bai à história que vinha contando até aqui. Parece que é outra pobre mulher a entrar em colapso... Pergunto a Ada o que acontece no fim. Ada, exaltada de horror, conta que a irlandesa começa a sentir que lhe falta ar e que não agüentará até a última palavra. Sim mas como termina? pergunto. Ada responde que nas três últimas linhas do livro a irlandesa vai contando que lhe falta ar, cada vez mais ar, ainda pede socorro ao leitor. Mas ninguém responde. E o livro acaba na palavra ar.¹²

The experience of the Irish author’s asphyxiation is similar to that of Ada: both are victims of violence against women, a violence experienced at a symbolic and physical level. Like the Irish author who dies in her attempt to utter the words that might enable her to disclose her feminine experience outside the constraints of male

¹¹ When comparing the *bildungsroman* – the ‘novel of formation’ which traces the moral, psychological, and social development of the fictional protagonist through the different stages of his/her life – written by a male or female author, Cristina Ferreira Pinto comes to the conclusion that male authors have generally portrayed their male protagonists in a positive light, which is mostly in balance with their social environment, while the female protagonist in novels written by women are always doomed to psychological and existential crisis – ‘unadjusted’ beings whose life experiences are incompatible with their phallogocentric milieu: ‘[o] ‘romance de aprendizagem’ feminino distancia-se do modelo masculino principalmente quanto ao desfecho da narrativa. Enquanto em *bildungsroman* masculinos – mesmo em exemplos modernos – o protagonista alcança a integração social e um certo nível de coerência, o final da narrativa feminina resulta sempre no fracasso ou, quando muito, em um sentido de coerência pessoal que se torna possível somente com a *não* integração do personagem ao seu grupo social’. Cristina Ferreira Pinto, *O Bildungsroman Feminino: quatro exemplos brasileiros* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1990) p. 27.

¹² Noll, *Bandoleiros, op. cit.*, p. 267/8.

symbolic dominance, Ada also expresses the desire to overcome the silence ‘imposed’ on her in order to occupy the ‘creative’ function arrogated to the male writer-narrator of *Bandoleiros*: ‘Digo então a Ada que vou escrever noite adentro... Ada responde que me inveja, que seu problema é não conseguir criar’.¹³ In the final stages of the novel, Ada seems to recognise the existence of a social order which reserves the function of ‘creator’ for men, while women are compelled to become men’s ‘creation’, represented for and by a masculine authority.¹⁴

Later in this chapter, I will return to an analysis of how some of Noll’s female characters appear to be engaged in the search for a discursive practice outside the phallogentric models perpetuated by language. However, at this point I shall continue to discuss the symbolic representation of women and, more specifically, feminine sexuality as it has become associated in Western societies with personal abstinence and physical pain.

2.2 The representation of female sexuality in Noll’s work

The ambivalent feelings experienced by women in a social environment dictated by patriarchal values is the main subject explored in ‘Pretinha fumegando’. In this short story, one of the few works in which Noll’s reader is presented with a female narrator-protagonist, we have the account of an unnamed woman whose role models are marked by internal conflict. She is caught in the dilemma of either accepting the model of female ‘sexual’ identity prescribed by a phallogentric society or revolting against it by challenging the submissive role prescribed to women as agents of their own pleasure. In the first moment of the story, the narrator clearly displays her ambivalent feelings towards her partner Eduardo. Polarities such as love and hate,

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

¹⁴ As Jean Franco argues, the roles of ‘authorship’, as ascribed to men, and of the ‘represented’, as attached to women in the Western literary tradition, are a reflection of the social discrimination between different genders, relegating women to a muted status: ‘the differentiation between male authorship and female reproduction... [is] a socially constructed position; [a situation to be reversed only when] women... take the production of meaning into their own hands’. Jean Franco, “Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power and the Third-World Intelligentsia,” *Colonial Discourse and Post-*

disagreement and acceptance seem to coexist in their relationship as a factor of attraction:

[Eduardo] sabe que eu o espero aflita a cada novo encontro e remexo os meus guardados para ver se tem algum brinco, algum colar esquecido, porque sabe disso tudo ele como que *me odeia para me satisfazer*. Eu não entendo do que estou dizendo, mas sei que entre a gente tudo se passa assim, *uma espécie de crueldade que me elimina e me renova* tanto que a cada dia eu fico mais parecida com o que ele gosta de mim [my italics].¹⁵

As the passage seems to suggest, the narrator's main concern is to please her lover. Her attempt to recover 'forgotten' feminine ornaments such as earrings and necklaces symbolises a tacit acceptance of the re-enactment of the female role specified by a male-dominated society in which women are supposed to be 'attractive' for their possessors: to thereby exist only in order to please their owners. This acceptance, however, is not performed uncritically by the narrator. She understands that, in order to become the ideal woman for Eduardo, she needs to consent to his cruelty. This entails the need to sacrifice her own self in order to be transformed into what he wants her to be. What is more, in describing their sexual relationship, the narrator renounces her body as a source of sexual gratification: the only way for her to achieve pleasure is by negating her own sexual feelings, surrendering the autonomy of her body and offering it to another. Annihilating her own position as a 'subject who desires', she wants to become a 'desirable woman' for her lover, thereby corroborating the male image of women as sexual objects. The aim of 'pleasing' rather than 'being pleased' by her lover is clearly stated by the narrator, who comments on her alienating desire to become 'another' – in this case the prostitute – with whom Eduardo had his first sexual experience:

Toda vez que eu faço amor com ele me lembro dessa puta e me pergunto como é que ela fez com ele, será que sentou em cima, será

Colonial Theory, edited with an introduction by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p. 361.

¹⁵ Noll, "Pretinha fumegando," *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 716.

que passou a língua e mordeu? Numa dessas noites em que a cama rangia feito uma desesperada eu me lembrei de novo dessa puta e acabei mordendo meu próprio lábio, sangrou mas ele nem reparou... eu queria adivinhar se ele sonha comigo ou com essa puta vagabunda que deve ter passado a língua sim, que deve ter sentado em cima feito uma cadela, que deve ter se rasgado toda que nem um trapo velho.¹⁶

The image of a whore, as expressed by the narrator, is given non-human associations, either through the comparison of the prostitute to an animal, ‘uma cadela’ (a bitch), or by her position as a degraded object, ‘um trapo velho’ (an old rag). However, despite these negative associations, the narrator as ‘whore’ nevertheless embodies a role model which guarantees a desirable sexual performance. By seeking to ‘become’ a prostitute for Eduardo, the ‘pretinha’ not only annihilates her own self but openly acknowledges her submissive position in relation to her lover.

Another role model for the narrator-protagonist is her former employer Madame Nicole, about whom the narrator expresses admiration. In contrast to the subservience associated with the role of the prostitute, Madame Nicole is recognised by the narrator as an autonomous female, a woman who sees her sexuality as a source of genuine pleasure. Rather than trying to please a man, Madame Nicole emerges as a woman determined to please herself: ‘Madame Nicole não passava de uma patroa como qualquer outra, era tão suficiente que sabia se masturbar de porta aberta’.¹⁷ Caught between the opposing female models of Madame Nicole (the mistress dedicated to her own sexual pleasure) and the prostitute (the servant whose role is to offer sexual pleasure to others), the narrator-protagonist is unable to establish a coherent female identity of her own.

In the development of the story, the narrator begins to reflect upon her potential to live her identity as a woman outside the masculine models she has tried conflictingly to fulfil in order to become a ‘desirable’ woman: ‘Sou eu que começo a pensar em mim como *uma coisa que podia ser. Sou eu e ninguém mais e isso arrepiava. Vai eu falar dessas coisas pra ele que ele é capaz de me ofender porque não entende que eu*

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 715.

queira mais do que ele' [my italics].¹⁸ The narrator refers to herself not as 'alguém' (someone), a human being who is authorised to decide about her own life, but as 'uma coisa' (something), a passive and inanimate object to be manipulated by its owner. Reflecting upon her situation, she arrives at the disturbing conclusion that the possibility might exist for her to become an independent 'being' and thereby to establish her female identity by means other than her submissive identification with the fantasies of her partner. But Eduardo, from the perspective of the narrator, appears unable to understand or even to entertain the possibility of a woman becoming unshackled from his masculine projections or being freed from her acquiescence to male domination.

At the end of the narrative, the protagonist decides to confront the authority of Eduardo by 'pretending' to exercise her right to decline his sexual proposal: 'E não é que é ele, agora?... mas hoje eu vou me fazer de bacana, dizer que eu estou cansada, que eu não quero, hoje não, amanhã quem sabe'.¹⁹ The decision to defy Eduardo's authority over her body changes at the very moment when the 'pretinha' realises Eduardo's vulnerability and despair, as revealed in his emotional outburst. Eduardo's sensitivity is immediately associated by the narrator with the image of a woman:

Mas aí vem ele, mas meu Deus do céu ele vem chorando eu nunca vi, que que houve bem, chorando assim por quê? E não é que é ele mesmo chorando feito uma mulher pobre coitada, eu nunca vi um homem chorando assim, chora aqui benzinho... conta tudo tudinho pra *tua* neguinha do coração, ela não é a *tua* neguinha do coração?, que que houve, não esconde de mim, ela te quer bem, vai te fazer um café quentinho, bem quentinho, fumegando.. olha aqui a *tua* pretinha, ela é só *tua* e está fumegando [my italics].²⁰

The narrator conforms to those sexist norms in society which dictate how a man or a woman should be or act, categorising Eduardo's emotional behaviour in gendered terms, so therefore a 'poor wretched woman'. For her, Eduardo's emotional outburst

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.717.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.718.

²⁰ *Loc. cit.*

contradicts his position as a male, typified by concepts of impassivity, physical strength and domination. Unexpectedly faced with Eduardo's tearful state, the narrator tries to comfort her lover by reassuring him of his position as the owner of her body. The emphatic use of the possessive pronoun 'yours' (Eduardo's) when referring to herself reinforces the narrator's submissive position as an object whose sole function is to serve her master. In the conclusion of the story, the narrator offers a cup of coffee to Eduardo in a metaphorical allusion to her own body: the 'dark' coffee and her 'dark' body are conflated as offerings for Eduardo's pleasure. The story's title 'Pretinha fumegando' (steaming hot dark girl) furthermore defines the narrator's role as that of a sexual object – a dark and hot, sexually pleasing woman, to be consumed like coffee by her male partner.²¹

Female sexuality in Noll's work is not exclusively represented in terms of subjective annihilation or submission to male desire. In fact, as we can observe in several of Noll's narratives, women's sexuality appears intrinsically associated with acts of corporeal violence and physical pain. As has been formulated by many feminist theoreticians, the distinctiveness of the penis and the vagina is not only as a mark of anatomical difference between the sexes: above all, they denote the hierarchical relations between man and woman, who are expected to perform unequal social functions in their different roles in society. Since the advent of psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth-century, much emphasis has been given to the symbolic privilege ascribed to the male sexual organ, which is identified as a reference point for social power and cultural domination. As Hélène Cixous comments:

²¹ This final scene adds a further, racial dimension to the oppression experienced by the protagonist. The image of 'hot, black coffee' identifies the protagonist, as a dark-skinned woman, with the stereotype of exotic sensuality, making her 'desirable' to the male protagonist as an object of sexual desire or, failing this, in the role of 'caretaker'. As Angela and Onik'a Gilliam have observed when analysing the identity attribute to dark-skinned women in Brazilian society, 'Brazilian women's lives will encompass more than one representation as they move from being sexualized, objectified mulatas in their youth to being caretaking, desexualized, nurturing black women as they age'. Angela Onik'a and Onik'a Gilliam "Odyssey: Negotiating the Subjectivity of Mulata Identity in Brazil," *Latin American Perspectives* 26:3 (1999) p. 64. For other discussions of the racial prejudice experienced by dark-skinned women as sexual objects, see Gislene Aparecida dos Santos, *Mulher Negra, Homem Branco: Um Breve Estudo do Feminino Negro* (Rio de Janeiro: Pallas Editora, 2004); Marco Frenette, *Preto e Branco: A Importância da Cor da Pele* (São Paulo: Publisher Brasil, 2001); and Teófilo de Queiroz Júnior, *Preconceito de Cor e a Mulata na Literatura Brasileira* (São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1975).

the stratagem and violence of masculine economy consists in making sexual difference hierarchical by valorizing one of the terms of the relationship, by reaffirming what Freud calls *phallic primacy*. And the 'difference' is always perceived and carried out as an opposition. Masculinity/femininity are opposed in such a way that it is male privilege that is affirmed.²²

The images and functions associated with the male and female sexual organs transcend the biological to become ingrained in the more symbolic aspects of culture, as in their representation in language. In his analysis of sexual behaviour and gender relations in Brazil, Richard Parker interestingly illustrates how Brazilians elaborate a very complex semantic structure to designate different states of mind and/or feelings associated with the penis and the vagina. Analysing words used in colloquial language which are directly connected to male and female sexual organs, Parker observes that words used in association with the penis are intrinsically linked to names for weapons or other threatening objects and/or animals, clearly denoting the imposition of power by the use of violence and aggression.²³ The female sex organ, by the same token, is associated with expressions denoting a sense of danger, albeit distinct from those associated with the penis. The characterisation of the vagina is rather that of ominous, mysterious danger connected to images of darkness, confinement and involuntary absorption. Furthermore, as Parker indicates, the vagina is usually associated with images of fluid dirtiness intertwined with the notion of mistrust in so far as the female sexual organ represents a danger to women themselves who live with the imminent risk of being ravished by male 'weaponry':

²² Hélène Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays," *The Newly Born Woman*, translation by Betsy Wing and introduction by Sandra M. Gilbert (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) p. 80.

²³ As Parker observes, '[a]mong the most consistently cited terms for the penis, for example, are expressions such as *pau* (stick), *caralho* (small stick), *madeira* (wood), *cacete* (club, cudgel), *pica* (prick, from *picar*, to prick or pierce), *mastro* (mast or staff), *vara* (pole, shaft, stick), *arma* (weapon), *faca* (knife), *ferro* (iron, iron tool, iron weapon), *bicho* (animal), and *cobra* (snake). While this brief list by no means exhausts the available vocabulary, the pattern that it establishes is clear: drawing on the observed, physical qualities of the penis, virtually all of these expressions describe an elongated object, phallic in the most obvious sense. But they do much more than this, as well, for they place emphasis on the potentially active quality of the phallus – on its aggressive quality, on its potency not merely as a sexual organ, but, in the language of metaphor, as a tool to be wielded, as a kind of weapon intimately linked to both violence and violation'. Richard Parker, *Bodies, Pleasures, and Passions: Sexual Culture in Contemporary Brazil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) p. 36.

[w]hile the male is characterized by his possession of a potential weapon, the female is characterized in terms of the fissure between her legs – the mysterious entrance that somehow defines her entire being. For both male and female informants, however, it would seem that in the darkness and obscurity of this emotionally charged image, mystery itself gives way to a sense of danger... Linked to the waste products of the body, to urine and to the flow of menstrual blood, the vagina thus becomes a focal point for notions of impurity in Brazilian life. As is so often the case cross-culturally, it comes to stand for uncleanness, pollution, and contamination. And, by extension, these negative images are associated with the most deeply rooted understandings of women and femininity in Brazilian culture.²⁴

The differing representations of the penis and the vagina have both been themes in some of Noll's short stories and novels. Rather than a source of pleasure, feminine sexuality is represented in many of Noll's works as a form of personal affliction which condemns women to experience life through suffering and pain, no matter what decisions they are condemned to make from the limited choice available to them. In 'A virgem dos espinhos', for instance, the reader follows the narrative of a female protagonist whose body appears to be completely controlled by the male characters of the story. In the first part of the text the 'virgem' describes her physical and psychological incapacity to decide about the use of her own body, which is sexually handled by her colleague Sabóia:

e ele abriu o fecho da minha saia e tudo escuro me jogou no sofá e foi por cima de mim e acho que ele já tava pelado e de repente começa a empurrar uma coisa pela minha boca adentro, e a luz voltou aí, e eu com aquilo enfiado na minha boca, me engasgando e ele empurrando, empurrando até que uma coisa quente bateu na minha garganta e ele tirou a coisa dele da minha boca e se atirou pro lado.²⁵

Unable to defend herself against the sexual harassment of her partner, the narrator cannot prevent her body from being violently manipulated. The violence of the scene

²⁴ Parker, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

²⁵ Noll, "A virgem dos espinhos," *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 711.

is characterised by the impassive behaviour of the virgin, who does not know how to react in the face of her rape in the ‘darkness of an apartment’, a possible allusion to her attitude towards her sexual organ and/or her sexual desires, which are experienced as a fear she cannot control or understand.²⁶ The penis becomes a *coisa*, something that is unable to be visually perceived (the action occurs in the darkness) and which therefore cannot be properly named. More than a sexual organ, the penis becomes the nameless instrument or ‘weapon’ which imposes masculine violence upon women. The passage furthermore suggests that it is through male aggression rather than pleasure where the narrator is allowed to experience her sexuality. Her body is transformed from an active medium through which she is capable of ‘offering’ her pleasure into a passive object, ‘an offer’ to be (ab)used by men.

In the second half and conclusion of the story, the narrator is again subjected to male violence, committed this time by her brother. In a different context from that at the beginning of the story, but still connected to her sexuality, her brother threatens the narrator with a gun in an attempt to impose his control over her body. Contrary to the previous scene which had taken place in darkness and had prevented the narrator from perceiving how her body was sexually manipulated by Sabóia, the words and actions performed by her brother are accentuated through his claim to be ‘heard’ and ‘seen’ by his sister. Assuming complete control over her body, the narrator’s brother explicitly threatens to harm her if she does not submit herself ‘voluntarily’ to his male authority by accepting his command to keep her virginity ‘intact’ – as if the fate of her body could be decided by the ‘virgem’ herself:

e agora você está me ouvindo me vendo, me ouvindo me vendo bem de perto, o irmão que lhe quer todo o bem, lhe pedindo que jure, que jure que você se conservará uma Virgem Maria... o cano da arma contra os lábios dela, esmagados e sangrados já os dois lábios perdiam a força e queriam se render enquanto o irmão urrava jura jura, a língua dela já no cano morno. E quando o irmão apertou até uma dor de insuportável náusea a mão com que ela segurava o revólver ela sentiu aquele

²⁶ Hélène Cixous has characterised this conflictual relation to the body, commenting that a woman is not permitted to ‘live in her ‘own’ house, her very body [which is experienced by her as] the dark region... [women] have internalized this fear of the dark’. Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

mesmo gosto quente da noite no apartamento do Sabóia estilhaçar lá por dentro da garganta e aí, com os dois restos da voz ela gemeu esganiçada eu juro.²⁷

For the narrator, then, there is no escape from male authority. Either silenced by the penis or muted by the gun barrel inserted into her mouth, both objects represent phallic power in the narrative and the virgin cannot act in her own defence: there is no way for her to state her position or have her voice heard. Her body is experienced not as a source of pleasure or subjective expression but as a place of social confinement by the ‘painful recognition that her body is not hers to control, that it is there for others [men] to handle. If that handling is physically invasive, it is also culturally pervasive’.²⁸ Her murder at the end of the story seems to suggest a symbolic extermination of female subjectivity in which women are physically and psychologically dispossessed of what is mostly intrinsically related to their existence as beings: their own body.

If the male sexual organ appears to be metaphorically linked to the imposition of authority and power as suggested in the analysis of ‘A virgem dos espinhos’, the female vagina becomes associated in Noll’s narrative with images of burning and bleeding wounds or dry and aching scars, as if constantly reminding the reader of the symbolic violence to which women have been submitted in a patriarchal society. The experience of the body as a source of pain appears to be one of the main attributes of feminine identity in Noll’s work. In *A Céu Aberto*, for instance, the narrator describes his encounter with a young girl who seems to be at ease with the marks of violence imprinted on her body, as if prepared from childhood to assume the victimised role reserved for women in a world dominated by male rules:

vi uma menina pouca em anos a brincar com um gato... e a menina mostrou seus braços e mãos muito lanhados pelas unhas do gato, e ela a me sorrir altiva como se estivesse exibindo seus troféus...
- Não dói? – perguntei mirando os arranhões frescos da menina.

²⁷ Noll, “A virgem dos espinhos,” *op. cit.*, p. 713/4.

²⁸ Sidonie Smith, “Identity’s Body,” *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, edited by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters (Boston: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) p. 275.

- Eu não me importo – respondeu ela cerrando os olhos como de tontura.²⁹

The game with the male cat and the injuries resulting from the scratches of the animal could be interpreted as the girl's preparation for assuming her future position as a woman in society. The successful attainment of her female identity is dependent upon the girl's capacity to tolerate her own pain; to 'close her eyes' to the injuries caused on her body and to learn how to dissimulate her own suffering by pretending to find happiness in the hostile environment which perpetuates her discomfort.

In the short story 'Encontro no quarto escuro', the narrator describes a sexual encounter with a man through references of images of darkness and physical pain: 'E no quarto trancado nós dois *na mais completa escuridão...* quero agora descansar no teu peito... porque agora *a ardência* já acabou' [my italics].³⁰ As in the case of 'A virgem dos espinhos', the dark room appears as an allusion to feminine sexuality populated by repressed desires and feelings of insecurity, mystery, danger and fear: a place where things cannot be properly seen, understood or clearly represented. Furthermore, the dark room appears to be associated with the image of a womb: the identification of female sexuality is seen exclusively in terms of its biological, reproductive function rather than a source of pleasure. This corroborates Luce Irigaray's proposition that 'in the absence of valid representations of female sexuality, this womb merges with woman's sex as a whole'.³¹ The connection between feminine sexuality and physical pain is further perpetuated in the narrative by spontaneous associations which occur to the protagonist during her stay in the dark room soon after sexual intercourse. The presence of her lover does not prevent the narrator from

²⁹ Noll, *A Céu Aberto* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 621/2.

³⁰ Noll, "Encontro no quarto escuro," *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 719.

³¹ Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," *The Irigaray Reader*, edited and with an introduction by Margaret Whitford (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) p. 41. The dark room appears again in *a Fúria do Corpo* as a metaphor for the reduction of female sexuality to the function of reproduction. In his dreams the male narrator associates his lover, Afrodite, with the image of his own mother and connected to functions of maternity. Mother and lover are further confused in images of dark cavities: 'Ali, naquele quarto todo escuro, com os soluços da minha mãe chegando agora em intervalos cada vez mais espaçados, ali naquele quarto todo escuro sonhei tendo a mão sobre o ventre tímido da gata: contei, sete gatinhos; sonhei que Afrodite sempre existira aquém ou além da minha vida... o pequeno corpo em arco olhava lá pra dentro do poço escuro e fundo... Afrodite já sabia umedecer-se ali, assim, meus dedos se lambuzando no úmido entre aquela penugem veludo sim, veludo, dourado, assim, meus dedos passavam pra lá pra cá, arredavam o fundo molhado da calcinha,

connecting her sexual experience with an earlier occurrence of imprisonment and torture: ‘Lembrei-me abruptamente de que eu tinha sido presa em 1970 e que eu estivera por um fio da morte. Apalpei a minha cicatriz e senti que eu desejava o homem... Eu me senti ferida... Este homem aqui que eu desejo não sabe que eu sofro... Passo a mão pela vagina e sinto arder’.³² It could be questioned whether her sexuality as alluded to in terms of a scar, and a wound could possibly refer, beyond her contemporary experience as a woman, to a more ancient discrimination against women perpetuated in each new generation, as I shall argue in the next section of this chapter.

2.3 The representation of women in the Judaeo-Christian tradition

As I have indicated, the sexual experiences that Noll’s female characters undergo are permeated by feelings of guilt and punishment. Their sensual excitement, as pointed out in the analysis of ‘Encontro no quarto escuro’, is a conjunction of conflictual feelings coterminous with images of violence and physical punishment, as if women were prevented from fully experiencing their bodies as a source of pleasure. Violence and corporeal injury are, for instance, the main signifiers connected to female characters in *Harmada*. The experience undergone by the character Amanda when she is caressed by the hands of the narrator-protagonist illustrates the conflicting aspects of female sexuality in which the arousal of sexual pleasure becomes associated with images of physical invasion, wounds and scars:

Passo lentamente o dedo indicador pela cicatriz rosada de Amanda. Ela diz que é bom o que está a sentir com o meu dedo passando com aquela suavidade pela sua cicatriz. Fala que se excita pouco a pouco com o meu dedo passando por um lugar do seu corpo onde há pouco houve um corte aberto, deixando as vísceras à mostra, um corte por onde passou uma criança.

entravam pelos interiores, bom o suor do meu corpo todo, bom o tremor, Afrodite e o vento lá pro fundo escuro do poço’. Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

³² Noll, “Encontro no quarto escuro,” *op. cit.*, p. 720.

- Eu sentia uma dor, dor fininha, não estava sob anestesia geral, olha, vê como já fiquei molhadinha de tanto que é bom este teu dedo passando pela minha cicatriz, vê!³³

Interpreting the passage in the light of the book of Genesis, we could observe how it displays the same signifiers of divine blame and subsequent punishment of women as expressed through the Judaeo-Christian scriptures of the Old Testament. The narrator's index finger (*dedo indicador*), which touches the scar in Amanda's genital area, might be associated with the image of God pointing at Eve's sexual organ and accusing her for the fall of human kind. Amanda's scar would then be equivalent to the vagina as a corporal mark of God's wrath: her sex is a constant reminder of Eve's celestial curse. The passage furthermore conveys a state of complete passivity on the part of Amanda, who offers no resistance to the narrator's finger touching her body. What is initially experienced as sexual pleasure soon becomes confused with motherhood and the pain of bearing children.

The persecutory representation of women's sexuality in the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the subject of discussion for a number of contemporary feminist writers. Leigh Gilmore interprets the misogynistic character of the biblical account of Genesis as a justification of the physical and moral subjection of women to men. As the critic observes, contrary to the birth of Adam, who was directly created by God from the dust of a 'virgin paradise', Eve's birth takes place through an act of injury inflicted upon Adam's body. The wounding through which Eve is brought into existence is connected with humanity's primordial experience of physical pain: 'God performs the first surgery and extracts a rib from the man to serve as the foundation for a rather peculiar birthing fable that links woman with wound. He opens man's body and from man's own flesh revises natural reproduction to make the man the 'mother' of the woman'.³⁴ The biblical narrative of the creation of humanity proceeds to further denigrate the image of women. Disrespecting the commandments of God, himself addressed in the masculine gender, Eve is tempted to consume the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge in order to gain access to the knowledge of her (masculine

³³ Noll, *Harmada in Romances e Contos Reunidos*, op. cit., p. 508.

³⁴ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994) p. 167.

gendered) God. What she discovers after transgressing the commandment of God is her own body and its sexuality. Her transgression, which is subsequently followed by Adam, leads to the expulsion of both man and woman from paradise and the sentence upon humanity to live in sin. As Gilmore suggests: '[w]oman pays for her [Eve's] transgression... female desire is a primal loss; it is what is one's own, though forever out of reach, its absence mourned, its presence a punishment'.³⁵

In a further punishment for Eve's guilt and as a consequence of their (transgressive) sexual discovery, women were cursed by God to suffer from the physical affliction of childbearing and were required to submit to the command of their husband: 'Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee'.³⁶ This Judaeo-Christian account of the origin of humanity has been discussed extensively by feminist scholars and identified as one of the central religious tracts which validate gender oppression of women by men. What is more, the book of Genesis reduces female existence to an irredeemable culpability which denies women the right to physical pleasure such as sexual gratification. In accordance with this biblical account, women do not only have to recognise but also to accept the annihilation of their own will and pleasure either by subjugating their bodies to fulfilment of the biological function of maternity or by transforming them into passive recipients which exist solely to satisfy the desire of men. As Luce Irigaray has noted, 'man [is] the sole subject exercising his desire and his appetite upon the woman who is deprived of subjectivity except to seduce him. So the woman's pleasure is alienated to that of the man, according to the most traditional of scenarios of temptation and fall'.³⁷

The oppressed condition of women and its relation to biblical narratives appears again at a later stage in *Harmada*, although this time in a more defiant context. During her first, acclaimed theatre performance, the character Cris appears to confront the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.171.

³⁶ Genesis, 3:16.

³⁷ Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," *The Irigaray Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

Judaeo-Christian tradition of ‘punishment’ assigned to the female body by challenging the authority of God:

Cris abre os braços em cruz e continua a sua fala do ponto onde parou, Cris vai, não pára, no momento preciso joga-se no chão estremunhada, machuca-se, eu noto, se esfolo no joelho, o sangue mancha o vestido... Cris arqueja a sua fala, às vezes um soluço, diz que não agüenta mais viver em estado emergencial, o que ela quer agora é entrar no rio, talvez morrer, nem sabe, mas entrar no rio... este senhor gelado, convenhamos, a quem ela agora se entregará qual espiã de uma outra sorte...O público ovaciona na noite de estréia. Cris, só isto. Cris, sem sobrenome nem nada, Cris torna-se uma estrela do teatro de Harmada.³⁸

The bleeding wound, which occurred as a consequence of Cris’s fall, might suggest a textual allusion to Eve’s spiritual fall and the price that women are condemned to pay for their weakness. However, contrary to Eve who acknowledges her fall and tacitly accepts the punishment prescribed by the male gendered God, Cris decides to confront God himself who appears metaphorically in the narrative as the image of a river, a ‘senhor gelado’ (frozen Lord).³⁹ The confrontation with the almighty power of a male God appears to be an attempt to take the initiative in withstanding the supremacy of masculine values which has been imposed on women throughout the centuries.

³⁸ Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 543.

³⁹ In biblical literature, God’s omnipotence and existence are very often illustrated in a comparison to rivers. His wrath is manifested by the transformation of water into blood in order to punish the Egyptians for their persecusion of the Jews ‘Thus saith the LORD, In this thou shalt know that I am the LORD: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood’ (Exodus, 7:17); His benevolence is shown through the abundance of water which makes the earth fertile with rivers ‘Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it: thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water: thou preparest them corn, when thou hast so provided for it’ (Psalm 65:9); His supreme power compared to the force of the river which shapes the landscape ‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will’ (Proverbs, 21:1); His power to decide over the fate of man compared to the stream of a river ‘But there the glorious LORD will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us’ (Isahiah, 33:21; 33:22); the recognition of His son metaphorized by the flow of a river ‘Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water’ (John, 7:38; 7:39), and the mystery of his existence revealed after the jugding day as river of clear water ‘And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb’ (Revelation, 22:1).

Cris's performance seems to endorse the necessity for both men and women to revise the iniquitous gender segregation which permeates almost all aspects of social and cultural life. Her decision to submerge herself in the river can be associated with the Christian ritual of baptism which is likened to death (going under the water) and resurrection (rising up) for the remission of sins.⁴⁰ After her immersion into the river, Cris wants to re-emerge into a new world in which the original sin committed by Eve would be forgiven, resulting in a female sexuality that would no longer be trapped in a form of subjective imprisonment. This transition from subjection to a male order to the freedom of experiencing her female subjectivity is suggested by Cris's performance in which she makes a speech with open arms in a possible reference to the image of the crucified Christ. In a similar way to Christ, who is condemned to carry the means of his own death: the cross, Cris is destined to carry the burden of a socio-cultural system in her female body which stigmatises women. However, despite the repeated falls they experience while carrying the heavy weight of their crosses, symbolic and real, both Cris and Christ show the endurance of their own body, raising themselves up after each new fall during their journey. The association between Cris and Christ (*Cristo*) appears to be secured at the end of the passage by the anagram in the sentences '*Cris, só isto*' and '*Cris torna-se*'. While Christ overcomes the death imposed by his persecutors through physical resurrection, Cris wants to be reborn into a world in which her material body would no longer be categorised in terms of gender oppression.

Contrary to the openly misogynist narratives of the Old Testament such as Genesis, the scriptures of the New Testament have been suggested by some feminist critics to engender a more positive, if not innovative, image of women in religion. In the interpretation of the New Testament proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Christianity presents an alternative to the patriarchal tradition of Judaism. According to Fiorenza, one of the principal aspects of the Christian faith is the abolition of any form of discrimination between human beings since separation results in oppression: 'within the Christian community no structures of dominance can be tolerated... in the

⁴⁰ The ritual of baptism is one of the most important ceremonies in the Christian tradition. It marks the access of the subject into the Christian religion by the re-enacting of Christ's own death and

Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant'.⁴¹ It is only in the later development of Christianity that Fiorenza identifies the 'patriarchalization process [which became] theologically legitimated [by] the formulation of the canon'.⁴² In her analysis of the literature produced by women during the Middle Ages, Sarah Beckwith argues that it was only through impersonating Christ's suffering that women in the Middle Ages were allowed to express themselves publicly and thereby articulate their own oppressive social position at the same time: '[i]n a society which prohibited women from writing and preaching... it was only the direct word of God and Christ, prophetically authorized, that could make a woman's words worth the listening or transcribing'.⁴³ The pictorial representation of Christ as an androgynous individual characterised by certain feminine attributes such as long hair, refined facial expression and a glabrous body has been also explored by some feminist theoreticians who highlight the corresponding physical parameters shared by Christ and women. Luce Irigaray for example describes Christ as 'the most female of men'.⁴⁴ For Irigaray, the common iconographic representation of Christ in his undressed and crucified body exposing bleeding wounds becomes a genuine source of feminine identification:

[women] never ceases to look upon his nakedness, open for all to see, upon the gashes in his virgin flesh, at the wounds from the nails that pierce his body as he hangs there, in his passion and abandonment... In his crucification he opens up a path of redemption to her in her fallen state.⁴⁵

Christianity is also one of the central allusions in *A Fúria do Corpo*. As Silviano Santiago argues, '*A Fúria do Corpo* é um romance cristão. Diremos melhor: é um

resurrection: 'Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life' (Romans 6:5).

⁴¹ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1992) p. 213. Fiorenza establishes her conclusions from the words of the apostle Paul though affirming that '[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

⁴² Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁴³ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: identity, culture and society in late medieval writings* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) p. 80.

⁴⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Publishing, 1985) p. 199.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 199/200.

romance de convertido'.⁴⁶ The term 'novel of the converted' employed by Santiago does not propose that *A Fúria do Corpo* is a typical religious tale which portrays a protagonist who decides to abandon his former beliefs in order to embrace Christianity as his new faith. It rather suggests that the novel promotes an 'inversion' of the biblical narratives devoted to the life of Christ. Contrary to the narratives of the Gospels which present the biography of Christ from the different perspectives of specified authors (Mark, Mathew, Luke, and John), *A Fúria do Corpo* is the account of an anonymous narrator who offers his 'unauthorised' version of Christ's life in the contemporary setting of the city of Rio de Janeiro: a city iconographically represented by its famous monument of Christ the Redeemer. In its structure, *A Fúria do Corpo* reverses the temporal order of the narratives in the New Testament. It begins by referring to the last scripture of the Bible, The Book of Revelation, when Christ descends to earth on the last day of the world, and then moves back in time through biblical analogies such as Christ's crucifixion and resurrection until the very moment when the Virgin Mary receives the news of her pregnancy.⁴⁷ However, the most significant association established by the novel with the scriptures of the New Testament is its replacement of the male Christ figure with that of the female vagabond, Afrodite.

Partaking of the same fate as Christ, who 'must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again',⁴⁸ Afrodite becomes the 'sacrificial lamb' who, as a woman, also symbolises the role of a persecuted woman in a phallogocentric society. Like Christ and, by analogy women, Afrodite – despite or rather through having her body subjected and exposed to a multitude of violence – is still able to endure the martyrdom of her oppression. While working as a prostitute, Afrodite is repeatedly subjected to male violence. Her body is transformed from a source of pleasure into a constant locus of punishment in which men can expiate their own sin:

⁴⁶ Silviano Santiago, "O Evangelho segundo João," *Nas Malhas da Letras* (São Paulo: Companhia das letras, 1989) p.64

⁴⁷ Afrodite's pregnancy is announced by the narrator in a direct reference to the biblical passage in which the angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary to proclaim her immaculate conception: 'ponho a cabeça de Afrodite sobre minhas pernas, digo que o Anjo do Senhor Anunciou à Maria...e Ela concebeu do Espírito Santo, faço a Anunciação'. Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 137. Afrodite's announcement, which takes place during the period of Carnival, is another element which points to the reversal of the biblical structure in *A Fúria do Corpo*, concatenating the two antagonistic moments of Christ's life: the period which precedes his birth and the interval anticipating his death.

⁴⁸ Luke, 24:7.

[Afrodite] tem conseguido clientes cada vez mais abjetos, ontem foi um bedel da escola que queria feri-la com cravos como os do Cristo, queria porque queria pregá-la em cruz... redimir o mundo dos pecados no cativoiro de uma mulher como Afrodite porque Afrodite viveu até a última instância do pecado mas tem a santidade inata para a ressurreição.⁴⁹

The sanctification of Afrodite resides in her capacity to endure her own torments, to exist in a world completely hostile to women. This idea of female endurance in the face of suffering is emphasised in the novel by the repeated resurrections of Afrodite who, like Christ, defies the perishable nature of her material body through the capacity to rise from the dead: ‘no terceiro dia a carne vitoriosa ressurgue do sono e anuncia a transformação’.⁵⁰ The immediate victim of male violence imposed at multiple levels on her own female body, Afrodite insists that the segregation of human beings through their bodies in accordance with culturally constructed models is a desecration of the law of the creator. As the embodiment of God on earth, Afrodite reveals the divine message ‘SALVA TEU CORPO’,⁵¹ emphasising that our physical body needs to be preserved in order for human beings to accede, like Christ himself, to the eternal life and occupy their position by the side of God. Afrodite’s parable ‘NÃO HÁ REMÉDIO QUANDO OS SENTIDOS SUPERAM A REALIDADE PORQUE A REALIDADE ENTÃO ESTÁ CONDENADA’,⁵² which is reiterated throughout the narrative in capital letters, acts as a constant reminder that there is no reality outside our sentient bodies and that it is by accepting that we all share one and the same body that we can break free of the constructed social and cultural values which perpetuate the differentiation of human beings according to their gender, sexuality or race. These are differentiations commonly taken for granted as defining the ‘reality’ of our being or our ‘true identity’.⁵³

⁴⁹ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵³ The co-existence of human beings outside the hierarchical division of gender, race or any other classificatory label is repeatedly asserted in the narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo*. The prophecy of John the Baptist recalled at the beginning of the novel: ‘As naves do Fim transportarão não identidades mas o único corpo impregnado do Um’. *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 25, highlights the non-differentiation of human beings in the eyes of the Creator.

2.4 Feminine discourse and the language of the body

Summing up what I have so far presented in this chapter, Noll's narratives seem to emphasise the physical and cultural violence perpetuated against the female body and to reinforce the way it is represented in phallogocentric societies through images of corporeal pain and passive resignation. In the remainder of this chapter, I shall analyse the way in which some of Noll's female characters contest their submissive position as women in patriarchal cultures by championing a new form of discursive practice which is capable of representing their experience as women outside of the domain of a phallogocentric linguistic code. But, before initiating this analysis of Noll's works, I shall briefly contextualise the theoretical debate around the issues concerning female oppression and discursive practices.

In her seminal article 'Can the subaltern speak?', Gayatri Spivak defines the oppressed subaltern as those 'men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat',⁵⁴ whose existence has been denied in society by the lack of any effective representation. As subalterns, such individuals have become prey to an 'epistemic violence of imperialist law and education',⁵⁵ which has imposed the moral values of socially dominant groups upon them, thwarting even the possibility for subaltern groups to articulate their own experience of oppression through an original discursive practice outside the models imposed by their own oppressors. It is in identifying the cleavage between the experience of the oppressed and its potential for articulation through language that the critic launches her question 'Can the subaltern speak?'⁵⁶

In order to approach the answer to her proposed question Spivak analyses the situation of *sati* (good wife) women in Hindu societies who are compelled to commit suicide upon the death of their husbands. Following this religious-cultural tradition, Spivak argues that *sati* women are related to their husbands not by complementation in a relationship involving two different parts, husbands *and* wives, but, mostly, as objects

⁵⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) p. 283.

⁵⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁶ *Loc. cit.*

of ownership. Through marriage, the husband literally takes possession of his wife's body and life. Once married, *sati* women not only belong to their husband: in fact their existence as an individual cannot be conceived of outside the existence of their owner.

With the advent of British colonization in India during the eighteenth century, the practice of suicide among *sati* widows was subject to sanctions since it was regarded not only as contradictory to the moral laws of the colonizer but, more importantly, as an unnecessary violence against women who needed to be 'protected' by the British judiciary system implemented in India. Spivak concludes, however, that if *sati* women were culturally oppressed under the institution of marriage, they became dually oppressed with the imposition of the colonizer's law. What they have accepted as a traditional system in which women were denied an individual existence when abiding by the rules of marriage, became itself repressed by the imposition of a new moral law (the sanction against suicide *after* her husband's death) which they could neither understand nor reject: '[b]etween patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization'.⁵⁷ Spivak's conclusion on the position occupied by the subaltern and, more specifically, about the oppression imposed upon third-world women is that: '[t]he subaltern as female cannot be heard or read... The subaltern cannot speak'.⁵⁸

Many other feminist theoreticians share with Spivak the idea that societies in general (and not only those of the 'Third World') have denied women the capacity to assume an active role in articulating their experience of oppression through a discursive practice which is free from phallogocentric values. The main argument used by feminists who point to the impracticability of women articulating their experience of oppression is that men have not only imposed their supremacy through taking control of institutionalised organisms such as education, the judiciary system, religion, etc., but have also surreptitiously dominated other modes of cultural expression – language being the most important of them. Luce Irigaray, for example, has observed how

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

different languages follow a similar logic in ascribing masculine or feminine gender to objects depending upon their level of importance, reflecting a cultural context in which men have ‘appropriated the most highly valued truths: God is now masculine in most, if not all, languages; so is *sun*... Man gives his *genre* to the universe, just as he wants to give his name to his children and his property... The feminine is a secondary mark, always subordinated to the principal *genre*’ [author’s italics].⁵⁹

The pre-eminence of the masculine over the feminine gender in language is not limited to the symbolic relevance or redundancy of objects in a specific cultural system. Male authority is also evidenced in correlated nouns which, depending upon their declination in agreement with the gender of the speaker or the referent, become semantically differentiated. As Norma Telles aptly observes, ‘*pires de palavras que denot[am] diferenças de gênero não são os mesmos. ‘Senhor’, por exemplo, denota domínio e controle; enquanto ‘Senhora’, o pertencimento ao outro.*’⁶⁰ In uncovering the ‘phallo-logocentric’⁶¹ mechanism of language which replicates the unequal relation between opposite genders in society, many contemporary feminist theoreticians have indicated the inadequacy of words to convey the experiences of women in a society dominated by male values and language. As Luce Irigaray suggests, ‘[u]nable to create words for themselves, women remain and move about within an immediacy having no transitional or transactional object... [they are] exiled into the male paternal world. An errant beggar in relation to values [they] will never be able to appropriate’.⁶²

The failure of language to express the experience of women in a phallogocentric society is constantly evoked in Noll’s narratives. Many of his female characters describe how their bodies become a territory colonized by a ‘foreign language’ that cannot be clearly understood nor easily confronted. The character Cris in *Harmada* mentioned in the preceding section of this chapter seems to illustrate the uneasiness of a ‘female subject [whose] body [is] constituted out of the ‘invisible presences’ of patriarchal

⁵⁹ Irigaray, “The three genres,” *The Irigaray Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

⁶⁰ Norma Telles, “Autor + a,” *Palavras da Crítica*, organizado por José Luis Jobim (Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1992) p. 45.

⁶¹ Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁶² Luce Irigaray, *To Speak is Never Neutral* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002) p. 237.

ideologies'.⁶³ Unable to arrive at a verbal (or any other) resolution to her conflictual subjectivity – a woman unable to articulate her feminine experience through a phallogentric culture – Cris is led to perform a radical action on her body. In an act of self-mutilation, she cuts off a piece of her tongue: the part of her body connected both to the corporeal sensation of taste, a form of pleasure, as well as being related to the performance of speech:

ah, não quero contar mais nada, você sabe de tudo eu acho, você sabe como vim para aqui, foi porque peguei uma gilete que eu tinha achado no lixo, e passei a lâmina na minha língua para ver se a minha língua parava de falar, eu não falava com ninguém mas não parava de falar sozinha, para dentro é claro, eu falava para dentro, mas era o tempo todo, e aquilo foi me dando nos nervos, as horas padeciam, e eu não queria mais escutar aquele pensamento que não parava de pulsar na minha língua, então pensei, eu corto feio a língua, tiro um pedaço se der, e ela aí na certa vai ficar calada, porque desde que minha mãe desapareceu, desde que fugi da pensão onde estava morando com ela, pois não queria que ninguém me pegasse para eu viver junto, não, eu não queria... desde aí não parei de ouvir a minha voz ressoando cá dentro, a lâmina da gilete no entanto já se apresentava quase sem fio de tão usada, lembro a ferrugem que ela já mostrava bem na pontinha sabe?, e uma velha me viu passando a gilete na língua e chamou um guarda, e vieram outros guardas, muita gente em volta e eu me recusando a falar, na língua mesmo só havia uma dorzinha e uma coisinha de sangue que me saía por um canto da boca, e veio um microônibus preto, li num lado da carcaça dele a palavra asilo e logo depois eu estava aqui dentro desta casa.⁶⁴

In excising her *língua* (the Portuguese word for both 'tongue' and 'language') from the rest of her body, Cris symbolically calls attention to the urgent need for women to discover ways of self-representation outside a linguistic code which corroborates the authority of masculine values. It is only by abstaining from a male oriented mode of

⁶³ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁶⁴ Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

representation that Cris can supersede the conflictual character of her female identity. Her attempt to escape from the house where she lives with her mother can be read as a metaphor for the necessity of women to be liberated from a female identity which is exclusively defined by motherhood and male possession. As Roberto DaMatta has suggested in his analysis of Brazilian culture, the segregation between the masculine and feminine genres can be directly associated with the public and private spheres. The street is the public sphere commonly reserved for men whereas the house is the private space occupied by women who are in charge of domestic affairs. In the public space of the street, individuals are not only free to circulate but are also exposed to new ideas and experiences through the contact with different people with whom they can exchange information. The house, directly connected with the idea of private possession, is marked by the presence of walls, doors and windows which establish a boundary between the interaction of the members of the house with the external world. What is more, the internal structure of the house is divided into different compartments, each of them fulfilling a specific function symbolising the imposition of an order which contrasts with the freedom associated with the street. It is in the dichotomy between male/female, street/house outside/inside, freedom/constraint, public/private, etc., that DaMatta concludes that '[o] discurso dominante é muito mais da "rua" do que da "casa"... A fala dos subordinados é muito mais o idioma da 'casa' e da família'.⁶⁵

Cris's escape from the house where she lived with her mother followed by the violent cutting of her tongue in the street marks the transition of a woman from the private to the public arena. This transition, however, becomes identified by the masculine order as being an act of transgression in the same sense that Hélène Cixous affirms that:

[e]very woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into loss of language, ground and language

⁶⁵ Roberto DaMatta, *A Casa e a Rua: Espaço, Cidadania, Mulher e Morte no Brasil* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1985) p. 18. The difference between male and female in the domestic realm is clearly expressed by the terms 'dona-de-casa' and 'chefe de casa'. Used for women, 'dona-de-casa' (*housewife*) does not indicate ownership: it expresses the domestic function exerted by women encumbered with the upbringing of children and the keeping of the physical order of the house. 'Chefe de casa' indicates the authority of man in the house who, despite freed from household activities, is in charge of other domestic issues such as financial provision and the decision upon the lives of those living in the house.

slipping out from under her, because for women speaking – even just opening her mouth – in public is something rash, a transgression.⁶⁶

Cris's attempt to expose her experience of oppression in a more public arena is immediately suppressed by the policemen who impose physical control over her body. Male authority, on the pretext of protecting Cris from damaging her own body, ends up repressing Cris's behaviour by locking her up into an official institution where she will be 'cut off' from contact with the rest of society. Her incarceration seems to illustrate Spivak's denunciation of the covert power of patriarchy as 'the establisher of the good society... marked by the espousal of the woman as *object* of protection from her own kind'.⁶⁷ Cris's attempt to articulate, through her body, the subaltern condition of women in a phallogocentric society is repressed by male authority – a repression which is rationalised as an act of protection.

Other feminist theoreticians have offered alternatives to the potentially pessimistic conclusion drawn by Spivak where she argues that the female subaltern cannot speak.⁶⁸ Hélène Cixous interestingly suggests that women are able to articulate, through their corporeal experiences, an innovative form of writing which can expose and at the same time transcend the totalitarian power of the masculine logic in language. In establishing a difference between spoken and written language, Cixous suggests that women's access to the symbolic realm of language within a phallogocentric system is always marked by a rupture between the female body and its representation: 'acquisition of speech, speaking out loud, is for her – 'acquisition' that is experienced more as tearing away'⁶⁹ so that through writing, women can recapture the primal experience of their feminine body which had been obliterated in language but at the cost of pain and physical suffering:

⁶⁶ Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

⁶⁷ Spivak, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

⁶⁸ In fact, the arguments used by feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément and Luce Irigaray, in pointing out alternatives to the articulation of the feminine experience of oppression, do not invalidate Spivak's proposal. If we take into consideration Spivak's definition of the 'subaltern woman' referring to poor and illiterate women whose specific social and economic background differs radically from the feminist theoreticians of rich countries, we can still agree with Spivak that the 'subaltern woman' lacks her own voice and is unable to articulate her experience as such.

⁶⁹ Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

woman, writing herself, will go back to this body that has been worse than confiscated... By censoring the body, breath and speech are censored at the same time. To write – the act that will ‘realize’ the un-censored relationship of woman to her sexuality, to her woman-being giving her back access to her own forces; that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal... Write yourself: your body must make itself heard.⁷⁰

It is important to stress here that Cixous’s conception of *écriture féminine* is not exclusively related to the production of female authors. In fact she indicates how texts written by male authors from different temporal and social contexts ranging from Shakespeare to Michael Koolhaas can fulfil the precepts of a ‘feminine writing’. Referencing the term through examples, Cixous indicates that ‘feminine writing’ refers to all those texts, mainly in the fields of poetry and theatre, which ‘burst partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes’⁷¹, thereby promoting a revolution within the linguistic structure which had previously supported the supremacy of a phallogocentric order. By presenting different and not exclusively female examples of ‘feminine writing’, Cixous restrains herself from reducing the term to a closed, eponymous definition. In differentiating ‘feminine writing’ from other, everyday forms of speech/writing, she also associates the term with non-linguistic modes. So, for instance, ‘feminine writing’ is the association of words with rhythm and the pulse, but not necessarily with semantics; something connected with bodies and their movements, but not necessarily with representational language. As she argues, ‘defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue; for this practice will never be able to be *theorized*, enclosed, coded, which does not mean it does not exist. But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogocentric system’.⁷²

The narrative of João Gilberto Noll seems to offer an accurate example of feminine writing. Through his literary production, Noll has always emphasised the importance of the unconscious and the body in a similar way to Cixous’s defence of the possibility of a ‘feminine writing’ which is capable of overthrowing the imposed male

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94/5.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

order perpetuated through our ordinary discourses. Referring to his own narrative, Noll asserts that:

é realmente difícil você fazer um discurso mais racional em cima [da minha literatura]. Ainda mais para mim. Eu escrevo realmente muito com o inconsciente; eu não tento controlar muito o que está saindo. Sabe, eu vejo a literatura como uma coisa muito orgânica, uma coisa que sai realmente pela pele e pelas mãos.⁷³

The narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo* illustrates, perhaps more than any other of Noll's novels, the presence of 'feminine' symbols which determine the author's literary style. Despite the presence of a male narratorial voice, Noll attributes the text with feminine elements: 'Em **A Fúria do Corpo**, o universo é feminino e a linguagem opulenta, transbordante. Nos outros [romances] o universo é masculino e a linguagem é árida, seca... acho mais bonito ser mulher, tenho essa tendência esteticista'. The search for a 'feminine writing' is in fact enacted by the character Afrodite. Initially occupying the position of an object in the narrative by being named and represented through the discourse of its male narrator,⁷⁴ Afrodite soon realises that any attempt to articulate her feminine experience (for the reader) will be doomed to failure unless she can take possession of her language through her writing (which is disassociated from the structural logic of a linguistic code that reproduces masculine cultural values).⁷⁵ In the development of the plot, Afrodite tries to compose a letter only to discover that she cannot write. Her behaviour could be associated with the traumatic discovery that

⁷³ Bueno Magalhães, "Entrevista com João Gilberto Noll," *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito*, *op. cit.*, p. 312.

⁷⁴ At the beginning of *A Fúria do Corpo* the narrator ascribes the name to his female partner: 'temos juntos um curso que começa aqui, neste exato instante em que ponho a mão sobre a cabeça desta mulher e a consagro com o novo nome: AFRODITE'. *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 29. The scene could also be associated with the biblical account of the 'Genesis' in which Adam, named by God, is allowed to assign a name to his wife: 'And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living' (Genesis, 3:20).

⁷⁵ The inviability of (a male-centred) speech of articulating feminine experience is stated by Afrodite when overtly refusing to speak. This decision to become mute is explained by her repudiation of a language which perpetuates her oppression as woman. As Afrodite states: 'ninguém me tira uma palavra sequer da boca, muda estou muda ficarei, nem mesmo adianta vir você, homem que fala pelos cotovelos mesmo calado, que vive tirando palavras da boca ou da idéia... é que transito entre eu e o mundo sem a canalização da fala que quando se ouve já não é mais a intenção original de quem a formulou... quando a palavra chega ela só consegue anunciar o que já se revestiu de alguma coisa posterior mais submissa aos ouvidos calejados de tantas mentiras'. *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 200/1.

the language she uses, even when chosen by herself, distances itself from her experience as a woman:

Afrodite não sabe mais escrever. Na última madrugada foi escrever um bilhete para o bedel e o que saiu foram traços sem rota. Me chamou, chorou, pediu que eu a ajudasse, perguntei em que eu poderia ser útil, respondeu que o útil lhe dava nojo, queria o ato que apagasse o passado e o futuro, queria o ato que dissolvesse a relação causa-efeito. Queria porque queria. Afrodite estava ficando estupidamente egoísta. Queria porque queria. Eu então escrevia seus bilhetes ou cartas porque de repente ela tinha necessidade de escrever mil cartas ou bilhetes, a qualquer momento uma necessidade de escrever uma carta ou um bilhete, e aí vinha ela a me ditar palavras sem semântica, um amontoado de palavras que não queriam dizer absolutamente nada. E o pior que depois de eu copiar ela desistia de enviar a mensagem porque não tinha confiança na cópia, chorava e dizia sabe lá que enxertos você colocou nesse papel, sabe lá que lapsos, que omissões.⁷⁶

Afrodite becomes caught in the antagonism between stating her genuine desires ('querer por querer') and her necessity to articulate her needs through a text ('necessidade de escrever') which can genuinely express her personal experiences. Seeking the aid of the male narrator who does not understand the personal, feminine nature of her semantics nor her apparently confused mode of expression, Afrodite realises that she will never be able to reconcile the disarray in which she, as a woman, experiences her feminine identity using the logic of a male-centred discursive practice. In order to find an appropriate mode of feminine expression, Afrodite needs to subvert the masculine logic of language by adopting the semantic structure of a schizophrenic discourse which promotes disorder in the cohesion (the grammatical and lexical relation between the elements of a text) and coherence (the logical sequence of sentences in the text) of regular, male-dominated discursive models. Such schizophrenic speech, which shares with poetry the 'strength from the unconscious... the other country without boundaries... where the repressed survive',⁷⁷ is the only way

⁷⁶ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁷⁷ Cixous, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

through which Afrodite can appropriate language to articulate her feminine experience.

In order to inaugurate an original form of writing, Afrodite has to invert the logic of language; she has to discover that ‘cada som tem uma letra’⁷⁸ (in place of the normal logic of saying that each letter has a sound), reversing the established order of possession between letter over sound, mind over body, male over female, etc. Guided literally by the hand of the narrator, which suggests Afrodite’s immersion in a practice of writing which is not her own, Afrodite starts to re-learn how to write and this time produces an innovative text which is outside the imposed structural order of male-dominated discourse and which subverts the communicative character of language altogether. Rather than reproducing stabilised meanings, Afrodite discovers the ‘recreative’ aspect of words which, like in poetry, operates by ‘creating anew’ the syntactical composition of language:

Afrodite chora e rabisca o chão. Me aproximo de Afrodite, toco seus cabelos morenos escabelados e digo não chore, se você não sabe mais escrever eu serei teu mestre, pastor, te ensinarei novamente o alfabeto, o bê-a-bá... Afrodite é fiel a seu fogo, o fogo é fato fatal mas sem ele a fibra fica falida e não funciona na Fábula – Afrodite pega gosto e se entrega à rota da minha mão... a letra de Afrodite ainda seguia minha direção mas já marcava no papel de embrulho seu próprio desespero... era preciso que Afrodite dominasse novamente a escrita, documentasse novamente seus pedidos, males, sensações, eu ia guiando o lápis apertando a mão de Afrodite quase até a dor porque sabia que aquele ato deveria ser um estímulo forte como quem se acha de repente novamente entregue à vida.⁷⁹

By stringing words together in an alliterative chain rather than by their logicality of meanings, Afrodite emphasises the auditory pleasure produced by words and brings

⁷⁸ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p.105.

⁷⁹ *Loc. cit.*

language to a more direct contact with her corporeal pleasure.⁸⁰ Her attitude towards language is similar to that ascribed by Severo Sarduy to the literary production of the baroque style. As Sarduy remarks, the ornamental aspect of the baroque style reviews and renews the function of language. Using words in a playful and decorative way, the baroque seems to reject the common notion of language as an objective tool of communication and embraces its pleasurable aspect through the rhythm and alliteration of words as they are used to produce aesthetic enjoyment:

[e]l espacio barroco es el de la superabundancia y el desperdicio. Contrariamente al lenguaje comunicativo, económico, austero, reducido a su funcionalidad – servir de vehículo a una información –, el lenguaje barroco se complace en el suplemento, en la demasía y la pérdida parcial de su objeto... Juego, pérdida, desperdicio y placer, es decir, erotismo en tanto que actividad que es siempre puramente lúdica, que no es más que una parodia de la función de reproducción, una transgresión de lo útil, del diálogo ‘natural’ de los cuerpos.⁸¹

For Afrodite, it becomes possible to express her feminine condition through the use of words by approaching language in a ‘baroque style’: to create a genuine female representation is not to reproduce (male) language but to exceed the functionality of its linguistic code by the promotion of a ‘proliferación incontrolada de significantes’.⁸² It is only by transgressing the limits of signification imposed on words that Afrodite is able to ‘recreate’ ever new symbolic referentials which are not subject to the stagnated order of a male code and thereby open up the possibilities of the written text so that she can rescue her body from the imprisonment in which it has been confined by a male-oriented culture – and ultimately to recover expression as a source of pleasure.

⁸⁰ In a general way, Afrodite’s attempt to bring language and corporeal pleasure together seems to reflect Noll’s own literary project as I shall discuss in length in the last chapter of this thesis.

⁸¹ Severo Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” *América Latina en su Literatura*, coordinación e introducción de César Fernández Moreno (México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1990) p. 181/2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.167.

2.5 Concluding remarks

Despite the overwhelming presence of male narrators who, for the most part, demonstrate a scornful attitude towards women,⁸³ the female body assumes a prominent position within Noll's work. As I have indicated in this chapter, existing in a society subjugated to male power in which men have supremacy over the symbolic aspects of culture, women have to transform this supremacy not by trying to occupy the same position of their oppressors but by looking for original alternatives of self-representation which differ radically from those imposed on them. The female body appears in Noll's narrative to be the place to which women have to turn in order to search for an accurate point of reference for their self-representation. Reading his work in the light of the discussions promoted by feminist theoreticians, Noll's narratives seem to present the feminine body both as a source of oppression as well as a potential form of liberation for women from the rigid and imposing structures of phallogentric societies.

⁸³ As Noll himself attests, '[a]s minhas personagens masculinas centrais têm um certo desdém pelo mundo, pelas mulheres'. José Weis, "João Gilberto Noll: o tempo da cigarra," *Brasil-Brazil: Revista de Literatura Brasileira* 17, Ano 10 (1997) p. 93.

Chapter 3

Noll and his critique of *Romance Reportagem*

The objective of this chapter is to discuss how Noll's oeuvre, especially those works published in the 1980s, seems to revisit and criticise one of the principal genres in Brazil in the 1970s: *romance reportagem*. My primary intention in this chapter is to examine how Noll manages to distance himself from the ideological straitjacket of *arte engajada*, which constrained artistic production in the 1970s. Before I initiate my analysis, I shall present a brief overview of the general political and social climate during Brazil's military dictatorship, specifically after the implementation of the AI-5, (Fifth Institutional Act) in 1968, which censored all sources of public information in the country. I shall also discuss how this situation has helped to shape the Brazilian literary production of the 1970s. My analysis will be particularly centred on Noll's narratives throughout the 1980s: the collection of short-stories *O Cego e a Dançarina* (1980) and the novels *A Fúria do Corpo* (1981), *Bandoleiros* (1985) and *Hotel Atlântico* (1989).

3.1 *Arte engajada* and the politicisation of the aesthetic

During the 1960s and 1970s, many artists pursued an aesthetic programme that was politically committed to the denunciation of the social and economic conditions of the oppressed classes at the hands of the military and monied classes. This artistic practice known as *arte engajada* or *arte de resistência* became the criterion upon which one could judge the 'aesthetic value' of artistic production during the years of military dictatorship in Brazil. It served also as a reference point for defining the level of 'political engagement' assumed by the artist in society. Works which did not follow the precepts of *arte engajada* by failing to convey a left-wing ideological message to their audience were severely reproached for their 'lack of social responsibility' and their creators labelled as 'alienated', 'reactionary' and sharing the values of the capitalist system. Commenting on the imposition of leftist political militancy upon artistic production in the early 1960s and late 1970s, Heloísa Buarque

de Hollanda observed that ‘os que se recusa[vam] a pautar sua composições ou apresentações nesse jogo de referências ao regime, ou que prefer[iam] não adotar o papel de porta-vozes heróicos da desgraça do povo, [eram] violentamente criticados, tidos como ‘desbundados’, ‘alienados’ e até ‘traidores’.¹ Buarque de Hollanda employs the term *patrulhagem ideológica* to indicate the strategic manoeuvre used by left-wing supporters in making use of artistic expression to spread their political ideology among the educated Brazilian middle-classes. She states that ‘[a] patrulhagem ideológica [era] identificada como mais repressiva e controladora da produção cultural do momento do que os, ainda em vigência, aparelhos de coerção do Estado’.²

Arte engajada was also criticised by some critics for its manipulation of cultural and artistic expression as a means of propaganda for left-wing ideology while at the same time failing to reach the audience it wanted to represent: the proletariat. This group were its inspirational muse yet had little or no access to the artistic production of the time. As Simon and Dantas indicate when analysing the poetic production within the precepts of *arte engajada*:

the leftist nationalist poetry movement of the 1960s obstinately fought for a poetics of direct communication with the public. Some argued that poetry ought to reach the distracted urban dweller, others that poetry should awaken the alienated consciousness of the exploited worker. However, the readership of these earlier movements did not exceed five hundred readers, the majority of whom were middle-class intellectuals.³

This barrier in communication between *arte engajada* and the popular masses was not restricted to the more elitist artistic production such as poetry or art exhibitions. In fact, as Buarque de Hollanda attests, the inaccessibility of the cultural production at

¹ Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda, *Impressões de Viagem: CPC, vanguarda e desbunde: 1960 / 70* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1980) p. 92/3.

² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³ Iumma M. Simon and Vinícius Dantas, “Bad poetry, worse society,” *On the Edge: the crisis of contemporary Latin American culture*, edited by George Yúdice *et al.* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) p. 142.

the time for the masses was a reality maintained by intellectual leftists who produced and consumed ‘revolutionary ideals’ within their own restricted milieu: ‘[f]racassada em suas pretensões revolucionárias e impedida de chegar às classes populares, a produção cultural engajada passa a realizar-se num circuito nitidamente integrado ao sistema – teatro, cinema, disco – e ser consumida por um público já “convertido” de intelectuais e estudantes da classe média’.⁴ A similar criticism is raised by Flora Sussekind who states that:

[a]os intelectuais ligados à produção ideológica, à cultura de protesto, restava uma espécie de ‘diálogo de comadres’. Ou falavam com os que já simpatizavam com o seu ideário, ou com a própria camada dirigente. Quando se imaginavam em diálogo com a massa operária ou camponesa, seus interlocutores eram bem outros. Daí, a maior parte da arte de protesto de fins dos anos 60 e início da década de 70 encaminhar-se para um vazio ideológico.⁵

Sussekind’s pessimism in describing the *vazio* (emptiness) of the Brazilian cultural climate of the 1970s was shared by other critics who considered *arte engajada* to be devoid of any substantive critique of the system that it proposed to attack and in addition was entirely disengaged from the oppressed public that it intended to represent. In an article entitled ‘A Crise da Cultura Brasileira’ published in the magazine *Visão* in 1971, Zuenir Ventura launched his attack against *arte engajada* for failing to present new aesthetic proposals capable of revitalising the already stagnated cultural debate in this time of military repression. The vast majority of artists in the early 1970s, suggests Ventura, were ‘*fabricantes de produtos em série e não criadores de objetos únicos*’[my italics].⁶ Considering the artistic production at the end of the 1970s, Silviano Santiago identified *arte engajada* also with emptiness and stagnancy, commenting that:

⁴ Buarque de Hollanda, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁵ Flora Sussekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: polêmicas, diários & retratos* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1985) p. 14.

⁶ Zuenir Ventura, “A Crise da Cultura Brasileira,” *Isto É*, 7 de julho de 1971. Reprinted as “O Vazio Cultural,” *Cultura em Trânsito: da repressão à abertura*, organizado por Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda *et al.* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano Editora, 2000) p. 48.

[a]s obras geradas nesse vácuo cultural – vácuo cultural que não está no campo da produção, mas na sociedade como todo – não acabam sendo qualitativamente melhores nem piores do que as geradas em outros períodos, mas a impressão que se tem é a de que, como um carro atolado na areia, giram os pneus, funciona o motor, levanta-se muita areia, mas movimento que é bom é nulo... Durante o período, tivemos uma das mais fascinantes florações de obras engajadas da moderna cultura brasileira, mas sua fruição se reduzia sempre aos 3 por cento da população... a proposta de um entrosamento mais generalizado e significativo entre a obra de arte e o grosso da população alfabetizada ou não... [deveria] sensibilizar os nossos artistas nesta década de 80.⁷

Aside from its inability to generate a revitalisation of artistic and cultural expression in Brazilian society, *arte engajada* was also criticised for becoming a vehicle for self-promotion by certain artists who used it to entertain middle-class consumers corroborating, in contradiction to its *raison d'être*, the same (bourgeois) economic system it proposed to attack. As Buarque de Hollanda observes, '[a]s obras engajadas [foram se] transformando num rentável negócio para as empresas da cultura: a contestação, integrada às relações de produção cultural estabelecidas, transform[ou]-se novamente em reabastecimento do sistema onde não consegu[ia] introduzir tensões'.⁸

Following this short summary of some of the principal issues raised by Brazilian literary critics in opposition to *arte engajada*, I shall now discuss how these issues are addressed in Noll's narratives throughout the 1980s, specifically in his critique of the novelistic version of *arte engajada*: the *romance reportagem*.

⁷ Silviano Santiago, "Repressão e Censura no Campo das Artes na Década de 70," *Vale Quanto Pesa: Ensaios sobre Questões Políticas Culturais* (Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1982) p. 54/5.

⁸ Buarque de Hollanda, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

3.2 *Romance reportagem*: an alternative route of protest?

The Brazilian political administration fell into the hands of a military government in 1964 after the deposition of the country's then left-leaning president João Goulart. It then initiated a process of dictatorship which was at its most oppressive between the years of 1968 and 1975. If, as Robert Schwarz suggests, intellectual production during the first four years of military government had experienced a certain level of freedom and autonomy in expressing its leftist ideals, at least at a theoretical level, this situation underwent a radical shift after the second military coup of 1968, especially after the promulgation of the Fifth Institutional Act (AI-5).⁹ The main purpose of the AI-5 was to suspend the Brazilian Constitution, passing supreme power to the military president in all elements of political, social and economic decision-making in the country. The dictatorial imposition enforced by this military act made it compulsory, amongst other demands, for all material produced for publication in the country to be subjected to prior censorship before being made accessible to the general public. Among the sectors most targeted by this draconian vigilance were the agencies of public information such as newspapers, radio and television which, due to their ability to reach a wide audience, could easily and rapidly disseminate the 'subversive' ideas of leftist intellectuals. In the face of these new sanctions levied upon the media, many journalists and other professionals involved in the dissemination of information turned to literature as, although it suffered the consequences of censorship on a reduced scale, it provided an alternative means of expressing discontent with the authoritarian regime. As Sussekind points out:

⁹ For Schwarz, the increase in military repression over intellectual production was concomitant with the growth of instruments of cultural diffusion among the country's population as a whole. In 1964, intellectuals were free to engage in discussions and exchange their ideas, provided that those discussions would not trespass the limits of academic circles and reach the masses, that is, the non-intellectual world. With the rapid rise of mass-media sectors and their role in the diffusion of information, military rulers started to see imminent danger in the 'popularisation' of intellectuals' leftist debate to the masses. In the face of this threat, the military government had opted to ban, through the imposition of censorship, all forms of cultural production that promoted the Brazilian leftist intelligentsia, including here the dangerous 'subversive' ideologies exposed by leftist artistic production: 'In 1964, it had been possible for the right to 'preserve' cultural expression, since it had only been necessary to eliminate all contacts with the working masses in cities and rural areas; in 1968, when students and those who enjoyed the best films, the best theatre, the best music and the best books had become a politically dangerous group, it would become necessary for teachers, producers, authors, musicians, books, publishers to be replaced or censored – in other words, the active culture of the moment would have to be eliminated'. Robert Schwarz, "Culture and politics in Brazil, 1964-1969,"

Graças ao interesse maior da censura pelos filmes para cinema e televisão, por seu alcance; ou pelos espetáculos teatrais, por seu contato direto com o público; foi possível à literatura utilizar-se de uma certa margem de liberdade. Preencher as lacunas de informação dos jornais e veículos de massa, aproveitar-se de seu próprio caráter artesanal e de um conhecimento prévio de seu público restrito: estas são algumas das preocupações da produção literária durante os anos 70.¹⁰

The military government entered a period of *distensão política* in 1974 and censorship, although still playing a central role in the cultural production of the time, gradually began to be relaxed. It is in this context that the novelistic literary production of the 1970s, known as *romance reportagem*, emerged. Used to fill the gaps in information resulting from the censorship imposed on the mass media, this emerging literary genre found itself transformed into a new form of journalism which rescued what realism and naturalism had previously claimed to have portrayed in their literary programmes: the narration of the ‘veracity’ of facts. However, far from promoting a pertinent analysis of the socio-political situation of the country under military rule or a search for new aesthetic possibilities which might provoke a sense of discontent in their readers in face of the problems of the nation, *romance reportagem* limited itself to the description of crimes and torture (mostly crimes which had a great impact on the country or the torture suffered by the author), which were not given full coverage in the mass media.

Before proceeding with my discussion, I will make use of a further distinction within the *romance reportagem* genre following the classification proposed by Malcolm Silverman who differentiates between *romance jornalístico* (related to those works in which the narrative does not assume an autobiographic character) and *romance memorial* (the autobiographical account of those who had been victim of political persecution and experienced torture during the time of military dictatorship).¹¹

Misplaced Ideas: essays on Brazilian culture, translated with an introduction by John Gledson (London and New York: Verso, 1992) p. 128.

¹⁰ Sussekind, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹¹ Malcolm Silverman, *Protesto e o Novo Romance Brasileiro*, 2a edição revista, tradução de Carlos Araújo (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2000). Among the examples discussed by the author in

3.3 The *romance jornalístico*

According to the literary categories proposed by Silverman, the *romance jornalístico* can be identified as those novels which seek to expose crimes of passion, hatred or other themes involving abuse of power, violence and corruption commonly associated with Brazilian society or official institutions in the country, such as the civil police and the military government. The aim of the *romance jornalístico* was to allow its author-narrator, a journalist in the majority of cases, to assume the role of a detective in the story. Their account followed the narrative elements of *faction*,¹² a neologism coined by Silviano Santiago to designate the literary genre initiated by North American authors such as Truman Capote and Norman Mailer. The term *faction* is indicative of the nature of these novels in that they seek to bridge journalistic *fact* with literary *fiction*. The term further suggests the tone assumed by the novel in its preference for action, and its market success which transformed the genre into a form of fashion. The author-narrator in the *romance jornalístico*, unhappy with the final reports of official investigations and this subsequent judiciary resolution, seeks to disclose a specific crime by presenting letters, documents, interviews or any other factual sources of information that substantiate his or her arguments. As Amélia Simpson argues, this specific form of *romance reportagem* was primarily designed to:

put journalism at the service of justice and truth... Yet these texts end up expressing a troubling lack of vision, a sentimentalism that interferes with the mechanics of critical reasoning, a gender-exclusive perspective that is no less offensive for being predictable, and... an

his categorisation of *romance jornalístico* are the works of José Louzeiro (*Infância dos Mortos* [1977], *Lúcio Flávio: o passageiro da agonia* [1978], *Aracelli, Meu Amor* [1979]); Valério Meinel (*Porque Claudia Lessin Vai Morrer* [1978], *Seqüestro* [1979], *Aézio, um Operário Brasileiro* [1981]) e Aguinaldo Silva (*A República dos Assassinos* [1976], *No País das Sombras* [1979], *A História de Lili Carabina* [1983]). In the category *romance memorial*, Silverman identifies, among others, the works of Rodolfo Konder (*Tempo de Ameaça* [1978]), Alfredo Syrkis (*Os Carbonários* [1980]), Renato Tapajós (*Em Câmara Lenta* [1977]), Carlos Alberto Libanio Christo, mostly known as Frei Betto (*O Dia de Ângelo* [1987]), Augusto Boal (*Milagre no Brasil* [1979]) and Fernando Gabeira (*O Que é Isso, Companheiro* [1979], *Hóspede da Utopia* [1981] and *Crepúsculo do Macho* [1981]).

¹² Silviano Santiago, "Prosa literária atual no Brasil," *Nas Malhas da Letra* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989) p. 32.

exploitative, commercial mentality at odds with the authors' stated principles.¹³

Through the avoidance of any allegorical or metaphorical elements in their narrative – elements commonly associated with literary fiction – *romance jornalístico* authors sought to assert the 'reliability' of their accounts, thereby differentiating them from all other forms of fictional novels. In this context, any connotative language or allegorical theme had to be treated in *romance reportagem* as obsolete because of its (dangerous) potential to ascribe a degree of choice to the reader, who could then decide about the meaning of the novel or offer a personal interpretation of the narrative:

[t]he authors [in *romance reportagem*] have little interest in the how of writing, in form and language, almost as if to show consciousness about the aesthetic elaboration of their account were a matter of shame. Spontaneous indignation, epic modesty, naked and unadorned truth, all lead them to write without caring for a linguistic strategy which would control and orient the material.¹⁴

The use of journalistic language, which is supposed to portray the facts through the lens of objectivity and veracity, does not however promote a dialogue between text and reader. Since its main purpose is purely the transmission of information, such language misses the connotative power of the literary text, which places the reader in the significant role of offering a subjective interpretation of the narrative.

In an opposition to *romance reportagem*'s literary form, which pursues, through a journalistic style, the uncovering of truth, we can situate Noll's short story 'A construção da mentira'. This story presents a critique of *romance jornalístico* authors who, obsessed with constructing their narrative based upon 'true' situations and 'real' characters as if seeking to expose the accurate image of the country, conceal their

¹³ Amélia S. Simpson, "True crime stories during the dictatorship: Brazil's *romance-reportagem* [non-fiction novel]," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 11 (1992) p. 9/10.

¹⁴ Ariel Dorfman, "Political code and literary code: the testimonial genre in Chile today," *Some Write to the Future: essays on contemporary Latin American fiction*, translated by George Shivers and Ariel Dorfman (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1991) p.157.

literary motivation from the public: the achievement of personal recognition and financial success through literature. The narrator-protagonist of the story, a journalist who joins a group of day-trippers visiting an old house, explains his interest in portraying any extraordinary events revealed in the excursion which he can then use to his advantage by transforming them into a storyline or theme to be exploited in his sensationalistic narrative:

Do grupo que admirava a casa eu era o único jornalista. Desliguei o gravador e me afastei um pouco dos demais, atingido por um desejo de percorrer a casa sozinho, mergulhar completamente na sua solidão para poder descrevê-la com mais dramaticidade para os meus leitores. Me enfurnei pelo soturno corredor imaginando encontrar uma porta e um aposento misterioso, *desses que li em velhos romances ingleses* [my italics].¹⁵

The old house, a building inhabited by an old lady and her ageing son – a metaphor which might suggest Brazil and its ‘senile’ military rulers – appears to have survived unchanged through time and is described in the narrative as an historic place where ‘se travaram as batalhas de consciência’.¹⁶ The journalist, caught up in his search for interesting action or unusual situations which could be dramatised for his readers, fails to perceive the deep ‘historical silence’ of the house and to make this silence the object of his search. The ‘real’ facts he is searching for in the building: its ‘true’ historical elements, are not revealed bona fide but are shaped by ‘fictitious’ models of suspense and imported detective novels. Upon leaving the house, the narrator meets his wife at the ‘Bar das Artes’ where, eager to learn about the narrator’s adventures in the old residence, she is told about the unsuccessful results of the enterprise. In answer to her questions, the journalist gives a brief and disappointed account of his discoveries: ‘Quase nada. A fala de um velho caduco e *uma casa mais literária do que jornalística*’ [my italics].¹⁷

¹⁵ João Gilberto Noll, “A construção da mentira,” *Romances e Contos Reunidos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) p. 755.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*

Considering his ‘real’ experience to be a ‘fictional’ enterprise, the narrator characterises the house itself as ‘literary’ as opposed to something ‘realistic’ which can be subjected to a journalistic style. In this situation, a point of irony occurs: in order to add a more realistic tone to his text, the narrator needs to create imaginary events which make his real experience appear more ‘true’ to his readers. In a broader context, this short story seems to refer critically to the hidden motives of *romance reportagem* wherein it refers to real places, situations and characters using the same ‘objective’ language employed in journalistic descriptions while at the same time adding to these descriptions some fictional attributes without discriminating the concrete facts from this imagined fiction. In conclusion, ‘the construction of the lie’ presents the manipulation of real events into a fictional narrative aimed at promoting the heroic nature of the narrator-protagonist, which also occurs in *romance reportagem*. At the end of the story, while playing the tape he has recorded in the ‘silence’ of the house, the journalist is confronted with his own unconscious desire to create, when inspired by his factual observations, a fictional hero able to bring the exuberance of fiction into the unenthusiastic detachment of the ‘objective’ language of a journalistic account: ‘E foi quando pela primeira vez eu ouvi realmente as palavras daquela voz. Elas falavam de um herói que eu procurava para a minha reportagem’.¹⁸

In an article which explores the consumption of detective novels in Brazil, Amélia Simpson suggests that the immense success of *romance reportagem* in the country, specifically in the case of *romance jornalístico*, was not directly linked to the reader’s desire to take part in a form of political protest. The more plausible reason for the wide production and consumption of *romance reportagem*, she suggests, could be found in its relation to the detective genre, which has always been held in high regard by Brazilian readers. This audience, who had been consuming translations of foreign thrillers since the 1930s, found in *romance reportagem* a ‘true’ national version of detective novels in which the narration could be easily followed by the description of places, situations and historical elements familiar to the reader. As Simpson points out:

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

The most fertile period for detective writing in Brazil is the seventies and eighties... The increase in the number of commercial works by Brazilian authors in the last two decades shows an opening for native writers in the market for detective fiction, long dominated by foreign authors. The publication in 1978 of a collection of social protest pieces labelled *contos policiais*, and the use of elements of the genre in *crime-reportagem* texts which involve critical thinking about Brazilian society while exploiting the public's appetite for sensationalism, are other signs that a reconsideration of the role of the genre in Brazil may be developing.¹⁹

3.3.1 *Hotel Atlântico* and the subversion of *romance reportagem*

The emergence of *romance reportagem* narrative in the Brazilian literary scene has been criticised by Noll, who views this documentary genre as being unfailingly connected to the monetary aspirations of the publishing market thus transforming literature into a source of financial gain.²⁰ In one of his interviews, Noll openly expressed his discontent with the genre: 'Eu não agüento mais *thriller*. Todo

¹⁹ Amélia S. Simpson, "Detective fiction in Brazil," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 7 (1988) p.23/4. Nowadays the literary interest in crime narratives and detective novels has helped to define not only the production of documentary literature in the country but has also been responsible for the publishing success of fictional novels such as those produced by Rubem Fonseca, Patricia Mello and Jô Soares, to mention here a few important names. As Flora Sussekind observes, 'an imaginary representation of fear and violence is what fundamentally organises the dominant urban landscape of Brazilian contemporary literature... bring[ing] detective fiction closer to 'discourse of fear,' to the proliferation of 'speeches of crime'. Flora Sussekind, "Deterritorialization and literary form: Brazilian contemporary literature and urban experience," *Working Paper CBS-34-02* (Oxford: Centre for Brazilian Studies, 2002) p. 9.

²⁰ Despite the unfavourable economic situation in Brazil during the 1970s, there was an unprecedented growth in book publishing in the country. Books which, until 1975, normally had print runs between 3,000 to 5,000 copies, started to have print runs between 30,000 and 100,000 in the second half of the decade. Brazilian publishing houses struggled against international publishers to secure their profits in the market. This commercial dictate had a deep impact on Brazilian writers who 'became preoccupied with changes in the economics of publishing. Multinational corporations such as Harper & Row do Brasil, Editora Macmillan, and others had entered the Brazilian book market, and writers had to compete against a barrage of translations of North American bestselling novels by such writers as Harold Robbins, Alex Haley, and Irving Wallace... The discussion of the writer and the marketplace surfaced regularly in the late seventies. The boom meant greater audiences and opened up for authors the possibility of being able to support oneself by writing rather than having to depend upon another occupation. Professionalisation, on the other hand, meant having to publish regularly to meet market demands, which might sacrifice quality'. Nancy T. Baden, *The Muffled Cries: the writer and literature in authoritarian Brazil, 1964-1985* (Lanham, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 1999) p. 119/20.

romancista quer fazer romance policial. Esse suspense vagabundo de policialismo internacional... não há tesão pelo *thriller*, pelo folhetim, por essa simplificação... tenho dificuldade neurológica de acompanhar essa narrativa... essa coisa caça-níquel'.²¹

Although inveighing against the commercial success of *romance reportagem*, Noll would appear to consciously appropriate a number of the genre's narrative elements in his novel *Hotel Atlântico*. Of all his works, this is the one that mostly obviously bears the stamp of the thrillers of this era. This 'emulation', however, soon evolves into a critique of *romance reportagem* novels. *Hotel Atlântico* offers the account of a narrator-protagonist who describes his arrival in a hotel at the very moment that a dead body is being removed. His descriptions, unfolding in a terse style suggesting the note taking of a detective at the scene of crime, are followed by an increasing sense of suspense underlying the action in the narrative:

Subi as escadas de um pequeno hotel na Nossa Senhora de Copacabana, quase esquina da Miguel Lemos. Enquanto subia ouvi vozes nervosas, o choro de alguém.

De repente apareceram no topo da escada muitas pessoas, sobretudo homens com pinta de policiais, alguns PMs, e começaram a descer trazendo um banheirão de carregar cadáver.

Lá dentro havia um corpo coberto por um lençol estampado.

Fiquei parado num dos degraus, pregado à parede. Uma mulher com os cabelos pintados muito louros descia a escada chorando. Ela apresentava o tique de repuxar a boca em direção ao olho direito.

²¹ José Weiss, "João Gilberto Noll: O tempo da cigarra," *Brasil – Brazil: Revista de Literatura Brasileira* 17, Ano 10 (1997) p. 89/90. The relation between literary production and market consumption has been criticised by other Brazilian literary critics and novelists. Silviano Santiago, for instance, draws attention to the fact that: '[t]ransformado em mercadoria dentro da sociedade de consumo, o livro passa a ter um temível (porque imprevisível) e subornável (porque manipulável) árbitro: o público. É ele que, segundo a empresa, atesta anônima, econômica e autoritariamente sobre o 'valor' da obra, digo mercadoria, como em qualquer teste Ibope ou índice de vendagem. Bons escritores são os que vendem, diz a voz do lucro empresarial.' Silviano Santiago, "Prosa literária atual no Brasil," *op.cit.*, p. 25.

Me senti arrependido de ter entrado naquele hotel. Mas recuar me pareceu ali uma covardia a mais que eu teria de carregar pela viagem. E então fui em frente.²²

With this introduction, which is a very common scenario used to open detective narratives, the reader is implicitly led to pose questions about the identity of the corpse and the causes of his death. He is also incited to discover more about the other characters in the scene and their possible connection to the dead. The reader is similarly invited to satisfy his curiosity about the narrator's identity and the reason for his vacillation after entering the hotel. However, despite the narrator's apparent promise suggested by the sentence 'E então fui em frente...' to develop his story around the obscure motive for the death and the disclosure of its cause, he makes no further mention of the circumstances of death nor the reason why he came to that specific location. The reader, willingly or not, soon follows the narration into a very different plot structure than that which might have been expected in the development of the novel and the continuity of the storyline. After leaving the hotel without any further allusion to what might happen next in his story, the narrator then becomes involved in another mysterious death. This time he is confronted with the apparent suicide of Susan Flemming,²³ his travel companion in the bus to Florianópolis: 'Não havia dúvida: Susan tinha morrido. Lembrei que era o segundo cadáver que eu encontrava em menos de quarenta e oito horas. O outro, o do hotel em Copacabana'.²⁴ Once again, the reader encounters an element of the story which could easily be identified in the plot of detective novels. However, in this narrative, the protagonist is not the one who tries to solve a crime, but instead appears to become the victim of a conspiracy which he suspects has been forged against him. In order to avoid being incriminated for a crime he has neither committed nor understood, the narrator decides to disappear from the death scene before he is taken into custody as the prime suspect of the murder: 'O que me agoniava é que começassem a desconfiar de mim. Naquele momento já parecia tarde demais para que eu desfizesse o equívoco. Passaria

²² João Gilberto Noll, *Hotel Atlântico* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

²³ As Norberto Perkoski has pointed out, the character's surname makes a direct reference to Ian Fleming, one of the most acclaimed authors in the thriller genre. Norberto Perkoski, *A Transgressão Erótica na Obra de João Gilberto Noll* (Santa Cruz do Sul: Editora da UNISC, 1994).

²⁴ Noll, *Hotel Atlântico*, *op. cit.*, p.389.

anos me arrastando pelos tribunais, encarando a sordidez da Justiça, já sem forças para eu mesmo acreditar na minha inocência'.²⁵

The possibility of a conspiracy against the narrator is further elaborated in the story by the introduction of a mysterious character who seems to be watching the protagonist:

De repente parei. E eu estava na frente de uma livraria da rodoviária. Vendiam também uma boa variedade de revista e jornais. Eu ia entrando para folhear alguma coisa quando percebi a figura de um homem de gabardine, atrás de um desses mostruários de cartões-postais. O que me chamou a atenção no homem foram os óculos escuros que ele usava, iguais aos óculos de Susan.

O homem virava o mostruário. Eu tinha parado, me perturbado com os óculos dele.²⁶

Seeking to cope with his nervousness due to being followed by a possible spy, the narrator, who is in a bookstore, decides to browse through a book in order to find something to help him to overcome his own anxiety:

Peguei um livro para me acalmar. Era um best-seller ambientado durante a Segunda Guerra. Li a primeira página, aí olhei em volta: o homem de óculos escuros já tinha saído da livraria. Voltei ao livro, aliviado.

A questão do herói do livro era a seguinte: ele, um espião britânico, católico, começa a história entrando numa igreja em Paris, e nessa igreja ele agradece a Deus a graça de viver numa época em que existe claramente contra quem lutar, o inimigo.

Na cena posterior ele está com uma amante num hotel em Nice, levanta a taça de champanhe e diz:

- Viva o inimigo!²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.390.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 390/1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

The true conspiracy against the protagonist, which is revealed through his reading of a spy novel, a bestseller, is for him to have become, even if not consciously, part of a system which has transformed literature into the profitable commercial business of creating bestsellers. Through this metafictional strategy, Noll exposes the commercial aspirations of *romance reportagem* narratives which conflict with the author's stated motivation for writing his novel. Rather than attacking the country's 'enemy' (the military dictatorship which perpetuates an unjust social system based upon the model of capitalism), *romance reportagem* authors are depicted in *Hotel Atlântico* as covertly exploiting, if not their oppressors, at least the system of their oppressors through offering thematic material which thereby generates monetary benefit both to themselves and their publishers.

The speculations surrounding Susan's suicide in the narrative, which are cloaked in the same climate of mystery as the previous death, are subsequently also abandoned with the consequence that the development of the plot again frustrates the reader's expectations by simply not engaging any further in the resolution of the enigma of the murder scenes. Instead, the unexpected and unresolved endings of the two crimes, which had emulated the model of detective novels, makes evident the narrator's refusal to reduce his account to a predictable story in which a mystery can be solved. It could be suggested that this is a conscious decision on the part of the author. Rather than showing any commitment to elucidating this second mysterious death, the narrator's main concern is to find an escape from the constraints of his situation as portrayed in his account: 'Pensei que eu precisava dar o for a dali... Comecei a andar rente às lojas da rodoviária, até que vi uma saída'.²⁸ The narrator's need to run away, although he is associated with the scene of the crime, assumes a metafictional function in the narrative. It seems to parallel Noll's urge to escape from the restrictions of *romance reportagem's* thematic and structural elements which are so central to their success as a bestseller. From this perspective, the central story in *Hotel Atlântico* commences not in the first parts of the novel with the accounts of the deaths, but in the subsequent events of the narrative after the protagonist finds his way out of the crime scene.

²⁸ *Loc. cit.*

In the ensuing development of the story, rather than allowing the reader to follow a typical commercially oriented plot, the narrator becomes increasingly involved in situations which are completely out of his control. When confronted with a third death he worries about his own fate: ‘Eu deveria ter todo o cuidado, em três, quatro dias era a terceira morte que me aparecia’.²⁹ The protagonist’s inability to resolve the elements of the story himself and his uncontrolled wanderings in an increasingly unresolvable narrative situation are further exacerbated by the perplexity he feels facing the situations emerging around him. He is first kidnapped by two strangers who try to kill him for no apparent reason. Escaping from the hands of his captors, the narrator tries to disguise himself as a priest. Then, he is accused of being a kidnapper and subsequently mistaken for a TV character. These situations, one after another, all occur unpredictably without any logical connection between them. He neither has no control over their occurrence nor can he contribute to their resolution or offer a coherent explanation of these events to the reader. As the novel ‘progresses’ through these scenarios of chaos and disarray, its narrative style transmits the experiences of its protagonist from one moment to the next. Far from seeking to establish a sequential presentation of events and their consequences – an orderly attitude typified by the narrator of *romance reportagem* – the protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico* conveys his experiences of turmoil and inability to communicate to others at the very moment that these experiences take place.³⁰

The description of the protagonist’s arrival in the city of Arraiol is the passage in the novel which most characterises this tension felt by the narrator as a result of his incapacity to establish a logical link between the events that happen to him. At the beginning, Arraiol appears to the narrator to be like any other calm, provincial and probably hospitable place: ‘Vi que era uma pequena cidade. Não havia ninguém nas ruas, nenhum carro passava’.³¹ This situation, however, undergoes a dramatic change when he knocks on a door to ask for directions or information:

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

³⁰ In the last section of this chapter while analysing *Bandoleiros*, I shall discuss the implications of Noll’s temporal choice.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

Bati numa porta. Uma mulher enrolada num cobertor abriu a porta, me olhou, notou que eu estava todo molhado e coberto de lama, e então bateu a porta soltando um berro. Depois ouvi ela gritar:

– É o seqüestrador, socorro!

Me afastei andando de costas. De repente me virei e eu estava na frente da casa de onde vinha uma ópera. Decidi por mais uma tentativa: bati na porta.

Um homem gordo e careca abriu a porta. O disco rodava levemente fanhoso. Era a voz de um tenor. O homem quando viu o meu aspecto enlameado tirou uma arma do bolso. E me apontou.

Mais uma vez me afastei andando de costas. Dessa vez me afastei com mais lentidão, sem mexer um dedinho da mão. A voz agora era de uma soprano.

Achei melhor continuar caminhando... Lá no fundo da rua vinha vindo um volks preto e branco da polícia, com a luz vermelha em cima girando.

Essa luz vermelha girando foi a última coisa que eu vi. Me segurei no ferro de um portão e senti que eu perdia as forças. Ainda ouvi a batida da minha cabeça contra o calçamento.

Quando abri os olhos o homem gordo e careca estava ao meu lado... O careca chegou ao meu ouvido e disse que era o cirurgião de Arraiol... Antes de pedir um anestésico, um sedativo, eu concentrei ao máximo as minhas forças que eram quase nada, e levantei a cabeça: tinham me amputado a perna direita.³²

The reader is left to piece together the contextual elements of the scene in order to bridge the gaps in information that exist in the narrative. We can conclude that the narrator has been shot in his right leg before falling unconscious on the floor. The loud opera played in the armed man's house mixed with the intermittent noise produced by the police car's siren makes it impossible for the narrator to perceive the sound of the gunshot; the only thing he could clearly hear was the sound produced by the impact of his head against the floor. However, despite being able to reconstitute

³² *Ibid.*, p. 418/9.

the information not given by the narrator, the reader still does not know who shot the narrator: the armed man or the police.

The story continues to develop in a mode which again superficially draws on parallels with the structural development of *romance reportagem*: after the shooting incident, the narrator wakes up in a hospital where he realises that his right leg has been amputated. This momentary ‘lapse’ into the content driven narrative of *romance reportagem*, which would normally extol the protagonist’s detailed account of physical tortures, gains no relevant foothold in the story as the narrator makes no further comment on the experience of his leg’s amputation. Where *romance reportagem* is explicit in its description of physical violence, Noll’s narrative is evasive: the reader is not allowed to partake of any of the ‘gory’ details or self-aggrandising accounts of dealing with his pain or loss.

A completely new scenario then unfolds in the hospital, whose chief surgeon, Dr. Carlos, emerges as an authoritative character (redolent of the authoritarian military dictators) who invests himself with the power to determine the life of his patients, not only their physical state but even including the information they are allowed to receive. During his stay at the hospital, the narrator comments that:

minhas horas se arrastavam, não conseguia ler nada que me caía nas mãos. Um dia era um livro sobre a vida de São Francisco de Assis. O livro começava com Francisco já santo. Não contavam a infância, a extrema juventude, como ele tinha em fim chegado à santidade. Começava o livro com Francisco já aureolado.

Pedi à Sebastião para tirar aquele livro dali.

Ele contou que no hospital era assim, os livros iam chegando aos pacientes, muitas vezes iam chegando à própria equipe do hospital, sem que ninguém soubesse de onde tinham vindo e por que tinham parado naquelas mãos e não em outras.

- Pra ti mandaram *A vida de Francisco*. Quem foi que mandou, adivinha?

- O doutor Carlos? – perguntei.

Sebatião me olhou sem dizer nada, absorto em me olhar.³³

In the hospital, patients are induced to read hagiological narratives to divert their attention from their prolonged illness. These idealised conceptions and portrayals of martyrdom can be viewed as parallel to the experiences of *romance reportagem* authors, especially those of autobiographical accounts of ex-political prisoners. These narratives compel the narrator to view his own suffering in the same light as a religious martyr and, by proxy, a protagonist of *romance-reportagem*. What is more, the passage suggests an implicit criticism of *romance reportagem* for endorsing the ideological purposes of its writer in the same way that hagiologic works served the religious dogma of their authors.³⁴ Even if *romance reportagem*'s ideological propaganda intends to attack Brazilian political and social systems, it ends up replicating the country's stereotypes without presenting any substantive analysis of the contemporary socio-political situation in Brazil.³⁵

If we consider the unfolding of the story from another interpretive perspective, the experience of the narrator in the hospital could be read as a metaphor of the experience of the Brazilian people during the time of *abertura política* in the country. Following a period of confusion, loss and terror, a stay in a hospital for the convalescent could represent a period of transition and uncertainty in which the patient will either recover or die from his health problems. The transition is not

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

³⁴ The use of literature for ideological purposes has been criticised by Noll who comments that 'I do believe that literature cannot have a code of morality, whether a religious morality, or a Marxist morality, literature cannot ratify a ready-made ideology, literature does not exist to endorse an ideology, that isn't the function of literature ... Literature has to get into those things that aren't normally broached in the social sphere, in society. Literature isn't for polite social gatherings. I believe that literature has precisely to lift up the carpet and take a look at the filth that's been swept away underneath it in social terms'. David Treece, "Interview with João Gilberto Noll," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6:2 (November, 1997) p.126.

³⁵ As Flora Sussekind aptly observes, the literary boom of *romance reportagem* during the time of military dictatorship suggests that the genre could have been used by the same political system it proposed to denounce as a form of ideological ally. As the critic puts it, 'the incentive to [literary] production, and especially to those works that *promotes a picture of the country*, is not so easy to perceive another opponent, who appears sometimes as a sponsor, other times as a father, but as powerful as or even more powerful than censorship. So powerful that it sometimes turns a blind eye to the promotion of works which are considered "denunciative" such as those by José Louzeiro or those by João Antônio, because, as in a great part of the documentary literature of the period, [the dictatorship government] find in those narratives efficient contributors. That is because [those narratives] are at the service to same master: the interest of literally *representing one* Brazil. *And even the negative of the picture is interesting for the National Politics of Culture...* [in this way] the

optimistic. In the specific case of the narrator, a complete cure is impossible: he has lost his leg and has to learn henceforth how to live with his new condition. Indeed, when the narrator first attempts to leave his wheelchair, he fails in his task completely: '[q]uando me vi a céu aberto sem a cadeira de rodas... me veio uma tonteira, um desequilíbrio e caí sobre um canteiro de crisântemos... Eu disse que agora teria de me acostumar a cair'.³⁶ The euphoria of liberty experienced by the narrator when he finds himself under an open sky, which is a possible metaphor for democracy, is then soon replaced by a feeling of loss: he does not have the means to travel through the open space which he had previously navigated with unconscious ease. For now on, he is resigned to falling and failing in this world. An essential part of him has been amputated through a unilateral (dictatorial) decision in which he had no say.

With the help of one of the hospital nurses, Sebastião, the narrator succeeds in escaping from the hospital. The protagonist and his aide decide to go a coastal location where they can be close to the sea:

- Ah, o mar – ele exclamou de repente –, nunca vi esse bicho antes.
- Você nunca viu o mar? – perguntei.
- Ainda não – ele respondeu.³⁷

Sebastião's encounter with the sea coincides with the moment of the narrator's death. This allegory of death used by Noll seems to indicate that the narrator in the final stages in the story is far from fulfilling the literary function of 'someone who discloses truth' – a role assigned by the authors of *romance reportagem* to the narrator (who is often a doppelganger of the author) but instead only expresses his hope to come to terms with his own confusion: 'disse a Sebastião que um dia eu esperava entender por que foi que tudo aconteceu'.³⁸ A moment of lucidity unexpectedly marks his sudden death thus reversing the condition of the narrator throughout his fictional life in the novella. His ensnarement in silence and in the lost gaze which he casts

'common enemy' (the censorship, the repression) is replaced by a 'perhaps friend' (the state assistance)'. Sussekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: polêmicas, diários & retratos, op. cit.*, p. 27.

³⁶ Noll, *Hotel Atlântico, op. cit.*, p. 425.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

towards the world is now turned back to the world itself which, though it becomes silent to the narrator, can now be seen clearly: ‘o mundo tinha ficado mudo, era só silêncio, mas eu via bem cada coisa... Aí Sebastião olhou o mar. Eu também... Depois eu fiquei cego, não via mais o mar nem Sebastião’.³⁹ The gradual loss of the narrator’s senses occurs simultaneously with Sebastião’s discovery of the sea. The narrator’s nomadic fictional existence, deprived of any further purpose, utilitarian project or goal, finds its function at the conclusion of the narrative: bringing the sea into the life of his companion, Sebastião, albeit in an unexpected way. The death of the narrator completes his function in the narrative: the person in a turbulent present who travels through the confusion of the world around him and survives the violation of his physical being to bring something unpredictably new to those who have accompanied him at the end – Sebastião and, on a more metafictional level, the reader.

Contrary to the *romance reportagem* narrator who seeks to win over the reader, the protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico* seems to destabilise the reader’s ‘positive identification’ with the narrator himself by the very fact that he, as the storyteller, does not assume an omniscient knowledge or even an authoritative role in relation to his own account.⁴⁰ The death of the narrator-protagonist in effect effaces any final meaning or closure in the narrative: it is left open. The last sentences of the novella simply describe the very instant in which the narrator takes his last breath:

Nesses segundos que enchia o pulmão de ar, senti a mão de Sebastião apertar a minha.

Sebastião tem força, pensei, e eu fui soltando o ar, devagar, devagarinho, até o fim.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁴⁰ As Nelson Vieira observes in his analysis of some contemporary Brazilian literary writers, ‘[i]n exercising their freedom to demystify illusion’s multifarious manifestations in the arenas of literature, society, politics and culture, those Brazilian novelists who practice metafiction or acute textual self-consciousness are, for all purposes, hoping to reduce the distance between art and life by deliberately inciting the reader to be suspicious and aware of those established codes, discourses and patterns, exuding power, control and authority. These writers begin to alert their readers to the pervasiveness of authority by signalling and dismantling the insidious control behind a narrator’s or an author’s authoritarian stance’. Nelson H. Vieira, “Metafiction and the question of authority in the postmodern novel from Brazil,” *Hispania* 74 (September, 1991) p. 584.

⁴¹ Noll, *Hotel Atlântico*, *op. cit.*, p. 442.

The word '*fim*' alludes both to the death of the narrator and to the end of the novella. But, in a recapitulatory loop, it could quite convincingly be suggested that this 'end' also refers the reader back to the very beginning of the narrative, which started with the removal of a corpse whose identity was completely unknown. Everything has come full circle except that the narrator's power over meaning has been totally altered. At the conclusion of the narrative, the reader, who by default assumes the position of Sebastião who is left alone holding the corpse of the anonymous (but eerily familiar) protagonist, is invited to give the final meaning to the text.⁴² The death of the narrator takes away this teleological crutch from the reader: the author-narrator who might be used to help configure the narrative in the reader's search for meaning. This is in stark contrast to the implicit pact - a conscious or unconscious collusion - between narrator and reader in *romance reportagem* where the text commits the narratorial voice to answering the questions which the reader expects to be resolved through explanations about the experiences described in the novel. This deprives the literary narrative of an implicit interpretative function for the reader and holds it to the interplay of promises by the narrator and the hopes of the reader, who is dependent upon him. For Noll, therefore, the definition of a literary work is not based upon the fulfilment of a reader's expectation in the resolution of a narrative but it is the narrative itself which invites its audience to offer a personal interpretation to the text at each new and recapitulative reading. As Noll himself states unequivocally: 'o romance pode ser purificador porque o leitor vai entrar de uma maneira e vai sair de outra... Vamos serenar um pouco, serenar essa expectativa doentia de tudo ter de levar a uma finalidade'.⁴³

⁴² As Noll puts it: '[n]ão me deix[o] guiar desejo de confortar o leitor... [muito pelo contrário], o leitor tem de trabalhar comigo durante a leitura.' José Castello, "Memórias desmemoriadas," *Jornal Valor* 20, 21 e 22 de setembro de 2002. Reproduced in <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/res3.html>. (Web page accessed on 03/05/03) no pagination.

⁴³ Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

3.4 The *romance memorial*

Continuing the classification proposed by Malcolm Silverman, we can define *romance memorial* as the second type of narrative belonging to the *romance reportagem* genre. On the whole, *romance memorial* assumes the same position presented in *romance jornalístico*: it promises to expose, through the description of ‘real’ facts, the arbitrariness of an unjust political and social system based upon the use of coercive force. However, despite its non-fictional characters and use of a journalistic style, *romance memorial* differs from *romance jornalístico* in two ways: the level of the author’s involvement in the plot and the implicit ideological nature which structures its narrative. The narrator-author of *romance memorial* is no longer the objective journalist who seeks to show, through his own investigation, how justice has failed to judge specific crimes. He becomes, instead, the narrator who offers his autobiographical account as a left-wing political activist who falls into the hands of the repressive apparatus of the dictatorship. Presented as a portrayal of reality, this form of *romance reportagem* often describes the incarceration of its author who survives inhumane treatment in prison without betraying his left-wing political principles. The ideological message in the narrative always confirms the moral superiority of the author over his torturers in an ‘evidente processo de heroização da personagem que, mesmo sob violenta tortura, não fala nunca, nem responde a qualquer pergunta dos policiais’.⁴⁴ The narrative of *romance memorial* is centred on the:

depoimento quase factual ou testemunho... sua meta declarada é expor, objetivamente, e em detalhes, casos de violência física e psicológica envolvendo órgãos de repressão do governo... Documentário francamente de oposição, sem pretensões literárias, descreve a forma mais rudimentar de depoimento, praticado preponderantemente por ex-ativistas políticos ao mesmo tempo jovens e ficcionalmente inexperientes.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sussekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: polêmicas, diários & retratos*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

Despite its intended social and political denunciation, this sort of *romance reportagem* based upon a testimonial narrative has been severely criticised for not actually offering any substantial evaluation of the system it proposes to attack. Centred on the perspective of the political prisoner, such narratives seek to seduce the reader into identifying with the sufferings and heroic behaviour of the narrator. Rather than engaging in a discussion of their own political commitments and conceptions, the authors of such novels avoid questioning their own ideological beliefs, which are perpetuated almost to the extent of a dogma. The intended social denunciation in this sort of narrative is neutralised by its own structural form which:

desperta emoções fortes no leitor, mas previsíveis e festivas, desencadeia pensamentos de ação no leitor, mas pretensamente coniventes e populares, levanta inquietações originais no leitor, mas que não o levam a um questionamento das relações concretas e duradouras que ele mantém com a sua classe de origem e os aparelhos do Estado.⁴⁶

In the ensuing sections of this chapter, I will examine the criticism raised by some Brazilian and Latin American literary critics of *romance memorial* and how this criticism finds its resonance in the works of João Gilberto Noll.

3.4.1 *Romance memorial*, heroism and the worship of 'macho' ideology

One of the attributes often criticised in *romance memorial* is the androcentric aspect of its narratives. Almost exclusively related to male testimonials, the *romance memorial* emerges as an appraisal of its narrator, who is able to tolerate the most extreme forms of psychological and physical suffering as a form of political resistance. As Idelber Avelar has rightly indicated, the ability of an author-protagonist to claim credit for enduring torture manages to perpetuate the 'genuine mythology of

⁴⁶ Santiago, "A literatura e as suas crises," *Vale Quanto Pesa: ensaios sobre questões político-culturais*, *op. cit.*, p. 131/2.

the macho who withstands torture and never betrays the cause'.⁴⁷ It also does not pursue any kind of substantial analysis of the political system which had led the writer to be imprisoned and subsequently tortured. The body, in this context, becomes the obstacle which must be overcome and from which one must tear oneself away in order to prove one's own moral and ideological strengths.⁴⁸ In *romance memorial*, there is no space for the accounts of 'those who talked, those who betrayed, those who gave information... those who did not withstand the pressure'.⁴⁹ It is as if all left-wing militants shared not only the same political ideals but, more importantly, the same, exclusive sense of heroism through resistance. This macho-authoritarian attitude is further corroborated by the linguistic strategy generally used in *romance reportagem* novels. At a structural level, these narratives present a cold and objective description of violence and torture in a direct and emotionally unattached text – thereby further augmenting the stoic heroism of the macho author.

One of the first narratives to inaugurate this political and autobiographical genre was Carlos Marighella's *Por Que Resisti à Prisão*. Imprisoned on 9th May 1964, less than a month after the military coup of the same year, Marighella decided to narrate his experience in prison to the wider public with the specific objective of convincing the 'young revolutionaries' of the importance of facing their own personal fears and inspiring them to resist torture in defence of their political ideals. This aim is justified by Marighella who writes:

⁴⁷ Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American fiction and the task of mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) p. 66.

⁴⁸ Physical torture, in fact, appears in *romance memorial* as if a rite of passage by which the left-wing prisoner could not only prove his political engagement to his peers but also integrate his own identity of a selfhood on the ground of a political praxis. As Tânia Pellegrini suggests, 'a tortura sofrida pelo narrador funciona, no nível textual, como um abismo pelas paredes do qual ele sobe à procura de si mesmo... A questão crucial da identidade ganha peso infinito quando o corpo e a mente são postos à prova... A dor vai fundo. Vai até o limite da culpa por não ter sido tão torturado quanto os outros... É justamente a tortura que vai pôr à prova a profundidade de suas convicções política e é a partir dela que ele (narrador) vai começar a se questionar mais efetivamente enquanto intelectual engajado na ação. [O narrador s]ai redimido desse embate.' Tânia Pellegrini, *Gavetas Vazias: ficção e política nos anos 70* (São Carlos: Editora da UFSCar e Mercado de Letras, 1996) p. 48/9.

⁴⁹ Dorfman, *op.cit.*, p. 162.

[a] resistência à prisão em plena ditadura, mesmo correndo o risco de ser baleado como fui, é... a prova de fidelidade aos compromissos com a luta pela liberdade... Este livro é uma mensagem de resistência. E é sobretudo endereçado à nova geração. Os jovens de hoje é que melhor poderão compreendê-lo e – com seu entusiasmo e espírito revolucionário – estudá-lo, interpretá-lo de vários ângulos, para as conclusões que se tornam necessárias.⁵⁰

In his book, Marighella clearly states the advantages for the leftist political activist in making use of literature as one of the most efficient media for evading the censorship imposed by the military rulers:

recorro à literatura política, gênero muito em voga nas circunstâncias atuais, quando a militância política sofre toda sorte de restrições. O livro editado – apesar do ódio e das violências dos detentores do poder, que instauram o terrorismo cultural – é ainda uma válvula de escape, ao lado da crônica literária e mesmo da social. A opinião pública aceita o gênero, compreendendo a vantagem da utilização de quaisquer possibilidades legais, por mínimas que sejam. Ao militante político não cabe desdenhar recursos – ainda os mais precários – contanto que possa comunicar-se com o público e travar o diálogo tão odiado pelos inimigos das liberdades, mas tão necessário quando a luta pela democracia surge num plano inteiramente novo, em ligação concreta com a realidade da vida econômica e social brasileira.⁵¹

Physical struggle and resistance is a *leitmotiv* in Marighella's narrative, justifying the heroic behaviour shown by the narrator in confronting the aggression of his enemies without fear: 'Resisti a essa prisão até o fim... Mas minha força vinha mesmo da convicção política, da certeza de que tudo isto é ditadura e de que a liberdade não se defende senão resistindo'.⁵² Marighella's heroic posture is endorsed by commentators such as the literary critic Antônio Cândido who affirms that: '[q]uando sabemos que o preço que pagou foi a morte, avaliamos plenamente a estatura de Marighella como

⁵⁰ Carlos Marighella, *Por Que Resisti à Prisão*, 2a edição, apresentação de Antônio Cândido e prefácio de Jorge Amado (São Paulo, Editora Brasiliense, 1994 [1965]) p. 101/2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 19/20.

herói do povo brasileiro’ [my italics]⁵³ and the novelist Jorge Amado who writes that ‘Carlos Marighella, assassinado pela ditadura militar, em 1969, *herói* da luta do povo brasileiro contra a miséria e a opressão. *Herói* porque a bravura, a constância, e irredutibilidade e o devotamento foram qualidades de seu caráter [my italics].⁵⁴ The undertone of epic which persists in the narrative of *Por Que Resisti à Prisão* is sustained by its constant reference to physical violence accompanied by numerous descriptions of bloodshed. One of the most recurrent images in the book is the bleeding body as an act of political nonconformism and even as an image of ideological commitment: ‘não calaram minha voz enquanto lutei contra todos eles [police officers], meu sangue salpicando o povo aglomerado na rua, espantado e atônito, a calçada vermelha’.⁵⁵

In fact, descriptions of physical violence played an essential role in defining the success of *romance memorial*. The more detailed the depiction of torture and bloodshed in the text, the more ‘realistic’ and interesting the narrative became for the reader. It is in this context that Flora Sussekind utilises the term *leitor-vampiro*⁵⁶ to refer to those many readers whose literary interests were devoted to devouring more information about torture techniques and bloodthirsty scenes. What is more, *romance memorial*’s successful recipe of blending together resistance with physical violence and political propaganda characterises the ‘seductive’ nature of a narrative which:

serve muito mais ao autor do que propriamente ao livro. Muito mais ao autor que propriamente ao leitor. Estamos percebendo que o contato que se estabelece não é entre o leitor e o livro, mas entre o leitor e o autor... E passa o leitor a ser companheiro do autor, companheiro e admirador em virtude das perseguições que o artista vem sofrendo por ter escrito um livro de denúncia.⁵⁷

Descriptions of imprisonment, police interrogations, violence and torture are also a recurrent theme in the narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo*. However, Noll deliberately

⁵³ Antônio Candido, “Apresentação,” *Por que Resisti à Prisão*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Jorge Amado, “Prefácio,” *Por que Resisti à Prisão*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Marighella, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁵⁶ Sussekind, *Literatura e Vida Literária: polêmicas, diários & retratos*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁵⁷ Santiago, “A literatura e suas crises,” *op. cit.*, p. 132.

appropriates these elements of *romance memorial* in order to subvert the genre. Describing his experience in jail, the narrator avoids any heroic tone of political commitment or physical resistance. Scenes of horror and torture, which are commonly depicted in *romance memorial*, appear in *A Fúria do Corpo* as indicative of the condition not only of the political prisoner but even more so of the situation of ordinary Brazilians (poor children, women, etc) who are deprived of a voice in their daily struggle of survival in a unjust social system:

atravesso ruas congestionadas de todas as máquinas e corpos sucumbidos, entro no Edifício das Maravilhas, subo as escadas como o condenado ganha a imprevista causa, corro por corredores e não entendo à primeira vista o que vejo nas salas onde passo, portas escancaradas mostram mulheres flagelando postas de carne, vejo meninas sendo açoitadas por velhos, crianças sendo esfaqueadas por policiais, vejo uma mulher sendo penetrada pela uretra mijar pelo cu e cagar pela boca, câmaras de horrores, entro por uma porta à procura de saída, encontro sentado à minha espera o aliciador do terraço do edifício, me ajoelho diante dele, imploro que me deixe, suplico que me esqueça, que tenha piedade deste homem que já tanto sofreu... no gesto mais vil, então no último recurso beijo seus pés que se derretem ao contato dos meus lábios.⁵⁸

Distancing himself from the heroic bravery shown by the authors of *romance memorial*, the narrator of *A Fúria do Corpo* is not ashamed to expose to the reader how he begs his torturer for clemency in order to avoid physical pain.

The novel also utilises one of the most widely descriptive elements present in *romance memorial*: police questioning. The description of interrogations, which were normally always followed by scenes of torture, challenges again the exemplary heroic position of leftist activists whose portrayal of political resistance is more important than their own physical suffering. After being detained by the police under the suspicion of (political) terrorism, the narrator-protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* gives a

⁵⁸ João Gilberto Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, op. cit., p. 191.

full account of his (meaningless) interrogation and his adamant refusal to pass any relevant information to his enemy:

Quando vim dar por mim novamente tiravam o capuz da minha cabeça e a venda dos meus olhos e apareceu na minha frente debaixo de uma forte e baixa luz um homem que se apresentou: eu sou o Coronel falou num meio sorriso, e continuou:

- Você tem medo da tortura?

- Não.

- Da morte?

- Não nao.

- Confessa?

- Não não não.

E por trás vieram duas mãos e me deram um ‘telefone’. Sei lá se o que senti ainda poderia ser chamado de dor, caí. Passaram-se alguns minutos e o Coronel surgiu novamente em cima da minha cara:

- Você é inocente?

- Não.

- Admite a culpa?

- Não não.

- Tem medo?

- Não não não.⁵⁹

The complete description of the scene, which occupies a full page in the narrative, depicts an almost jocular, otiose interrogation: the colonel does not ask any substantial information about the supposed ‘subversive behaviour’ of the tortured, nor does the narrator know what the colonel is accusing him of. To sum up, the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* is a social outcast whose life and behaviour do not fit into the expected models of the left-wing combatant and cannot, therefore, fulfil any kind of identifiable role for the novel’s reader. The epizeuxis ‘não não não’ at the end of every question in the interrogation, rather than indicating political resistance, operates here in a more connotative sense, pointing to the fact that the narrator in *A Fúria do*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66/7.

Corpo has no significant ideological message to transmit; not to the police, the text or the reader.

3.5 Temporal perspective in Noll's narrative

The description of events at the very moment that they take place in the narrative is a common feature in the works of João Gilberto Noll. As the author states: 'o presente para mim é o que mais me inspira. O presente imediato, o espaço onde eu estou. Eu não sou um escritor voltado para o passado, para a reconstituição histórica de fatos ou épocas'.⁶⁰ The main implication of this temporal perspective is that both the fictional (narrator) and metafictional (reader) components of the novel assume the same position in relation to what is being narrated. This is in clear opposition to the temporal framework of detective novels and *romance reportagem*. The authority exerted by the *romance reportagem*'s narrators over the readers is achieved in great part by the temporal discrepancy between the scenes referred to in the novel – events that happened in the past – and the time at which these events are narrated. What is present for the reader – the description of a specific occurrence – belongs to the past of the narrator, who not only reconstitutes different events which took place before the narrative starts but also organises them in a chronological way in order to arrive at a conclusion which will be disclosed at the end of the story, i.e. in the future of the reading.⁶¹

As Roland Barthes has interestingly suggested, the more a text centres its narrative on the present time, the wider its level of indetermination becomes. For Barthes, novels

⁶⁰ Miguel do Rosário e Bruno Dorigatti, "A literatura é muito perigosa," *Arte e Política*, http://www.artepolitica.com.br/entrevistas/entrevista_noll.html. (Web page accessed on 02/02/05) no pagination.

⁶¹ As Patricia Waugh has observed, the orderly reconstitution of past events in the solution of a crime is of paramount importance in the structure of detective novels: '[d]etective fiction is a form in which tension is wholly generated by the presentation of a mystery and heightened by retardation of the correct solution... The reader is kept in suspense about the identity of the criminal until the end, when the rational operations of the detective triumph completely over disorder. Thus the reader enjoys the triumph of justice and the restoration of order, yet until the end he or she has been able to participate vicariously in the anarchic pleasure of the criminal's 'run'. The detective story celebrates human reason: 'mystery' reduced to flaws in logic; the world is made comprehensible to you'. Patricia Waugh *Metafiction: the theory and practice of the self-conscious fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984) p. 82.

which refer to actions that occurred in the past are not simply dealing in a descriptive form with previous facts, but are consistently ascribing a specific meaning to it. As a result, the narrative voice in such novels, by organising, controlling and determining the significance of past events in connection to the omniscient position of its narrator, leaves little space for the reader to exercise his freedom in adding new possible meanings to the story narrated:

the preterite is the expression of an order, and consequently of a euphoria. Thanks to it, reality is neither mysterious nor absurd; it is clear, almost familiar, repeatedly gathered up and contained in the hand of a creator... The narrative past is therefore a part of a security system for Belles-Lettres. Being the image of an order, it is one of those numerous formal pacts made between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter. The preterite *signifies* a creation: that is, it proclaims and imposes it [author's italics].⁶²

It is against the explicit chronological order imposed by the *romance reportagem* narrator that Noll's protagonists rebel. This position is clearly stated, for instance, in *A Fúria do Corpo*, where the reader is directly approached by the narrator-protagonist: 'O meu nome não. Nem o meu passado, não, não queira me saber até aqui, digamos que tudo começa neste instante'.⁶³ The narrator's account is a statement of his own fictional identity in that he knows that his existence can only take place at the very moment when the reader reads the novel. This initial metatextual reflection further indicates that the text can only exist as a continuous present which runs in parallel with the reading. The important role played by the reader in giving meaning to the narrated story is finally announced by the novel's narrator who proclaims to his audience: 'Me chame como quiser'.⁶⁴

⁶² Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967) p. 37/8.

⁶³ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ *Loc. cit.*

The metafictional elements that open the narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo* make the novel a dialogical process which is contrary to the authoritarian and one-sided account as promoted in *romance reportagem*. The use of the present tense as a metafictional strategy encourages readers not only to assume a role in the fictional world but also invites them to put aside their own identities from the ‘real’ world during the reading process. Conversely, the ‘real’ world of the reader, considered from the perspective of the narrator and characters in the novel, appears as a fictional construction. It is in this way that the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* casts doubt on the reader’s existence by questioning ‘quem sois?... e sois?’⁶⁵ – positing a reversal in which our ‘real’ identity assumes the character of a ‘fictional’ construction. As Wolfgang Iser indicates, the act of reading requires the reader to suspend – even if momentarily – his personal values and conceptual beliefs which establish the basis of their ‘fixed’ identity:

[o]nce the reader is entangled [in the fictional world], his own preconceptions are continually overtaken, so that the text becomes his ‘present’ whilst his own ideas fade into the ‘past;’ as soon as this happens his is open to the immediate experience of the text, which was impossible so long as his preconceptions were his ‘present’... Reading reflects the structure of experience to the extent that we must suspend the ideas and attitudes that shape our own personality before we can experience the unfamiliar world of the literary text.⁶⁶

The fictional pact between reader and novel is emphasised in the narrative, which establishes that the reader becomes also a character in the story by assuming a new identity from the moment the first page is turned. This ‘identity’, however, may not always be congruent with the reader’s everyday beliefs and moral principles so therefore ‘the reader may revise his or her ideas about the philosophical status of what is assumed to be reality’.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁶⁶ Wolfgang Iser, “The reading process: a phenomenological approach,” *New Literary Review* 3:2 (Winter, 1972) p. 295/6.

⁶⁷ Waugh, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

The Brazilian narratives of the 1980s which, like Noll's, portray the account of a first person narrator in the present tense have become a point of discussion among literary scholars. Tânia Pellegrini, for instance, identifies in the work of João Gilberto Noll, Caio Fernando Abreu and Sérgio Sant'Anna, among others, a confessional tone which, although void of any direct political or historical referentiality, would bear some resemblance with *romance memorial* narratives:

[a] tendência à 'confissão' aprofunda-se nos anos 80; não se trata mais de usar a literatura para suprir a falta de elementos referenciais que a situação política estava negando; cria-se agora um tipo de narrativa que abandona qualquer referência exterior mais explícita, mergulhando solipsisticamente no 'eu' absoluto. Não importa o tom empregado.⁶⁸

Pellegrini's arguments, especially when confronted with Noll's literary project, raise a series of problems. Firstly, she fails to identify a metafictional strategy used in the autobiographic or confessional tone employed by some authors in the 1980s to advance a critique of *romance memorial*. An additional point which Pellegrini does not address in her critique is that the first-person narrators in some of the works she analyses, and especially in Noll's narratives, do not present themselves through a 'coherent' or 'absolute' self whose existence precedes the act of reading, but openly resist being framed in an identifiable category by omitting circumstantial details about their lives such as proper names, social position or a recollection of their past experiences.⁶⁹ When focusing on the narrator's portrayal of his experiences, Pellegrini suggests that: 'esses narradores, *encerrados em suas cápsulas vazias, sem memória do passado e sem expectativa de futuro... [estão] enclausurados num eterno presente*' [my italics].⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Tânia Pellegrini, *A Imagem e a Letra: aspectos da ficção brasileira contemporânea* (São Paulo e Campinas: FAPESP/ Mercado de Letras, 1999) p. 69.

⁶⁹ In this sense, I agree with Flora Sussekind who, in a reading of the narratives produced in the 1980s, suggests that: 'talvez em diálogo crítico com o excessivo autocentramento das memórias, testemunhais e confissões dominantes na prosa de 70, o que se percebe agora é exatamente o embaciamento, às vezes assassinato puro e simples, de subjetividades e egos. Torna-se impossível pensar em confissões ou num lugar secreto e sedutor onde se esconde o sujeito, quando este é apenas uma espécie de objeto passível de visitação pública.' Flora Sussekind, "Mais virão, verás – o mundo como paródia e representação: os novos narradores" *Leia* 95 (setembro, 1986) p. 18.

⁷⁰ Pellegrini, *A Imagem e a Letra: aspectos da ficção brasileira contemporânea, op. cit.*, p. 70.

Contrary to Pellegrini's arguments, I suggest that the focus on the present time, at least in Noll's narratives, stands as an exercise of 'symbolic freedom' by which the meaning derived from the literary text is never something to be revealed by others (be that the narrator, characters or even the author of the text), but a demiurgical exercise to be resolved by the reader during the process of reading. This view is endorsed by Noll when he affirms that:

o relato ou a narrativa [na minha obra] não interessa tanto. Interessa é o que está se dando ali como acontecimento, como evento através da linguagem... eu acho que a estrutura da obra literária, mesmo em ficção, mesmo em prosa, ela tem um poder de gerar conteúdo por ela própria, quer dizer, é a combinação que você faz entre as palavras, é a estrutura que você dá ao seu livro que vai gerar seus significados, muito mais do que alguma coisa que seja prévia, que seja programática, na cabeça do escritor.⁷¹

Noll, as is clear in the above statement, emerges as a writer who does not set out with a conscious agenda but who finds himself driven along by his narrative rather than choosing it initially. His work does not evolve through a chronological sequence based on causality, but instead conveys the immediate experience of narrator-protagonists and characters for whom every action and perception is impregnated with meaning.⁷² It is this temporal framework in which the time of the narrative coincides with the time of the narration, alongside other factors, that distinguishes Noll's literature from other forms of confessional narratives which aim to provide a moral or epic account to the reader. As Noll himself expresses: '[t]rabalho com um tempo que não é utilitário e não vai ter nenhum resultado prático'.⁷³

For Silviano Santiago, the narratives produced during the 1980s which focused on the present experiences of their narrators mark the emergence of a postmodern literary tradition in Brazil. Santiago claims that contrary to the position of the narrator in testimonial accounts, who uses his or her past experiences in the form of an

⁷¹ Rosário e Dorigatti, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

⁷² In the next chapter I will expand on the significance of perception and gestural expression in Noll's work.

⁷³ Castello, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

unconditional knowledge which then operates as an ‘exemplificative lesson’ for the reader, the narrator in the postmodern text openly rejects such a didactic manoeuvre:

[a]qui se impõe uma distinção entre o narrador pós-moderno e o seu contemporâneo (em termos de Brasil), o narrador memorialista... onde o processo de envolvimento do mais experiente pelo menos se apresenta de forma oposta ao da narrativa pós-moderna. Na narrativa memorialista o mais experiente adota uma postura vencedora... Por isso a narrativa memorialista é necessariamente histórica (e nesse sentido é mais próxima das grandes conquistas da prosa modernista), isto é, é uma visão do passado no presente... A ficção pós-moderna, passando pela experiência do narrador... é primado do ‘agora’.⁷⁴

Santiago’s definition of the ‘postmodern’ text, which gives priority to the ‘here and now’ of the narrator can be easily identified in Noll’s works. However, the relevance of the immediate present for Noll’s narrator does not rule out the idea that his present is constantly shaped and informed by past experiences and future expectations. This is what can be inferred from a closer analysis of Noll’s works such as *Bandoleiros*. In its structural aspect, *Bandoleiros* eliminates any clear distinction between past, present and future by making different time planes coexistent. The narrative alternates between the protagonist’s experiences in Boston, Viamão and Porto Alegre, which are correlative to different times in the account: Boston and Viamão belonging to the protagonist’s past while Porto Alegre, the city where the narrator is situated at the beginning of the novel, indicates his present experiences and his projection for the future. This approach to non-linear time is best illustrated by the different position assumed by the other two main characters in the plot. The anonymous narrator always speaks from the perspective of the present while the other two male characters in the novel, Steve and João, seem to embody, respectively, the past and the future of the narrator.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Silviano Santiago, “O narrador pós-moderno,” *Nas Malhas da Letra*, *op. cit.*, p. 47/8.

⁷⁵ As Norberto Perkoski suggests, ‘o tema do **duplo** (o *doppelgänger*)... permeia a composição de *Bandoleiros*’ [author’s emphasis]. Perkoski, *op. cit.*, p. 16. Although identifying both João and Steve as *doppelgängers* of the narrator in *Bandoleiros*, Perkoski does not present a clear argument on how these two characters might reflect the protagonist’s self. Francisco Venceslau dos Santos offers a different reading for *Bandoleiros*, indicating that the narrator, Steve and João are the embodiment of different geographical realities which, brought together as a result of the process of globalisation, are

This sense of past to which Steve appears to be bound is highlighted by the very choice of the character's name. The phonetic realisation of the word 'Steve' analogises the Portuguese verb *estive* (I was) during the process of reading. This implicit verbal choice – *estive* (*estar*) in place of *fui* (*ser*) – appears to have an obvious implication in the understanding of how personal identity is conceived in the novel. Whereas the verb *ser* indicates an innate and enduring quality of being which is immune to change, the verb *estar* points to a transient condition of a subject whose identity is fluid in a reflection of the variety of his life experiences. This idea seems to be reinforced through the way in which the character Steve haunts the protagonist:

Eu grito Steve. Grito Steve simplesmente porque ele está muito perto de mim e agarra-se à minha camisa e a puxa com os olhos injetados de pânico. *Como se eu pudesse lhe dar algum sentido...* Eu não tinha nada a dar àquele homem que me puxava a camisa como um animal desesperado. Gritei Steve. E gritei que ele se afastasse... E vi que Steve já ia longe. Seus passos iam agora surpreendentemente firmes, como se quisessem alcançar a tempo o pôr-do-sol. Pois Steve caminhava em direção ao pôr-do-sol vermelho... Era o momento propício de eu escapar, fugir dali. E num repente desandei a correr. Mas por mais que quisesse evitar, eu não conseguia correr em direção que não a do pôr-do-sol... Ouvi um som atrás de mim. Era Steve. Que falava sozinho. Como esse cara me aparece agora, assim tão de repente?... *Estranhava que ele sumisse e reaparecesse assim, tudo tão encoberto* [my italics].⁷⁶

In his impersonation of the narrator's past experiences, Steve is always placed either 'behind', 'pulling back from' or 'following' the protagonist. The relation between Steve/past and the narrator/present – antithetical, yet interdependent – provides a crucial clue to the novel's meaning and structure, suggesting that there is no past that could be called upon to elucidate the present. Both temporal dimensions, past and

conflictually related to each other: '[e]m *Bandoleiros*, as fronteiras entre local – Brasil, *pueblo*, Viamão e o global – Boston (= bosta) implodem devido à *tensão entre os hemisférios Sul e Norte investida nos corpos dos personagens...* [onde todos s]ão viventes sem lugar... desconstruindo a oposição Primeiro Mundo x Terceiro Mundo'. [my italics] Francisco Venceslau dos Santos, *Subjetividades da Ficção Brasileira Contemporânea* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Europa, 2004) p. 83/4.

⁷⁶ João Gilbeto Noll, *Bandoleiros in Romances e Contos Reunidos, op. cit.*, p. 230.

present, shuttle freely throughout the novel without either of them assuming priority over the other. As Marcelo Rezende observes, ‘[n]a ficção criada por ele [Noll], o tempo não passa; se divide e se sobrepõe em camadas que seus personagens atravessam – partindo, depois retornando, refazendo o caminho na direção contrária – com extrema facilidade’.⁷⁷

This erratic time perspective contrasts sharply with the temporal progression that shapes the narratives of *romance memorial*. As I have indicated earlier in this chapter, *romance memorial* authors look back into past events in their lives in order to reconstitute and justify their heroic behaviour in a systematic way.⁷⁸ When confronted with his past, the narrator of *Bandoleiros* is not able to give it a coherent meaning or justify it in any way as his past is continually modifying and being modified by his present experiences. As Noll comments on the temporal aspect of his narrative, ‘the past [is] almost reinvented, with your experience of the present you sometimes bring into being possibilities forgotten from the past’.⁷⁹

On the whole, *Bandoleiros* presents temporality as recurring and non-linear, whilst also enhancing the slanted and illusory aspects of personal memory.⁸⁰ As it emerges

⁷⁷ Marcelo Rezende, “‘Berkeley em Bellagio’: Noll parece ansioso por comunicar,” *Folha de São Paulo*, 09 de novembro de 2002. Reproduced in <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrad/fq0911200217.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination.

⁷⁸ The narrative device by which the past is used in order to validate the narrator’s brave behaviour is clearly present in the case of Carlos Marighella’s book which I discussed briefly in the previous section. Apart from presenting his courageous actions, the past is recalled to reinforce the combatant character of the narrator, which is also reinforced by the behaviour of his ancestors: ‘[m]eu pai era operário, nascido em Ferrara (Alta Itália – Região de Emília). Chegara como imigrante a São Paulo e se trasladara à Bahia. Minha ascendência por linha materna procede de negros haussás, escravos africanos trazidos do Sudão (e afamados na história das sublevações baianas contra os escravistas)’. Marighella, *op. cit.*, p. 19/20. When explaining the aim of his book, Marighella clearly states that: ‘este livro é uma mensagem de resistência. É sobretudo endereçado à nova geração. Os jovens de hoje é que melhor poderão compreendê-lo’. *Ibid.*, p. 102. For the author, we can conclude, the narrative of his personal experience needs to be taken as a lesson for forthcoming generations. His message is not devoted to his contemporary readers, but to the young people of today who can become the revolutionaries of tomorrow. Only they will be able in the future to understand the important message that the adult reader at the present cannot fully realise.

⁷⁹ Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁸⁰ The subjective and imaginary character of memory is also stressed in *Harmada*. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator questions the truth of the scenes he remembers from his past: ‘[f]iquei assim por algum tempo, parado pensando nos últimos acontecimentos, tentando fazer um balanço sucinto daquilo que acabara de ocorrer, me perguntando se tudo fora composto mesmo por acontecimentos... ou se tudo não passara de um breve colapso... o que parecera ser talvez não fosse’. João Gilberto Noll, *Harmada in Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 503. Regardless of the time in which a specific event took place, be it the distant past or the near present, the narrator cannot be certain of the veracity of his memory. In the novel, the reader is presented with a dialogue between the narrator and his friend Bruce in which the two characters are unable to reconcile their memories of a common past experience:

in the novel, memory is not a factual representation of reality but the equivalent of personal imagination: through the very act of remembering, the past acquires its own version of imaginative truth for the subject. This point is underlined in one of the passages in the novel where the protagonist fantasises an encounter with the Argentinean writer Ernesto Sábato:

Na biblioteca penso em Ernesto Sábato estudante aqui em Boston. Volto a pé, passo na frente de um grande prédio. Muitos estudantes entram e saem. Quem sabe Sábato não entrava aí todas as manhãs. Vem-me a sensação da tristeza de Sábato. Um dia nervoso como esse, e Sábato ali, subindo os degraus com livros na mão... Se eu encontrasse Sábato ali, naquela esquina, poderíamos talvez conversar longamente. Eu lhe confessaria minha admiração. Tomaríamos café como faço neste instante. É aí que pego a sua mão e a beijo. Noto que Sábato perturba-se com o exagero afetivo... Sábato ri. E segue andando. Fico pensando aonde vão dar os passos de Sábato.⁸¹

The sudden dispersion across unrelated verbal tenses (present, past-imperfect, past-subjunctive, future-conditional and present participle) indicates how the protagonist's attempt to talk the past into being becomes, irremediably, a figment of his imagination. While re-evoking Ernesto Sábato's sojourn in Boston, the narrator revives some experiences and sentiments that might have occurred to Sábato himself. The desire to have met Sábato in the past becomes a factual memory for the narrator

'- Sabe? – Bruce quebrou o silêncio – aquele dia em que eu te segui...

- Sim, você me seguiu por Harmada toda, a pé...

- É, te segui por horas e horas... e depois ficamos até tarde da noite pelas ruas conversando, era uma noite de ventanias muito quentes que vinham do mar, *lembra?*... e lá você tirou a roupa e começou a passar lama pelo rosto... a dançar pelado à luz daquela pequena clareira no matagal, *lembra?*

- Não, *não lembro* – confessei.

- *Lembro* que quando entrávamos no matagal havia por ali dois caras... as calças de ambos abaixadas, o de muleta enconstado num tronco, *lembra?*

- Não, *não consigo lembrar*.

- Pois eu *lembro* que depois de um tempo em que você dançava todo embarrado, os dois apareceram sem cerimônia para olhar... *lembra* que naquela noite levei você para a minha casa?

- Não, não, *não lembro*...

Neste ponto Bruce se calou... eu sentia vez ou outra um frêmito vindo do seu corpo, como se um ferrão que brotasse lá de dentro, quem sabe uma *lembrança inesperada*... com *os mais empedernidos assomos do passado*' [my italics]. *Harmada, op. cit.*, pp. 565-67. Although referring to the same event which occurred in the past – a walk through Harmada – Bruce remembers the episode in a way that is completely alien for the narrator. As a result, the reader is incapable of deciding if Bruce's account is a factual experience of the past, if the narrator has forgotten the unfold of the event, or even if both narrator and Bruce have indeed met in the past.

⁸¹ Noll, *Bandoleiros, op. cit.*, p. 244/5.

who then recreates an encounter with the writer. The reader is unable to determine with any degree of certainty whether the narrator does or does not believe in his illusory digression. In my opinion, the passage blurs the distinction between reality and fiction by suggesting that our memories of the past are always provisional and therefore capable of being reinvented and revived as an episode whose veracity is in accordance with our personal needs and desires. As Noll has expressed: '[o]ften, when you pretend that something exists, you pretend so much that this something begins to come into being'.⁸²

In contrast with Steve's life, whose past experiences are constantly evoked in the account – even if in a dazzled, fragmentary and non-chronological order – the narrator makes no reference to João's past. The only thing we learn in the narrative is about João's future in which he is condemned to experience a gradual withdrawal of life: 'João está na minha frente... sofrendo de uma doença desconhecida. Ele perdia as forças e o movimento – o sistema nervoso se deteriorando'.⁸³ João's irreversible physical deterioration – a metaphor for the process of ageing – could also represent our inevitable mortality: 'João sorria, e não importava coisa alguma que ele fosse morrer. João vai. Eu vou. Todos nós vamos morrer'.⁸⁴

The recurrence of the sentence 'João está na minha frente', uttered by the narrator throughout the narrative, suggests a relationship established both on opposition and parallel ground, as if mimicking a subject confronted with his own projected image in a mirror.⁸⁵ In fact, João seems to embody the narrator's idealised image of the writer he wants to become. João is described as an 'escritor guerreiro', able to write 'romance[s] esperançoso[s]'⁸⁶ while the narrator is categorised as a disenchanted novelist whose 'talento todo [se encontra] empregado numa armadura corrosiva'.⁸⁷ In conclusion, João appears to symbolise the narrator's hope for a future which would bring lucidity in a twilight zone of confusion and dismay. This future, however, is not

⁸² Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁸³ Noll, *Bandoleiros, op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁸⁵ The novel's conclusion 'João estava ali do outro lado, com seu braço bonito dobrado para cima, a mão contra o vidro, e eu fui ali, toquei minha mão no vidro, justo na mão de João' (Noll, *Bandoleiros, op. cit.*, p. 320) highlights the idea in which the glass works as a mirror separating the narrator from his image.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁸⁷ *Loc. cit.*

only uncertain but is constantly threatened with the possibility of not becoming realised: '[e]ntre a vigília e o sonho imaginava em volta de mim uma escama impenetrável. Mesmo que eu passasse meus últimos anos escavando essa escama e o conseguisse, não haveria nem João do outro lado de mim'.⁸⁸

To sum up, *Bandoleiros* provides a sustained meditation on time whilst also suggesting that the past is no more fixed or certain than the future and that both temporal dimensions are conceived according to the momentary and ever changing experiences of our living present. This temporal approach stands in clear opposition to *romance memorial* narratives which, drawn on 'real' past experiences, manipulate time in order to justify and even defend the brave behaviour and heroic identity of their narrators in order to serve as a model for future generations. In Noll's narratives, past and future are dissolved in a confused present thus preventing the reader from ascribing a coherent identity to the narrator or establishing an identification with him. As Idelber Avelar astutely remarks:

[t]he eruption of past fragments does not awake [Noll's] protagonists from the temporal sameness to which they seem condemned. The process of subject formation stages a gaze back at the past that finds nothing to identify or recognize... Noll's is thus a literature alien to all restitutive thrust... The reader ends up feeling that, despite fragmentation and disorder in the protagonist's memory, there is ultimately no puzzle to be recomposed, because it does not matter much what happened before or after.⁸⁹

3.6 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have contextualised Noll's works within the mainstream Brazilian literary production of the 1980s. My main intention was to indicate how Noll distanced himself from the narratives known as *romance reportagem*. While appropriating some elements of this genre, particularly where they portray violence,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁸⁹ Avelar, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

police interrogations, scenes of torture, unsolved deaths, etc., Noll seems to criticise *romance reportagem* by exposing its perpetuation of macho ideology through the pretence of an objective account, its commercial nature and its replacement of international detective novels and crime thrillers for the Brazilian readership. Finally, I have discussed its failure to proffer a pertinent evaluation of the system that it was designed to attack.

I have also expounded how Noll's works differ radically from those of *romance reportagem* in being stylistically and formally fragmented through the abolition of an omniscient narrator. This is sustained by the suspension of moral or ideological judgements upon the narrated events, the unsystematic shift between different temporal moments and the conception of memory as a subjective invention. These elements ensure that Noll's narratives cannot arrive at a tidy and conclusive resolution, thus leaving the reader without an answer or solution and burdened with questions to the answers for which the reader must attain through embarking upon a personal interpretation of the text.

Chapter 4

The phenomenology of perception in Noll's literature

In this chapter, I will explore the close relationship between subjective consciousness and corporeal perception as it operates in Noll's work. Before embarking upon the analysis of Noll's narratives, I shall briefly highlight the core propositions supported by two of the most influential thinkers of Western philosophy, Plato and René Descartes, who argue for the division of man between mind and body and, in so doing, defend the superiority of rational thought over corporeal experience. I shall first indicate how and why Noll rejects this body/soul dichotomy. I shall then discuss how Noll's approach to the body and corporeal perception as the cornerstone of subjective consciousness challenges the philosophical tradition which gives primacy to mind over body. My attention here will be mainly devoted to *A Fúria do Corpo* and *Canoas e Marolas*.

Following this discussion, I shall show how the author rejects the definition of an emotional state as a 'mental feeling or affection'¹ by defending, through the experiences of his narrators and characters, a conception of subjective emotion which is intrinsically tied to our bodies and perceptual activities. My analysis here will reflect the phenomenological propositions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In the final sections of this chapter, I will discuss the function of vision in Noll's narratives. Stepping back from the arguments raised by some critics, who identify the role of Noll's narrators as that of a 'neutral camera' which captures different images of the fictional world without establishing a logical connection between them, I will argue that what is visually perceived by Noll's narrators is not the objective recording of multiple and unrelated images but instead a subjective projection which awakens personal responses that range from physical sensations to personal thoughts and memories. I will also discuss the other main perspective of Noll's critics in that they offer a reading of his protagonists in the context of a postmodern society.

¹ The Short Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd edition, prepared by William Little, H. W. Fowler and Jessie Coulson, revised and edited by C. T. Onions (London: Guild Publishing, 1986).

Finally, I will present a reading of the communicative function of the body in Noll's works. Analysing the function of the body in Noll's characters, I shall seek to demonstrate how the conception of interpersonal communication in Noll's narratives is not limited to the use of verbal language but rather becomes sustained through gesture, movement and perceptual response.

4.1 The supremacy of the soul over the body in the Western philosophical tradition

The revision of Western philosophical traditions has been ongoing for nearly 2,500 years and has formed the backbone of intellectual/philosophical discourse during this time. At this point, it is necessary to summarise this tradition in order to contextualise the work of Noll. In simple terms, one could contend that in its pursuit of the transcendent aspects of human existence, philosophical tradition in the past has often sought to ascertain the nature of consciousness by first dividing human experience into body and soul and then resolving this dichotomy by establishing the supremacy of the latter over the former. In this process, consciousness is aligned with thought although of course this is a certain simplification. The philosophical enterprise of discerning body from soul and error from truth is the central objective of one of the foundational works of Western philosophy: Plato's *Republic*, specifically in what is perhaps the most widely known of its parables: 'The Allegory of the Cave'. In this allegory, Socrates proposes the existence of two groups of people: one living in an underground cave and the other group inhabiting the earth's surface. After introducing this scenario, the philosopher explains that the cave dwellers are collectively chained to each other and are thus unable to leave or even to move within their environment. What is more, Socrates suggests, the cave prisoners perceive reality by directing their vision towards a wall on which shadows are constantly projected. Relying only on what is perceived by their eyes, the underground population, believing that their immediate senses are the gateway through which the truth of the world can be

ascertained, would never question whether what they see are indeed the real objects themselves or only their shadows.

Socrates then describes the experience of the denizens of the surface world, which is in contrast to the situation of the cave dweller. These individuals, free to move around and capable, therefore, of moving their eyes in different directions, would be able to see not only the shadows of objects but also the objects themselves. They would even be able to look at the sun itself, the primary source of light, which makes the vision of objects and their shadows possible. For these people, there would be the possibility of questioning what they see, so they could acquire a knowledge or truth about the world through distinguishing shadows from objects. Their ability to discern or judge between what is false and what is real could only be achieved, as Socrates elaborates, from their capacity for rational thought. Without seeking to elucidate further inferences from this story, I would like to focus my attention on the dichotomised aspect of Plato's narrative. His allegory was used to illustrate the difference between corporeal perception and intellectual knowledge. For Plato, beliefs based on our corporeal perceptions are always prone to error, whilst perception based upon rational thought was the only path which could ultimately lead to a true knowledge of the world and of oneself. What is more, the parable is constructed on an evaluative polarity (superior and inferior, true and false, knowledge and belief, reality and appearance, freedom and imprisonment, etc.) which reflects the philosopher's positive valuation of the soul and mind over the inadequate nature of our physical bodies and perceptual experiences in the world.² Therefore, Plato argues that whereas the body can be deceived by the appearance of things, the mind, which refuses to fall into the falsehood of sensation, will search for the essence of what is presented to man's sensorial apparatus.³ Plato concludes his philosophical allegory by affirming that:

² Not all Greek philosophers shared Plato's ideas concerning the difference between body and soul. The stoics, for example, placed the body at the core of their philosophical discussions. They stressed the importance of human beings' physicality in our process of world discovery. The objective of this section, however, is not to compare the different traditions within Greek thought but to centre my attention on Platonism, which, through its dichotomic body/mind model, has provided the framework followed by much of the Western philosophical tradition.

³ It is interesting to note that, despite his admonishments about the inadequacy of corporeal perception, Plato constructs his allegory exclusively in reference to the human body and its perceptual activities: vision is the main perceptual activity used by Plato to illustrate the superiority of rational thought over sensorial impressions.

the capacity of knowledge is present in everyone's mind. If you can imagine an eye that can turn from darkness to brightness only if the body as a whole turns, then our organ of understanding is like that. Its orientation has to be accompanied by turning the mind as a whole away from the world of becoming, until it becomes capable of bearing the sight of real being and reality at its most bright.⁴

Defending reason as the only valid process for the acquisition of knowledge, the philosopher René Descartes elaborated further on the Platonic division between body and soul. Descartes's philosophical model, sometimes encapsulated in the phrase '*cogito, ergo sum*', delineates the nature of human existence exclusively in terms of cognitive activity. Considering man to be a *res cogitans* (thinking thing), Descartes equates rational activity with subjective consciousness, arguing that it is only because of our capacity for thought that we as human beings are able to fully experience ourselves and the world around us: '[b]ut what, then, am I? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, that imagines also, and perceives'.⁵

The body, Descartes argues, is but a passive recipient which receives all the chaotic stimuli that the external world showers upon it. The mind, however, acts to order, processes, and where necessary puts into doubt the diffused sensations experienced by our body, expunging in this way the erroneous nature of corporeal perception. Descartes defends the supremacy of the soul over the body by further arguing that it is in our minds, and not through our bodies, that perception occurs:

bodies themselves are not properly perceived by the senses nor by the faculty of imagination, but by the intellect alone; and since they are not perceived because they are seen and touched, but only because they are understood [or rightly comprehended by thought], I readily discover

⁴ Plato, *Republic*, translated with an introduction and notes by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 245.

⁵ René Descartes, *A Discourse on Method, Meditations on the First Philosophy and Principles on Philosophy*, translated by the French from John Veitch with an introduction by Tom Sorell (London and Vermont: Everyman, 1994) p. 85.

that there is nothing more easily or clearly apprehended than my own mind.⁶

Whereas Plato defends the body and soul dichotomy by differentiating between their respective functions of sensorial-perceptual and intellectual activities, Descartes further diminishes the importance of the human body by comparing it to a machine which neither perceives nor thinks. According to Descartes, our material body is only lifeless matter completely dependent upon the soul, which enables men to ‘imagine, be attentive, and move the body’.⁷ Even the most organic sensations such as hunger, pain or heat are felt, according to Descartes, in our soul although we are often misled into attributing them to our bodies. Descartes believed that these sensations ‘are nothing more than certain confused modes of thinking’.⁸ He concluded that, if my feelings, emotions, volitions, perceptions and sensations are located in my soul rather than in my body, then *I am my soul*; in the same way as the environment where an individual is located cannot be regarded as belonging to his identity, the body in which I, as a soul, am situated is considered by Descartes as extrinsic to the ‘self’.

This summary of two of the seminal thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition sets the context for the next section in which I will seek to show how Noll distances himself from the philosophical idealism proposed by Plato and Descartes, emphasising the pre-eminence of our material body in the process of experiencing ourselves in the world. For the purpose of this chapter, I will give more emphasis to the analysis of Noll’s works in the light of the propositions of René Descartes. In the last chapter (Chapter 5) of this thesis, I will return to the ideas of Plato as presented in *The Republic*, to provide a further contrast when discussing the aesthetics of Noll’s literature.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

4.2 Noll and the rejection of the body and soul dichotomy

The delineation of human experience in terms of our rational capacity for judgement and thought as highlighted in the philosophical ideas of Plato and René Descartes appears to be refuted in Noll's works. The prominence given by Noll to the corporeal experiences of his narrators and characters places emphasis on the physical body as the primordial source by which man is able to experience the world and to achieve an awareness of the self. As Noll himself states, his literature is mainly devoted to the 'reconstrução [da experiência humana] no encontro do corpo sofrido-de-cada-dia. Não o corpo "pret-à-porter" para o próximo verão, mas o corpo-referencial-primeiro da nossa fundação humana'.⁹

Amongst Noll's works, the novel *Canoas e Marolas* offers one of the best illustrations of how the author rejects the pre-eminence given to the insight of the rational mind and/or soul over the experiences of our physical bodies. In this novel, we are presented with the account of a narrator-protagonist who decides to return to an island where he had lived in the past. The main reason for his return is to meet Marta, his supposed daughter. Doubt and uncertainty are the two main feelings that accompany the narrator throughout his journey. If we were to follow the propositions of Plato and Descartes, doubt might be regarded positively as the first step to be taken by the subject in questioning his false beliefs on the way to attaining a state of true knowledge through intellectual processing and judgement. René Descartes, for example, attests that '[i]n order to seek truth, it is necessary once in the course of our life to doubt, as far as possible, of all things'.¹⁰ However, the doubts that afflict the narrator, far from leading him to any kind of substantive revelation or important truth, operate in an inverse manner whereby his mind increasingly becomes the source of entangled misunderstandings. His continual doubts only generate new questions in an endless chain of unsolved misgivings. Unable to know with any degree of certainty whether Marta is his daughter or even if she really exists, the narrator finds himself alone with his own nebulous thoughts. When he does encounter Marta, this only

⁹ "Em *A Fúria do Corpo*, o amor na adversidade humana," *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, 09 de dezembro de 1981. Reprinted in Flávia Armani Bueno Magalhães, *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito*, (Unpublished MA dissertation, Campinas: UNICAMP, 1993) p. 319.

¹⁰ Descartes, *op.cit.*, p. 151.

intensifies his state of mental confusion. The close resemblance between Marta and her namesake mother appears to act as a further blow to the already confused narrator. His return to the island – a geographical displacement – evolves into a temporal retrocession due to his incapacity to perceptually differentiate his past with Marta, his lover, from his present encounter with Marta, his daughter:

tudo o que me cercava sobrevivia agonicamente dessa incerteza, é, sem dúvida, mesmo aquela loira grávida que de fato parecia descendente de húngaros como também Marta sua mãe, tudo era incerteza, vaguidão, mistério sem realeza divina ou força semelhante, não sei, pois não sei mesmo se realmente fecundei a mãe dessa Marta agora grávida... No meio dessa grave onda de incertezas, dava até para especular se o pai dessa criança que se formava no ventre de minha filha não seria eu, eu que sabia trabalhar cada vez menos com a memória, *esse eu que era eu e que podia sentir vivamente* ainda os movimentos do feto – na extremada delicadeza de ser levado a tocar no ventre grávido [my italics].¹¹

As the passage seems to suggest, all the metaphysical activities normally related to the mind – e.g. the capacity to discern reality from illusion, judgement from rational thought, the organisation of experience into a linear temporal succession and the function of memory which establishes logical correlations between the experiences that occur at different moments of one's life – become, in fact, obstacles which prevent the protagonist from arriving at any degree of certainty about himself and his environment. The only assurance that the narrator can grasp in his state of mental confusion is the presence of the self – 'esse eu que era eu' ('this I who was I') – which is achieved not by the process of abstract thought but by his physical interaction with other bodies. For the narrator, it is the perception of another body which enables him to be sure about his own existence and the existence of those around him. The narrator can literally feel ('sentir vivamente') Marta's baby, still in gestation: the foetus exists not as a 'a thinking thing', as Descartes would describe man, but because he can be physically perceived by others.

¹¹ João Gilberto Noll, *Canoas e Marolas* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 1999) p. 41. As I have discussed at length in the previous chapter, the temporal perspective in Noll's works always enhances a non-linear

The refutation of the dichotomy between body and mind is further elaborated in the novel when the narrator contests the idea of a mind or soul which inhabits the human body and which is identified as the origin of human consciousness:

Pois eu mesmo não sabia com exatidão de mim, se adquirira um contorno pela vida ou não; meu corpo talvez resultasse flutuante, informe, tal qual a minha mente se ela de fato existisse, se ela de fato não fosse a ilusão de um miasma aventureiro, sim, se ela fosse de fato mente, precisa entre as demais.¹²

The relationship which unfolds between Marta and the protagonist could be understood as an allegorical opposition to the Cartesian hypothesis that 'I [that is, my mind]... am entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it'.¹³ Marta is a medical student who is working on a project called 'Programa de Ablação da Mente' (Programme for the Ablation of the Mind). This programme is further described by the narrator as '[u]m método relativamente simples que consistia em levar o doente até o outro lado como se o terapeuta estivesse transportando o agonizante a um novo paraíso, paraíso criado não por profetas mas por humanos como a gente'.¹⁴ Science, the repository of a body of knowledge provided by rational enquiry, is portrayed in the novel as the modern substitute for religion. In the narrative, the scientist and his theory is equated with a mystic prophet and his dogma in that both seem to base their authority on an explanation of a 'truth' which is, in most cases, inaccessible to the majority of people, who accept the authority of the scientist in the same way as they would believe in a mystical power without any rational or logical explanation. The only available information about this obscure 'Programa de Ablação da Mente' is its aim or objective but not its method or procedures, which the scientist keeps secret. The scientist i.e. Marta, arrogates to herself not only the task of understanding the secrets of life but also that of preparing the individual's transition into the mysteries of death.

conception of time by which the narrator's past and present experiences cannot be fully differentiated from each other.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32/3.

¹³ Descartes, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁴ Noll, *Canoas e Marolas*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

This assumed supremacy of the mind over the body seems to be further reflected in the novel through the authoritarian role played by the scientist and her imposition of a truth upon those who function as the object for her research. After meeting Marta, his supposed daughter, the narrator is informed that he has been chosen to take part, as an experimental subject, in the ‘Programa de Ablação da Mente’. Unable to come to terms with this decision taken by others about him without any previous consultation, the narrator tries to share his puzzlement with Marta in the face of this unexpected occurrence:

Não sou doente terminal, porque me trouxeram aqui? Marta sorriu como quem sorri diante de um velho que não quer tomar o seu remédio.

“Não, não estou velho, mostro minha identidade e tudo, olha!”

Ninguém está velho, ela parecia me dizer. Apenas chegou a hora para você.¹⁵

We can infer that the main idea behind the ‘Programa de Ablação da Mente’ is that by promoting the annihilation of the mind, the body would be exempt from its sensory functions, benefiting the patient by eliminating the pain of their illness. It is only after being subjected to a surgical procedure that the narrator can fully experience the consequences of the programme which, contrary to the assertions of its defenders, does not lead to a state of pleasure but instead to a condition of utter torpidity:

Naquele estado eu não tinha o tão discutido gozo, só frustração. Aquele estado era uma inação barata, indigente para se tirar dali qualquer partido. Naquele estado apenas me sentia inapto e pronto, puro peso morto... Fiquei não sei mais quanto tempo assim, de papo pro ar, exposto para aqueles abutres, sabendo que não estavam obtendo sucesso comigo, não estavam conseguindo me induzir para o bem-estar derradeiro, essas coisas que comprovariam suas teses a respeito da passagem serena para o submundo dos vermes.¹⁶

The narrator, his mind having been extracted from his body, describes his post-operative experience as a regression to a form of consciousness prior to the constitution of reason in which the experiences of the ‘self’ and the world are

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67/9.

dissociated from his body: 'Eu entrava num coma branco, sem razão ou sem sentido... eu apenas recebendo soro na veia, imerso na minha genética genuína, quase inorgânica, aquela cuja memória vai até um tempo anterior à alma'.¹⁷ Deprived of his mind, the protagonist is able to experience his body as an independent entity possessing its own volition, contrary to the Cartesian proposition that the body is 'nothing but a statue or machine made of earth'.¹⁸ Mindless though he may be, it is in this state in his own body that the narrator finds the necessary conditions to enable him to escape from his coma and from the hospital where he is kept as an object:

Nessa condição em que me acho me exaspera estar completamente dependente desses fulanos do Programa de Ablação da Mente. Desses caras que fuxicam para me injetar alguma reação distinta da inércia... mas não conseguirão, verão. Se me levantar daqui com algum fervor vai ser por minha conta e risco pois ainda tenho uma parcela de impulso dentro do meu organismo, com ele ainda posso me levantar daqui e sair andando pelos corredores do hospital... Como sonâmbulo encarno um corpo inverídico, um trapaceiro da aparência, um equívoco da vista. Por isso fujo melhor que qualquer lúcido.¹⁹

Notwithstanding his somnambulant state due to the extraction of his mind, the narrator is still able to experience, through his body, the presence of the world and the existence of the self. In the last sentences of the protagonist, which mark the conclusion of the novel, he describes the gradual process of physical paralysis which overtakes him. The ceasing of his bodily functions occurs simultaneously with his life coming to a standstill, which leads to the literal petrification of the narrator's being. Unable to move his body within the world, the narrator is compared to an inanimate stone which stands alone in the empty, inhospitable environment of a desert:

notei que as minhas pernas não obedeciam mais ao meu comando. Eu estava parálítico da cintura para baixo.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁸ René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p. 99.

¹⁹ Noll, *Canoas e Marolas*, *op. cit.*, p. 70/1.

Sim, eu deveria estar transmitindo a impressão de ser uma figura além da vida, *exultante em sua alma divinizada, mas, enfim, parálitica...* E a parte superior do meu corpo pareceu também se paralisar.

[C]omo uma pedra, uma esfinge no deserto, senti o vento encontrar na minha pele um duro contentor, uma alma à altura de sua força... Sim, eu era uma pedra, uma esfinge no deserto [my italics].²⁰

The conclusion of the narrative seems to suggest an intermingling between body and soul as the narrator loses the corporeal functions which connect him to the world. Contrary to the Cartesian conclusion that body and mind ‘can exist independently of each other’,²¹ the experience of the protagonist seems to suggest that if we need to describe the essence of life by the presence of a soul, this ‘soul’ has to be defined first and foremost as undifferentiated from the body and that ‘[i]t is the body rather than the mind which interprets the world, chops it into manageable chunks and assigns it approximate meanings’.²²

4.3 Corporeal perception and consciousness in Noll’s work

The Cartesian proposition of an internal mind or soul which not only rules over its ‘container’ the physical body but which also symbolises our true self has provided the epistemological ground upon which most of contemporary Western philosophical ideas have been raised. As some critics have pointed out:

[b]y and large philosophers have focused on the concept of self-consciousness and the complexities in explaining it inherited from Descartes, and have tended to neglect the complexities of the way we use and represent our bodies... within

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²¹ Descartes, *A Discourse on Method, Meditations on the First Philosophy and Principles on Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) p. 235.

psychology itself, as within philosophy, discussions of the body and of the self have rarely made contact.²³

As has been discussed in this chapter, the literature of João Gilberto Noll seems to articulate a different approach to the term ‘consciousness’ by focusing on the important role played by our body and physical perception in the constitution of the ‘self’ and affirming at the same time that it is only through our bodies that we can become aware of our existence as living beings engaged in a interdependent relationship with the world and with others. The constant displacement of narrators and characters in Noll’s literature highlights the incessant and ever changing flux of the perceptual experiences of his protagonists. These experiences, which take place in the very moment in which the narrator tells us his account, seem to reject the Cartesian definition of an imminent, subjective consciousness which reveals itself through ‘thought’; embracing instead a more phenomenological approach to consciousness by which perception – the encounter between the subject and his world – assumes a relevant position in the definition of the self. As Sandro Ornellas suggests, ‘mais do que simplesmente em trânsito, seus [Noll’s] narradores são exemplos de personagens cuja própria referência identitária é fragmentada... os espaços exteriores que eles percorrem parecem se afigurar como manifestações anímicas das suas próprias subjetividades’.²⁴ In their continuous mobility through the narrative, Noll’s protagonists are exposed to unfamiliar environments and unexpected situations. In order to respond to these unpredictable situations, these narrators learn that it is primarily through their perceptual bodies, and not through an attempt to ‘understand’ their new experiences, that they are able to respond to the world. As the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* concludes: ‘cada encontro nos lembrava que o único roteiro é o corpo. O corpo’.²⁵

²³ Naomi Eilan, Anthony Marcel and José Luis Bermúdez, “Self-Consciousness and the Body: An Interdisciplinary Introduction,” *The Body and the Self*, edited by Naomi Eilan, Anthony Marcel and José Luis Bermúdez (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1995) p. 2.

²⁴ Sandro Ornellas, “A narrativa subjetivante de João Gilberto Noll,” *Revista Verbo 21 – Cultura & Literatura*. Reproduced in <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/est1.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination.

²⁵ João Gilberto Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Contos e Romances Reunidos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) p. 35.

In fact, amongst the many aspects of Noll's literary project, there is a persistent interest by the author in describing the immediate perceptual experiences of his protagonists where these experiences have a clear connection with the 'I' of his narrators:

o que eu tenho assim de consciente, com relação à essa opção da primeira pessoa do singular, é que, na minha cabeça, eu sempre achei que ficaria mais fácil ter um empenho filosófico na ficção ... *Porque esse mundo é visto pelo olhar de um "eu," não o "eu" que possa dar um recado, falar apenas do seu mundo, não é isso. Mas, deste "eu" que está sempre em contraposição com esse outro que é o mundo, que é o outro mesmo, a pessoa [my italics].*²⁶

Noll's philosophical interest, as we can conclude from his own words, lies in the way that his narrators and characters are aware of their existence through their physical interaction with each other and with their environment. Rather than reflecting on subjective consciousness in metaphysical terms, Noll stresses the fundamental importance of corporeal perception in the continued shaping of the 'self'. This is clearly stated in the narrative of *A Fúria do Corpo*, especially in the passage in which the narrator is confronted with an image in a mirror that he cannot recognise as his own. Instead of seeing the reflection of a poorly dressed male beggar (the self-image that he mentally associates with his body), the narrator perceives the image of a rich old lady in the mirror which is completely at odds with his 'imagined' body representation: 'uma dama irreal se apossa do meu corpo e me reflete esguia, loura e bela qual ninfa de outras eras'.²⁷ Trying to come to terms with this outlandish situation in which body and mind are literally experienced as dissociated from each other (the objective perception of his body does not match his conceptual image of it), the narrator is unable to discern who he really is: 'Não sei quem sou, que fiz, por que mundos me entranhei... Não sei quem sou. Minha alma é transparente. Meu corpo é prega sobre prega... Não sei quem sou. Talvez precisasse impingir-me um espelho e diante dele ficar por toda a madrugada'.²⁸ This conflict of identity is only resolved

²⁶ Bueno Magalhães, "Encontro com João Gilberto Noll," *João Gilberto Noll: um escritor em trânsito*, *op. cit.*, p. 299.

²⁷ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 162

when the narrator recognises that his existence and that of the world around him can only be experienced through the materiality of his body:

Trago um rubi no anular, é este rubi quem sabe que me consagra, ou pelo menos me distingue, define, quem sabe; roço o rubi pela face, comprimo-o contra a pela fronteira aos lábios até deixar a marca: sim, sei agora que o rubi existe e que minha pele é viva: sangra... então canso-me de tentar saber quem sou, pois o razoável sei: sou.²⁹

The narrator concludes that ‘to be’ is not ‘to think to be’ but literally to exist as a physical, sentient body. In this way, Noll’s narrative, when it is approached from a phenomenological perspective, highlights that one’s consciousness arises from one’s direct experience as a perceptual subject within the world: I am sure that I exist not because I can *think about existence* but because my material body allows me to *experience existence* in my everyday relation to objects and to other beings. My body, in this sense, is not a organic layer which contains my ‘consciousness’ – my body is, in fact, the sole means through which I can be conscious of my existence and that of the world. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues:

when I reflect on the essence of subjectivity, I find it bound up with that of the body and that of the world, this is because my existence as subjectivity is merely one with my existence as a body and with the existence of the world, and because the subject that I am, when taken concretely, is inseparable from

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163. The theme of a personification of a character in the body of another appears in several works by João Gilberto Noll. In most cases it appears to be used, as in the passage of *A Fúria do Corpo* we are analysing here, as an allegory to illustrate the fundamental importance of the body in providing the signification of our existence. In the short story “Miguel, Miguel, não tens abelha e vendes mel” (*Romances e Contos Reunidos, op. cit.*, p. 696-699), we have the account of a boy, Miguel, who in an unexpected way, assumes the body of another character, Seu Patrício. His identity becomes divided between a body he does not acknowledge as his own and a mind, conceived as his ‘self,’ which makes him believe to be imprisoned in someone’s else body. The narrative ends with the physical death of Seu Patrício resulting, concomitantly, in the annihilation of Miguelzinho’s voice. His existence, at the end of the story, appears to be connected, not to who Miguelzinho ‘thought’ he was, but precisely to the materiality of that body he couldn’t ‘rationally’ recognise as his own.

this body and from this world. The ontological world and body which we find at the core of the subject are not the world or body as idea.³⁰

In the same way that my material body becomes the only possible way through which I can be conscious of my own existence, it is also the case that my knowledge of the world and of others around me comes through my physical experience of them, which suggests that I can only be aware of the existence of other beings when I can physically perceive them. This would seem to explain Noll's preference for introducing his protagonists and secondary characters, in the majority of the cases, through their relation to the narratorial voice ('meu pai', 'meu irmão', 'meu amigo', etc.) or by their physical aspects ('o garoto', 'a garota', 'o velho', 'o índio', 'a mulher' and so on), and not by other abstract or cognitively organised characterisations such as proper name, life-history, psychological features or internal thoughts. It is only by their physical presence and mutual interaction that narrators and characters can validate their existence for the reader and for each other.

That is the case, for instance, in *A Fúria do Corpo* where the narrator certifies the existence of his partner Afrodite by perceiving her material body: '*sei que és mulher porque teus lábios vaginais estão descobertos sob a saia roxa e eu os vejo entreabertos... sei que és mulher não porque te queira assim mas porque tua voz que ouço agora tem o risco das cordas mais tesas... já toquei nos teus lábios vaginais, já penetrei entre eles*' [my italics].³¹ As the passage seems to indicate, 'to know' the other is not the same as to 'conceptualise' the other through cognitive activity, but mainly through perceptual activities such as by vision, hearing and touch. The order in which these perceptual verbs are employed in the passage – to see, to hear, to touch and to penetrate – awakens a kinetic impression in the reader in which we follow the narrator's physical motion towards Afrodite, as if the closer he gets to her, the more certain he becomes about her existence. The perceptual encounter between the two characters is first indicated by the verbs 'to see' and 'to hear', indicating the gradual proximity of the two bodies until they touch - a direct physical contact which is subsequently followed by penetration in sexual intercourse. It is in this moment of

³⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 408.

³¹ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op.cit.*, p. 27/8.

extreme physical intimacy attained through sexual intercourse that the narrator and Afrodite become bound to each other and are able to experience love: ‘o meu sexo sim, o nosso sexo, e agora é tudo como se fosse nossa origem... nos olhamos e percebemos o quanto amor se pode ainda sustentar’.³² As the passage seems to indicate, corporeal perception not only confirms the existence of Afrodite for the narrator but also certifies their mutual love which is clarified by and through their bodies.

4.4 The corporeal nature of emotions

Other than offering the material source through which his narrators and characters can be certain of their own existence and the existence of the world around them, the body also functions in Noll’s narrative as the place through which emotions can be experienced. Scenes of intense emotional nature appear in *A Fúria do Corpo* with a direct connection to the character’s perceptual experiences. It is mainly through his body, more specifically through tactile perception, that the narrator is able to feel the intensity of Afrodite’s love:

Quando a gente se encontrava você [Afrodite] dizia meu coração tá doendo, toca aqui. Eu tocava no coração com a mão espalmada sobre teu peito e sentia o coração responder: pulsava ali uma outra vida que não a minha, um outro ser vivo no mistério mas tão mineral que eu podia tocar, alisar na minha ternura, apertar com o ódio de quem possui o que não é seu e que no entanto se dá. Um coração apaixonado. O coração pulsava feito uma pomba na mão.³³

Here Afrodite’s love is not expressed metaphysically, by words or thoughts, but is manifested in her body through involuntary physiological responses, such as the acceleration of her heartbeat. Through a comparison with an erect penis – the physiological manifestation of male sexual arousal – Afrodite’s heartbeat is for the

³² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

narrator an unquestionable, as it is palpable, proof of her feelings, confirming Merleau-Ponty's assertion that:

[m]y love, hatred and will are not certain as mere thoughts about loving, hating and willing: on the contrary the whole certainty of these thoughts is owed to that of the acts of love, hatred or will of which I am quite sure because I *perform* them.³⁴

It is exactly as acts *performed* and *perceived* by physical bodies that emotional feelings are described in Noll's texts. Another moment in *A Fúria do Corpo* which illustrates the association between emotional feelings and bodily experience takes place when the protagonist collapses on the streets of Rio de Janeiro and is taken to a public hospital. In the hospital he discovers the 'corpo jovem e desvalido'³⁵ of a boy with whom he falls immediately in love. Again, as in the case of Afrodite, love appears to be evoked through corporeal sensations which resonate in the body of the narrator:

eu via naquela bunda meu único oásis da enfermaria, o único lugar possível de beleza e oração... minha voz queria aliciá-lo a não morrer, fique, volte, porque meu coração te necessita... e só te nutrirei do *amor real* como o gostar da tua bunda e adorá-la... Por vezes ele se revolvia e eu tinha vontade de chegar ali e alisar os cabelos do anjo, passar escavar a mão pelo seu corpo todo como num garimpo, dizer meu bem o mundo tá precisando mesmo é de amor e você meu menino *tem o corpo amado*... Eu estava apaixonado por essa beleza. E agarrava essa paixão pelos ouvidos olhos, e eu precisava sentar no chão para que as golfadas de meu pau não fossem observadas por ninguém [my italics].³⁶

The love experienced by the narrator is described in its material dimension. Unable to touch his beloved's body, the narrator appeals to his other perceptual organs such as

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 385.

³⁵ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49/50

ears and eyes which can validate the boy's physical presence. The erection which the narrator tries to hide from the eyes of others – rather than a mere sexual excitement – appears to be one amongst the many forms of physical responses caused by love. The term 'amor real' (real love) mentioned by the narrator defines his love not as a product of thought or imagination but rather as a material feeling in the same sense described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty when affirming that 'emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude'.³⁷

The physical manifestation of emotion, however, is not felt exclusively by those directly involved in a specific relationship but also finds a response in the bodies of other people who can witness the display of emotional feelings. Such is the experience that occurs to the narrator of *Harmada* while perceiving the exchange of caresses between Cris and her boyfriend. The bodily contact between the two lovers awakens some unexpected physical reactions in the narrator:

Bebemos os três juntos num bar chamado White e pelo visto os dois estão mesmo enamorados um do outro. Às vezes se beijam com alguma candura, noutras dão-se as mãos, e sempre que suas peles se tocam, eu noto, há entre os dois uma corrente pouco disfarçável de tremor. Por mais um pouco chegariam aos meus ouvidos uns gemidos ainda submersos, eu pressinto. Aquela troca branda de carícias, ali na minha frente nesse bar chamado White, me faz bem. Não preciso de nada mais para que o meu próprio corpo se sinta contemplado, ele apenas constata aquela dedicação concentrada um pelo corpo do outro, ali, e fica bem, assim, mesmo que nenhuma promessa pessoal lhe instale a sensação febril, o meu corpo ali a admirar discreto os dois que se procuram quase chega a conhecer ele próprio uma espécie rara de abrasamento, que eu só começo a adivinhar agora nos meus cinquenta e poucos anos: sim, eu estou ali a admirar discreto aqueles dois e não gostaria de estar neste momento em nenhum outro lugar, porque em

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The film and the new psychology," *Sense and Non-Sense*, translated with an introduction by Hugert L. Dreyfus and Patricia A. Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) p. 53.

nenhum outro lugar encontrarei a sinceridade entre dois corpos a revelar-se inteira para mim, e isto me supre de verdade, quase a convicção de que alcançarei ainda hoje uma espécie de saciedade desconhecida, embora este estar aqui agora com aqueles dois corpos não precise de mais nada além de estar aqui, pois o não entrar em cena não fere nenhum dos meus sentidos, eu fui feito sim para estar aqui, admirando quieto e calado aqueles dois, e estes minutos não transbordarão para depois, e depois eu saberei que fui atingido por inteiro, e que me renovei...³⁸

Although not directly involved in the physical contact of the two lovers, the narrator is able to experience, through his body, the intensity of emotions expressed by the couple. The description of what he sees is not narrated in an objective or neutral way, but instead demands a certain physical reaction from him in his role as a ‘participant observer’. In order to fully comprehend the feelings of the lovers, the narrator does not resort to a rational conceptualisation of love. The presence of Cris and her boyfriend and their ensuing bodily gestures evokes a sort of physical response in the body of the narrator which brings their experience of love into him, corroborating Merleau-Ponty’s proposal that:

[s]ince emotion is not a psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude, we cannot say that only the signs of love or anger are given to the outside observer and that we understand others indirectly by interpreting these signs: we have to say that others are directly manifest to us.³⁹

The intrinsic relation between emotions and corporeal feelings in Noll’s narrative is not restricted to those emotional responses expressing physical attraction. In fact, all types of sentiments taking place in the characters’ physical bodies are described in Noll’s narrative. Another passage in *A Fúria do Corpo* illustrates how repulsive emotional feelings such as hatred have a material resonance in the bodies of the characters. While convalescing in a public hospital, the narrator describes how he is

³⁸ Noll, *Harmada in Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 549

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, “The film and the new psychology,” *op.cit.*, p. 53.

confronted by the powerful gaze of another inmate: '[n]o leito em frente ao meu havia um velho... Me fitava quase o tempo todo, seus olhos chispavam ódio em direção à minha idade e eu devolvia o ódio'.⁴⁰ The exchange of gazes is described through its potential to directly communicate feelings of loathing, thereby expounding corporeal perception as a form of communication which transmits material feelings rather than only abstract ideas. The hatred which establishes the relationship between seu Dino and the narrator is literally felt in and by their bodies. This feeling, which characterises the relationship between the two characters, ceases at the very moment when the narrator looks at the dead body of seu Dino: 'olhei o cadáver do velho envolto no lençol... então havia apenas um cadáver sem a menor possibilidade de olhar sobre mim admirado?... o velho dormia só, naquela solidão que ninguém é capaz de violar, tão sozinho que só olhá-lo representava um gesto fracassado'.⁴¹ When looking at seu Dino's corpse, the narrator realises that he cannot experience the same feelings that he once shared with the old man. The mutual feeling between the characters could only survive as long as both of them were alive and able to *perform* their emotions to each other.

4.5 Visual perception and subjective experience

Vision assumes a prominent position amongst the many other perceptual acts described in Noll's narratives. Sentences such as 'O seu olhar dizia que ele entornara várias doses';⁴² 'falava-me com o olhar visivelmente emocionado';⁴³ 'me olhou como se estivesse perguntando a meu respeito';⁴⁴ or 'o menino manifestou inquietação no olhar'⁴⁵ are constantly present in Noll's narratives, revealing how the characters' gaze expresses their personal feelings and subjective desires, which are normally absent from their actual speech. This frequent reference to visual images which do not have a clear connection to the narrated event has led some critics to consider Noll's fictional

⁴⁰ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op.cit.*, p. 45

⁴¹ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op.cit.*, p. 47.

⁴² Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 565.

⁴³ Noll, "Alguma coisa, urgentemente," *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 683.

⁴⁴ Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

⁴⁵ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

strategy mainly from two perspectives. The first compares Noll's narrators to a cinematographic camera which records the images of the fictional world in a random and neutral way. The second group of critics suggest that the visual experiences of Noll's narrators illustrate the condition of the contemporary individual who, living in a world saturated by visual images, has lost the potential to organise different images that are presented to him. in a logical sequence or even respond to them.

For those critics who consider Noll's works from the perspective of cinematographic techniques, there is a common assumption that the narrator assumes the posture of a camera which automatically captures all of the different images that happen to fall within his visual field without being able to select or even differentiate one image from the other. In his analysis of *O Cego e a Dançarina*, Norberto Perkoski proposes that: '[o] narrador, como se fosse uma câmera cinematográfica, desdobra-se e desloca continuamente seu centro de interesse, gerando vários pontos de vista **na e da** narrativa' [author's emphasis].⁴⁶ In focusing this reading of Noll's works on the interactive nature of perception in the connection between perceiver and perceived, I would challenge the interpretation offered by Perkoski. If we consider the narrator's visual descriptions to be the product of his personal perception of the world and others, we cannot but assume that the protagonist/narrator can only have a single point of view within the story he tells. Except for a few stories in *O Cego e a Dançarina* which are narrated by a third-person voice (a strategy commonly employed by the narrators of realist fiction who assume an all-knowing and all-seeing position which enables them to offer both a commentary on the behaviour of distinct characters as well as an account of their thoughts and points of view to the reader), Noll's narratives are mostly centred on a first person narrator who tells his story from a subjective perspective. Consequently, while he may not be able to shift his point of view and assume the perceptual position of other characters in the story, which is an artifice seldom used by the author and therefore uncharacteristic of his narrative approach, the narrator cannot be reduced simply to a cinematographic camera. As has already been discussed in the previous sections, Noll's narrators are actually reflecting their own experiences based on sensation.

⁴⁶ Norberto Perkoski, *A Transgressão Erótica Na Obra De João Gilberto Noll* (Santa Cruz do Sul: Editora da UNISC, 1994) p. 35.

Marinyze Prates de Oliveira is another critic who, like Perkoski, suggests that the gaze of the narrator in Noll's work functions in the form of a camera that constantly shifts focus without centering its attention on a single object while at the same time not comprehending or becoming affected by the images it captures:

Em *Hotel Atlântico*, ainda que o narrador fale sempre na primeira pessoa, há um claro distanciamento entre seu ponto de vista e o mundo por ele tematizado. De seu posto de diretor cinematográfico, capta de forma neutra com o olhar-câmera o espetáculo da vida, atirando na tela/página imagens quase sempre destituídas de emoção e envolvimento pessoal.⁴⁷

Again, I propose a different reading from that offered by Prates de Oliveira (and Perkoski), by suggesting that Noll's narrators and in particular the narrator-protagonist of *Hotel Atlântico* do not assume a 'neutral' position towards the images in the narrative and that they are personally involved in what they visually perceive. The description of the images perceived by the narrator, even those that do not appear to have any relevance in the development of the narrative, indicates a deep level of personal involvement between the seer and the object of his look. The act of seeing, as we can observe in the narrative of *Hotel Atlântico*, is always followed by other perceptual responses experienced by the narrator, such as in the following passage:

Numa esquina da Barata Ribeiro uma banca exibia um jornal com uma manchete sobre o extraordinário frio carioca daquele ano.

Assim que li a manchete *percebi* que eu tinha perdido a fome, e até se instalava em mim um certo enjôo [my italics].⁴⁸

Or, as the protagonist comments on another occasion when he is deciding on the destination of his next trip in a bus station:

⁴⁷ Marinyze Prates de Oliveira, *E a Tela Invade a Página: laços entre literatura, cinema e João Gilberto Noll* (Salvador: SCT, FUNCEB, EGBA, 2002) p. 87.

⁴⁸ Noll, *Hotel Atlântico* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 377.

Agora eu *via* apenas o chão sujo do piso superior da rodoviária. Olhando aquele chão sujo eu não tinha nada a pensar. Talvez uma vaga *saudade* da intimidade infantil com o chão.

Me surgiu a idéia de que a viagem me devolveria essa intimidade. Sabe lá se não vou ter de dormir no chão, *era o que dizia uma voz interna entre excitada e apreensiva* [my italics].⁴⁹

The description of the objects of visual perception in *Hotel Atlântico*, as exemplified by these two moments in the novel, does not seem to indicate an impassivity on the part of a narrator unable to react to his environment. Rather it points more precisely to an opposite function: the awakening of other perceptual activities ranging from physiological sensations to emotional states, all of which are connected to the narrator's own body. In the first passage, the vision of the newspaper headlines makes the narrator aware of his lack of appetite and the sensation of sickness. In the second passage, the sight of the dirty floor in the bus station is immediately associated with a nostalgia for the narrator's childhood. This nostalgia is referenced in his own body and its perceptual experience – his tactile familiarity with the floor and its association with something lost in his adulthood.

The realisation of the conception of perceptual experience, and more particularly vision, is not so much a mode of a random capturing of the world, but rather one of a subjective operation which reflects the individual's self in the external objects, people and landscapes that he sees, in the sense that 'he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at... he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*'.⁵⁰ The subjective way through which we perceive the world is discussed in *Bandoleiros* during the dialogue between Mary and the narrator. Pretending to be a blind man, the protagonist lets himself be visually guided by Mary, who describes for him what she sees in their environment. Her description, however, far from being an 'objective' rendering is, in fact, the result of a personal perception marked by the selection of specific visual elements which clearly reflect Mary's own subjective and emotional state:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.

⁵⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated from the French by Alphonso Lingis, Edited by Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) p. 134/5.

Até Mary chegar no quarto. Sentou-se na cama. E me contou que estava vendo a neve a flutuar numa grande placa azul-prateada. Lembrei-me de que, para ela, eu era um cego de nascença. Não a desapontei, deixei que ela fosse se entusiasmando com a descrição. Estava agora a descrever as ruas, casas, um *yellow-cab* trafegando pela neve. Ergui sorrateiro a cabeça, e comecei a contar quantos elementos ela adicionava à paisagem. Até agora, dezessete. Dentre eles, uma bicicleta retorcida, um velho manco, uma torre incendiada. Todos trazendo velado ou claro um apelo à desolação. Triste cego que dependesse de Mary para olhar, pensei.

Por que Mary apresentava esse fascínio por detalhes tristes? Essa pequena perversão que só eu, ali, um cego que não era cego, estava em condições de conhecer. Certamente ninguém mais no mundo tivera acesso a essa obscura ótica de Mary. E nada provável que ela viesse a encontrar outro cego capacitado a surpreender esses seus melancólicos acréscimos.⁵¹

Through Mary's account, the protagonist realises that what is being described to him is not an impartial view of things but rather a selection of visual elements which are organised perceptually and selectively by one particular pattern: 'um apelo à desolação' or an appeal to grief, to use the narrator's own words. The act of seeing, as depicted in the passage, does not suggest a random selection of images but instead indicates a reflection of the subjectivity of the seer who projects himself into the very world he sees. As Juan-David Nasio rightly suggests: 'não há surpresa no ver, porque se trata de algo que se relaciona com o reconhecimento... [ver] [t]rata-se de estar sempre à espera de encontrar, na imagem das coisas visíveis e pregnantas, nossa própria imagem'.⁵² It follows that the narrator, through his own experience, recognises that each person sees only what is of concern to himself; to everything else

⁵¹ Noll, *Bandoleiros in Romances e Contos Reunidos*, op. cit., p. 253.

⁵² Juan-David Nasio, *O Olhar Em Psicanálise*, trans. Vera Ribeiro (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar Editor, 1995) p. 30/1.

he seems to be blind suggesting that what we perceive of the external world belongs, in fact, to our own self.⁵³

It is important to stress here that while challenging the arguments of critics such as Perkosi and Prates de Oliveira in their analysis of Noll's works, I do not negate the profound influence exerted by films on Noll's narratives. Noll's interest in adapting aspects of the cinema in his works does not seem to indicate a literal translation from film techniques by the function of the camera, but appears to reside in the possibility offered by films to introduce fictional characters through their 'physical actions' rather than by presenting their 'abstract thoughts'. In this sense, theatre is another form of performance art which has exerted, as much as cinema, a deep influence on Noll's literary production.⁵⁴ This is a fact which has been overlooked by those critics who promote a reading of Noll's works exclusively from the perspective of the new possibilities of image recording initiated by the cinematographic camera. What both cinema and theatre explore in their narratives – contrary to the more traditional forms of literary narratives such as in the realistic or the psychological novel in which the

⁵³ As José Gil puts it: 'Percepcionar equivale então a investir (forças e afectos), de tal maneira que não é possível separar o sujeito do objecto: o observador faz parte da observação, o sujeito está implicado na percepção. O que significa que não há percepção objectiva de um corpo humano: este é um sistema meta-estável perceptivo, a cada instante o olhar, o tacto, o cheiro, são impregnados de mil determinações subjectivas que condicionam a percepção das formas. Por isso, a percepção do corpo humano tem sempre uma carga afectiva: perceber é transferir, entrar em relação de transferência'. José Gil, *Metamorfoses do Corpo* (Lisboa: Relógio D'Água Editores, 1997) p. 182/3.

⁵⁴ Theatre appears as a theme in two of Noll's novels: *A Céu Aberto* and *Harmada*. The character referred as 'o rapaz' in *A Céu Aberto*, a playwright, discusses with the narrator the aesthetic project he wants to develop under the name of 'Teatro da Aparição' [Theatre of the Appearance or Apparition]: 'Escuta: pois é, não sei se te contei que o teatro que estou a escrever é o teatro que consagrará as aparições, é o que eu tenho denominado para consumo interno de Teatro da Aparição, melhor assim, pois basta de personagens de carne e osso que vêm de algum lugar e partem para outro, não, não, a partir de agora de repente irrompem do nada e de súbito desaparecem para o nada... o espectador aqui terá sua capacidade de previsão amputada'. João Gilberto Noll, *A Céu Aberto* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 636. It is interesting to observe the close similarity between the character's aesthetic proposal and Noll's own literary project. As in the case of the 'Teatro da Aparição', Noll's narratives focuses exclusively on the moment when characters come into action without elucidating for the reader any past memories or experiences lived by these characters, as I have discussed in the previous chapter. Both in the 'Teatro da Aparição' and Noll's narratives, the reader is equally prevented from anticipating what is going to happen in the development of the plot. In *Harmada*, we have the account of an ex-actor who uses his theatrical skills to entertain his companions (including here the reader himself who 'listens' to his narratives) in a shelter for homeless people. When reflecting on its narrative, Noll affirms that *Harmada* '[é] um livro que tem uma fé cega no teatro, no poder do teatro, no poder da recriação, de você realmente ver outros mundos, de fazer um exercício de vicer outros mundos, outros personagens, de sair um pouco de você mesmo e recriar a realidade. O teatro tem esse poder'. Miguel do Rosário e Bruno Dorigatti, "A literatura é muito perigosa," *Arte e Política*, http://www.artepolitica.com.br/entrevistas/entrevista_noll.html. (Web page accessed on 02/02/05) no pagination. Noll's interest in plays is not only attested by the introduction of actor narrators or

attitudes and behaviour of its protagonists and characters are described by the elucidation of their private thoughts, the reflection over their past experiences and the explanation of their personal aspirations – is the actions carried out by the characters through their bodies. Corporeal movements, physical appearances, bodily gestures, facial expressions and exchange of gazes are, among other perceptual manifestations, as important as the words uttered by the characters. By presenting his fictional characters through their actions, Noll seems to adhere to a more phenomenological perspective in which the definition of selfhood and subjectivity are not exclusively related to what the subject *thinks* he is but are defined by the interpersonal relationships that the subject maintains with others and with the world and which are in a process of constant reformulation. Underscoring his interest in theatre, Noll comments that his narratives have ‘[u]m traço... do Artaud – aquela coisa do Artaud tentar romper as fronteiras entre o corpo e o teatro, entre o corpo e o espetáculo. Me atraí essa idéia do despojamento existencial de alguns personagens ou não-personagens do Artaud. As suas figuras aparecem apenas com o seu corpo’.⁵⁵

Resuming the discussion on the relevance of visual perception in Noll’s works, there is a second group of critics who identify in Noll’s narrators a perceptual attitude assumed by individuals who have been characterised as living in a ‘postmodern’ society. In responding to this critique, I will incorporate some brief summaries of the conceptualisation of postmodern theory as it relates to this interpretation of Noll’s work. For the advocates of postmodern theories, the recent technological advances of the mass media have enabled us to be acquainted with images that are sometimes not only completely alien to the objects, people and landscape of our specific surroundings, but are also presented in a concatenated formulation with no necessary logical relation between them. The experience of the television viewer has been used by the postmodernists, in this sense, as a primary example of how man has become impassive to what is captured by his eyes. The transmission of news, documentaries, films and soap operas, which are intersected by advertisements of various products aimed at different targets and audiences, has had a profound impact on television viewers. The passive perception of these different images, each of them disconnected

playwright characters in his narratives. In fact, Noll himself wrote a play in 1994, *Quero Sim*, which was performed in his native city Porto Alegre.

⁵⁵ Moacyr Scliar, “A Busca do Romance Sinfônico,” *Leia* 100 (fevereiro, 1987) p. 18.

from the other, is, so affirm some social critics, reflected in the subject's incapacity to formulate a coherent narrative of what he perceives.

Based on ideas put forward by 'postmodern' theoreticians such as Jean Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson and others, some critics have identified in Noll's narrators the position of the 'automaton': a subject who, deprived of any capacity for judgement or sense of subjective response, perceives diffused images in a fictional world and neither discriminates between them in terms of their importance in the narrative nor in some cases even reacts to what has been perceived visually. Nizia Villaça, for example, considers the visual perceptions of Noll's protagonists to be a neutral operation which does not reflect in a given moment any personal involvement between seer and seen: '[a] proximidade entre o observador e o observado funciona como estranhamento... Ao contrário dos demais sentidos, o olhar não entra em contato com o mundo, passa entre as coisas, objetiva-as'.⁵⁶

Edu Teruki Otsuka is another critic who points to the failure of Noll's narrators to offer a coherent account of their perceptual experiences. This is, in Otsuka's view, an indicator of an empty subjectivity unable to extract any valid knowledge from his external environment or to make sense of it. As the critic proposes:

[o] que predomina [na narrativa de Noll] é o registro 'objetivo', neutro e sem emoção dos eventos que o narrador presencia ou nos quais se vê envolvido... O olhar do narrador não intenta buscar sentidos profundos que desvendem os objetos que abarca. Tampouco o que é visto parece repercutir de alguma forma dentro do narrador, pois o Eu que narra é um homem oco, *um Eu sem interioridade íntegra*... Assim, o narrador limita-se a ver mecanicamente as pessoas e os objetos ao redor; seu olhar é o registro transitório do que quer que venha a entrar em seu campo de visão, e disso resulta um discurso feito de fragmentos

⁵⁶ Nízia Villaça, *Paradoxos do Pós-Moderno: Sujeito e Ficção* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora da URFJ, 1996) p. 104.

descritivos que se sucedem sem vínculos entre si... Isso se dá porque
lhe falta a *capacidade organizadora da consciência* [my italics].⁵⁷

As I have been discussing in this chapter, Noll's narratives do not seek to engage the protagonists (and by proxy the readers) in a rational discourse about their experiences. Rather than offering an interpretation of the narrator's subjective experiences, Noll's focus remains with the experiences lived by his protagonists through their perceptual bodies, which precede any form of personal judgement or rational explanation. As Noll has expressed: '[e]u acho que nessa relação entre o vivido e o elaborado há um processo que leva a duas coisas de qualidades bastante diferentes',⁵⁸ since to affirm that what the narrator understands never quite tallies with his experience would suggest that the experience itself is never entirely comprehensible. What Noll seems to offer in his work is, in my opinion, a more phenomenological account of subjective consciousness by showing that the individual's awareness of the world and of himself does not occur through the mental faculty of abstraction but through his physical relation to the world and to others, confirming that our '[p]erception and the perceived necessarily have the same existential modality, *since perception is inseparable from the consciousness* it has, or rather is, of reaching the thing itself' [my italics].⁵⁹

In fact, it is Noll himself who enhances his disinterest in creating narratives in the mode of a psychological novel when he affirms that:

when you create a novel you are elaborating that initial experience of life at one remove... I am an author who is seen as someone linked to subjectivity, and in a sense I am, but I don't consider myself an intimist. I work with subjectivities, *but I'm not interested in deciphering states of mind*... I like literature with a certain schizophrenic perspective, once again the unfamiliar perspective, that possibility to see the world with an estranged gaze, because what we have made of the world isn't natural... One of the good things about the novel, one of the

⁵⁷ Edu Teruki Otsuka, *Marcas Da Catástrofe: Experiência Urbana E Indústria Cultural Em Rubem Fonseca, João Gilberto Noll e Chico Buarque* (São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2001) pp. 104, 107/8.

⁵⁸ Lúcio Agra, "Um 'dedinho de prosa' para Noll e Sant'Anna," Caderno 2, *O Estado de São Paulo*, 01 de março de 1989. Reprinted in Bueno Magalhães, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 374.

healthy things about the novel, is that it doesn't have a normative perspective [my italics].⁶⁰

In his own words, Noll emphasises his conception of literature as something irreducible to a rational mode of representation. *Rastros do Verão* offers a good example of how Noll's narratives avoid a normative account. The novel consists of a contrast between two perceptual states: the visual images occurring in the narrator's dreams and the images captured by him during his wakeful state. The reader, however, facing a succession of events lacking any order, is unable to determine with accuracy whether what is perceived by the narrator belongs to his 'real' environment or whether his perceptions are but a figment of his imagination. The novel opens with the description of two apparently unrelated scenes:

Um homem debaixo de uma árvore, sentado num banco de pedra, a cabeça pendida olhando os pés descalços. De repente ele olha para o fim da planície e sente como se um colapso, e acorda.

Foi quando abri os olhos, e o motorista do ônibus batia no meu braço, pedia que eu acordasse porque tínhamos chegado... e olhei pela janela e vi alguns passageiros aguardando a bagagem que iria ser retirada do porão do ônibus. Lembrei que era Terça-Feira Gorda.⁶¹

Without a clearly defined mechanism within the novel to separate the two scenes, the reader is left with the impression of two utterly distinctive perceptual experiences – the dreamlike and real, the phantasmagoric and the concrete, both of which are deeply enmeshed. The initial paragraph narrated by a third person voice suggests the position of the dreamer, the narrator himself, who captures, as a spectator, the different oneiric images that occur to him. In the second scene, the narrator is awoken by a bus driver and starts to provide the account of what he perceives from his environment. What seems to be at stake in both scenes is not so much the clear differentiation between two mental states, i.e. a phantasmagorical or 'unreal' perceptual experience of a world which belongs to the narrators dreams and the accurate or 'objective' account, to use

⁶⁰ David Treece, "Interview with João Gilberto Noll," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6:2 (1987) p.127/8.

⁶¹ Noll, *Rastros do Verão* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

here Villaça and Otsuka's term, of what is perceived by the narrator in his waking life. Instead, what is at stake is perceptual experience itself and how it reflects the narrator's own subjectivity. The only information given in the narrative about the narrator's perceptual state - whether he is sleeping or not - is indicated by the description of his eyes when closed or opened. Occasionally, the shift between what is perceived in his environment and that which belongs to his imagination is completely blurred, as if the distinction between reality and fantasy were completely inconsequential for the narrator. Such is the case when the 'boy' communicates to the narrator of his plans to become a seaman:

Enquanto caminhávamos pela praça Quinze o garoto parou e disse que estava indo embora amanhã para o Rio. Curso para a marinha mercante, e depois sairia pelos mares para todos os portos do mundo. Quando o garoto disse isso não olhei bem para ele, olhei um porto congelado digamos lá no mar do Norte, e nesse porto eu via um marinheiro encolhido e frio.⁶²

Following the boy's explanation, the narrator's view moves from his actual environment to an imaginary scenario as if the narrator were foreseeing the boy's future in a geographical setting strikingly different from their objective situation— cold and in the Northern Hemisphere. The narrator admits his preference of his dreamlike perceptions over those when he is awake – 'desde criança eu tive uma coisa assim, de querer fechar os olhos e quando os abrisse estar num outro ambiente, quem sabe uma outra cidade, quem sabe até um outro mundo',⁶³ indicating that our perceptual actions, no matter if they are real or imaginary, are determined by our subjective needs and desires.

The reiterated descriptions of visual perception in *Rastros do Verão* emphasise the intrinsic connection between perception and consciousness. All of the objects and persons which are visually perceived by the narrator – either belonging to his imagination, dreams or factual situations – constantly occur in the narrator's thoughts, physical sensations, emotional feelings, desires and personal memories. The novel provides multiple passages indicating how the narrator's perceptual experiences,

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

especially through vision, arouse physical or psychological responses in him. Sentences such as ‘eu *via*, mas cada imagem tinha alguma coisa que me *figava no peito*’;⁶⁴ ‘[e]u *olhava* novamente o garoto e me *sentia* agora descansado.... *Olhei* e vi a mulher com o ar desolado. Tudo se esvaía, *pensei*’;⁶⁵ ‘[o]lhei as notas abertas na minha mão e *sentí* vontade de ter muito dinheiro’;⁶⁶ ‘[o]lhei o braço do garoto e *imaginei* o músculo que ele iria criar. *Raciocinei* se não era o caso de deixar aquele garoto sozinho’;⁶⁷ or ‘[o]lhei o garoto e o *invejei* loucamente’ [all italics mine]⁶⁸ appear throughout the novel constantly reaffirming that the narrator’s visual perceptions, either real or imagined, are directly related to the narrator’s self. His consciousness is not determined by an imminent and stable ‘I’ constructed by thought, but is essentially the result of a phenomenological process which, through his own corporeal perception, is constantly being shaped in the relationship between him as an individual and his world, confirming the view that for Noll’s characters ‘[m]y consciousness is turned primarily toward the world, turned toward things; it is above all a relation to the world’.⁶⁹

4.6 The communicative function of the body

Noll’s approach of expounding the physical actions of his characters rather than registering their internal thoughts through the description of their corporeal gestures rather than their dialogues indicates how relevant he views the body to be in the process of interpersonal communication. In general, Noll’s narratives achieve moments of maximum intensity through silence and gesture. Verbal language often becomes inept in the attempt to convey the emotional experiences of Noll’s characters whose bodies achieve an expressive medium which transcends spoken utterances.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁶⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, edited by John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) p. 116/7.

⁷⁰ It is through silence, for example, that the protagonist of *A Fúria do Corpo* describes the intensity of his encounter with Afrodite: ‘[n]os olhamos calados, nos abraçamos, beijamos, ela chora... nos damos as as mãos, as mãos estão mais ásperas e temos no mesmo momento a consciência dessa aspereza... [um momento em que] tudo se relata e nada se diz’. Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 73. In their

From the taciturn relationship between father and son in ‘Alguma coisa urgentemente’, whose bodies reveal the illicit political activities of the former and the medium of subsistence for the latter,⁷¹ to the simple movement of a hand by the narrator of *Rastros do Verão*⁷² and the spontaneous frown performed by the protagonist of *Harmada*,⁷³ all of these elements point to the body as performing a linguistic function which runs in parallel with verbal formulations by adding a new significance to, sustaining a meaning for or even interposing a contradiction of the words uttered by the characters.

In the majority of cases, Noll’s narratives point to verbal language as a masquerade used either to shield the true intentions of the speaker or to disguise his emotional feelings. The body, in its turn, is guided by a different semantic articulation over which the subject can neither exert control in its manifestation nor decide upon its meaning. This is best illustrated by the narrator of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* when describing how easily words can be manipulated, especially through written texts, in order to deceive other people: ‘conseguia enganar sem deixar rabo, coisas que eu sabia fazer se fosse por escrito, falando não, aí eu já entrava numa compulsão de ser descoberto mentindo, parece que eu chegava a simular os olhos sonsos, olhando de viés, parece que me ardia na face um fogo’.⁷⁴ The protagonist’s attempt to sustain a lie in a face-to-face conversation becomes impossible by the unconstrained signs which his body emits. The evasive reaction of his gaze in conjunction with the redness of his face; all these uncontrollable corporeal expressions give him away to his interlocutors.

physical encounter, the lovers achieve a state of mutual understanding which dispenses with the intervention of words.

⁷¹ The several disappearances of the father during the time of military dictatorship in Brazil, followed by his reappearance with visible signs of torture in his body are for the narrator the material of his father ‘subversive,’ left-wing activities. The son, in order to survive during the absence of his father, offers his body to other men in exchange for money.

⁷² [T]ive a impressão de ouvir dentro de mim um grito inacessível, como se submerso numa camada imemorial. A impressão foi tão breve que nem tive tempo de impedir o gesto de levar a minha mão sobre a toalha branca’. Noll, *Rastros do Verão*, *op. cit.*, p. 329. The involuntary gesture of placing his hand on the tablecloth indicates the emotional response of a the narrator, who is suddenly frightened by his own thoughts.

⁷³ As the narrator acknowledges, his facial grimaces denounce what he tries to conceal from his speech: ‘falei arqueando a sobrancelha direita, sinal de que eu já não acreditava um milímetro no elã despuadorado que eu procurava incutir no meu relato’. Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 511.

⁷⁴ Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

It is precisely in this potential to emit signs which cannot be controlled that José Gil suggests that the human body:

desempenh[a] um papel de uma *infralíngua* que traduz os signos... Neste sentido, o corpo não fala, faz falar. Mas sendo ele próprio articulado, fornece à linguagem uma língua virtual e muda, uma estrutura potencial que permite passar do nível do significado ao nível dos significantes... Enquanto infralíngua o corpo está em comunicação [direta] com o mundo.⁷⁵

In Noll's work, the body deploys a self-determining language, an 'infralanguage' to use here Gil's terminology, completely alien from the syntactic and grammatical rules that govern lexical expression. Words are a cultural product that comprise an arbitrary code by which the sender informs the receiver of something using specific signs which are deciphered through a consensual agreement between the agents involved in the process of communication. The body, on the other hand, provides a 'concrete', and therefore, 'universal' language which can be understood by others without a pre-established referential code. In some situations, Noll's characters convey a complete distrust of verbal language altogether. This is the case of Afrodite in *A Fúria do Corpo*, who denounces verbal language for failing to enable an effective communication between human beings and to disclose the truth of the world:

quero é me comunicar com as pedras que respeitam o verbo vivo que sou, não quero mais tentar seduzir a vida com palavras, quero permancer muda no meu canto num gesto sem volta... nada de precárias pontes feitas de palavras que não agüentam o peso do meu ato, é que transito entre eu e o mundo sem a canalização da fala que quando se ouve já não é mais a intenção original de quem a formulou eu não, eu dou o meu pensamento em bruto porque quando a palavra chega ela só consegue anunciar o que já se revestiu de alguma coisa posterior mais submissa aos ouvidos calejados de tantas mentiras, não, não quero essa fala que parece solta mas quando vem se apresenta em escamas que escondem o sentido original... desembuchem essa rala razão enfeitada com o mais suntuoso vocabulário, vomitem suas tripas silábicas, digam, falem, mas

⁷⁵ Gil, *op. cit.*, p. 35/6.

não me peçam uma resposta que estou verificando aqui pela primeira vez que aquela vaca ali é feliz.⁷⁶

Through its expressive gestures, grimaces, mimicry and movements, the body is at the same time significant and a signifier, which allows me to ‘understand the gesture of others, not by a common intellectual interpretation of the same, but by a sort of blind judgment or acknowledgment (my body’s) previous to any elaboration of meaning’.⁷⁷

In *Harmada*, perhaps more than in any other of Noll’s novels, the narrator openly reflects upon the inadequacy of words to designate in an effective way our subjective feelings and personal experiences. When asking his friend Lucas for the title of a song, the narrator is confronted by the revelation that ‘nem tudo tem nome nesta vida ingrata’.⁷⁸ Unable to find an appropriate term to match his own emotional experience, the protagonist refers to his feelings as ‘aquilo que eu não saberia que nome dar’.⁷⁹ After writing a letter to his ex-wife, the narrator reflects on the ineffectiveness of words to express personal feelings to others: ‘[d]eixe um bilhete para Jane. Poderia não ter deixado palavra nenhuma. Mas eu estava ali, a escrever aquelas desembestadas palavras, que não fariam a menor diferença em canto nenhum do mundo em qualquer situação’.⁸⁰ The protagonist in *Harmada* repeatedly attests to the fact that verbal language fails to transmit concrete individual emotions and sensations and that words, while always conceptually referring to other words in the mode of a loop, are nothing but pure abstractions.⁸¹

The body, on the other hand, provides a language that dispenses with the use of a pre-established linguistic code: it has no rigid syntactical rules, no specific alphabet or

⁷⁶ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 200/1. Rejecting verbal language, Afrodite withdraws from speech in order to open up the potential of her body and corporeal perception in the process of communication.

⁷⁷ Mary Rose Barral, *Merleau-Ponty. The Role of the Body-Subject in Interpersonal Relations* (Louvain: Duquesne University Press and Editions E. Nauwelaerts, 1965) p. 188.

⁷⁸ Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 528.

⁷⁹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 530.

⁸⁰ *Loc. cit.*, p. 520.

⁸¹ As Anthony Wilden remarks, ‘the meaning of a word is always another word, a determined perusal of our linguistic dictionary will eventually return us to our starting point. Perhaps language is in fact totally tautologous in the sense that it can only in the end talk about itself’. Anthony Wilden, “Lacan and the Discourse of the Other” in Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, translated with notes and commentary by Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) p. 273.

dictionary. At the conclusion of *Harmada*, the protagonist is confronted with the presence of a seven year old deaf and dumb boy from whom he learns about the communicative potential of his own body. Initially the boy's silence is immediately experienced as an oddity which disturbs the narrator:

– Quem é você? – perguntei.

Havia nele um silêncio opaco, à primeira vista com um quê de perturbador, como se este silêncio não se constituísse apenas num capricho infantil, mas tivesse a real função de tentar afogar algum distúrbio.

Então me ajoelhei, que nem fosse falar com uma criança bem menor do que ele.

Talvez, ao me ajoelhar, pretendesse imprimir na situação uma boa vontade.⁸²

Realising the dumb state of his interlocutor, the narrator kneels down in order to bring himself level with the boy, but, unable to explain his decision to kneel, the narrator almost impulsively feels that in order to establish a dialogue with the dumb and deaf child he first needs to offer, through his body, a gesture which would be interpreted by the boy as an invitation to speak. However, the more the narrator insists on the use of verbal language to communicate with the other, the more he realises that his attempts are doomed to failure:

– Hein... você não vai falar? – eu disse me levantando.

O garoto ali, o corpo cada vez mais duro, o ar cada vez mais turvo, de reação apenas um tique nervoso que o fazia momentaneamente apertar os olhos como se não quisesse ver.⁸³

In reaction to the narrator's insistence, the boy squeezes his eyes shut expressing through this gesture his withdrawal from communication, just as someone who is able to hear and speak might put his fingers over his ears and/or press his lips together to indicate his refusal to take part in a dialogue with others. It is only later in the story that the narrator understands the essential role played by the body in the process of communication with the boy:

⁸² Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 571.

⁸³ *Loc. cit.*

o seu olhar parecia decididamente perdido... Eu precisava consertar o que acabara de dizer, mas não me vinha a maneira... Então me saiu uma explosão... passei a imitar a cara do macaco na frente do garoto, as mãos abrindo as orelhas para torná-las de abano, de repente eu dissolvia tudo e fazia outra careta, súbito já virava cambalhotas no piso azulejado, *eu me transbordava de mim a cada gesto, revirava os olhos sem que me desse tempo de pensar na próxima maluquice, tudo saía de mim instantâneo* – e como sempre, *sem pensar*, resolvi me prostrar diante do garoto e beijar seu pé, e o garoto aí sim começou a soltar as mais fogosas risadas e repentinamente iniciou a expelir os linguajares mais engrolados e indecifráveis... e foi então que entendi que aquele garoto era mudo, *o corpo todo dele estremecia de rir e de transmitir com engrolações a sua doida alegria* [my italics].⁸⁴

When observing the boy's evasive gaze, the narrator becomes aware that he needs to rely on his own body, and not on words, in order to interact with the child. At first, he cannot see any communicative effectiveness in the gestural movements he performs. His spontaneous mimicry, described as *actions* without *thinking*, is an act of communication completely antithetic to verbal language. It is only by observing the boy's positive reaction to his pantomime that the narrator discovers the potential of his body not only as the *medium* through which messages can be transmitted but, more importantly, as the *place* in which signs become invested with meaning. Therefore, the narrator realises that 'through his body, the subject emits... a signifying speech which he does not even know he emits... [and that he] always says more than he means to, always more than he thinks he says'.⁸⁵

After 'rediscovering' the communicative potential of his body, the narrator starts to interact effectively with the boy:

Começo a fazer sinais com as mãos. Como se eu dominasse desde sempre a comunicação dos mudos.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 575.

⁸⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I - Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by John Forrester (Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 266.

Conto uma longa história que se desenrola na Pérsia, cheia de cavaleiros, de monstros, de assombrações nas curvas das estradas...

De repente sinto as minhas mãos dormentes de cansaço.

Pego o lenço do bolso.

Enxugo o suor das mãos.

Clareia o dia.

O menino adormeceu no chão da sala.

Apago a chama da vela com os dedos.

Vou até a janela. Respiro o ar fino da manhã.⁸⁶

As the passage suggests, the narrator becomes immediately aware that his gesticulations provide a more ‘material’ and therefore ‘universal’ semantics which is understood by others without a pre-established consensual meaning. The discovery of the communicative potential of his body becomes a turning point in the narrative, affecting the way in which the narrator offers his account to the reader. The selection of simple sentences and short paragraphs in final stages of the novel indicates the narrator’s gradual discarding of verbal explanations, which are then replaced by the description of physical movement and visual perceptions. Sentences such ‘I dry the sweat from my hands’ or ‘the day was breaking’ capture the narrator’s awareness of his bodily movements and corporeal perceptions without incurring a detailed explanation of his thoughts.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist seems to have fully introjected the communicative behaviour of his companion. Verbal dialogues are steadily replaced by silence. Language becomes dissociated from verbal expression in order to become connected with the body and its perceptual activities:

E o garoto *me pegou* de novo na mão e *apontou* a campainha que ele não alcançava.

Topei o que poderia ser uma brincadeira e toquei a campainha.

Um homem jovem atendeu. Estava de calça preta, sem camisa.

– Sim? – ele perguntou.

⁸⁶ Noll, *Harmada*, *op. cit.*, p. 573/4.

Olhei para o garoto, aguardando receber dele alguma indicação para que eu pudesse inventar o que dizer.

Da boca não me saía palavra. Eu parecia ter me contaminado pelo silêncio do garoto.

– Sim? – o homem perguntou mais uma vez.

Eu e o garoto *nos olhamos*. *Percebi* que dele não viria socorro que me pudesse mostrar o que pensar, dizer.

– Sim, sou Pedro Harmada – o homem falou abrindo mais a porta [my italics].⁸⁷

The novel's conclusion coincides with the narrator's last attempt to communicate with others through verbal language. Unable to express himself through words, he can no longer provide a verbal account to the reader, who is ultimately left wondering about the identity of Pedro Harmada. This character, who introduces himself at the very end of the novel, seems to take up the thread of the story which had been abruptly broken by the narrator's lost of verbal communication. Pedro Harmada's gesture of opening the door could be interpreted as an invitation to the narrator and the boy to step into his own fictional world, a world to which the reader would otherwise have no access after being left alone on the doorsteps of Harmada's house.

As Idelber Avelar has observed, João Gilberto Noll's narratives always seem to suggest a 'self-erasure and drive toward silence'.⁸⁸ For the critic, Noll's literary posture could be identified as belonging to the 'poetics of negativity'⁸⁹ which, 'flirting with silence and the unsaid',⁹⁰ proposes 'a critique of all instrumental, pragmatic conceptions of language'.⁹¹ In his analysis of *Harmada*, Avelar further suggests that: '[t]hroughout *Harmada*, in fact, Noll places a good deal of emphasis on the utopia of a nonsymbolic language... a language that opens itself up to the contingent, the aleatory, as in the purely affective babbling of a mute boy'.⁹² However, my

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

⁸⁸ Idelber Avelar, *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) p. 189.

⁸⁹ As Avelar indicates, the term 'poetics of negativity' is used in the same sense proposed by the Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia. Piglia employed the term to indicate the work of some twentieth-century writers such as Samuel Beckett, who display a 'refusal of all mass-cultural conventions... and concentrate, instead, on destroying myths of direct communication and linguistic transparency'. Avelar, *op. cit.*, p.186.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 208/9.

perspective differs here from that proposed by Avelar in his reading of Noll's narratives as a negation of language altogether. Following my investigation of the close relationship between body, corporeal perception and interpersonal communication, I would suggest that, rather than a negation of language or even a critique of the pragmatics of language, Noll's fiction seems to suggest a re-evaluation of language by stressing the central role of our physical bodies in the process of communication.

The encounter with the mute child brings the narrator back to a preconceptual language which is both gestural and emotionally expressive. In this linguistic system, which precedes the abstract or conceptual aspect of verbal communication, *to understand* and *to experience* are undifferentiated. Rather than transmitting *ideas*, the narrator and the mute boy embody for each other their own feelings and emotions in 'a language which teaches itself, and in which the meaning is secreted by the very structure of the signs'.⁹³ When commenting on the conclusion of *Harmada*, Noll emphasises his interest in confronting his narrator with the possibility of a mode of expression which is inseparable from the experiences of the subject; a language which, connected to his material body, resists being translated into abstract thought:

[q]uem leva o personagem de Harmada ao encontro do fundador da cidade, Pedro Harmada, é uma criança muda, uma criança que vive numa condição pré-linguagem... Eu me sinto um escritor muito preocupado com... a convulsão, essa coisa, esse movimento selvagem da vida, ainda sem nome, ainda sem comunicação, pura expressão... Tudo está codificado, tudo está explicado. Então parece assim que os meus personagens vão atrás de uma condição de indeterminação.⁹⁴

In this sense, the last scene in *Harmada*, the opening of a door, seems to indicate that by discovering the communicative potential of his body, the narrator himself has access to new experiences: experiences which transcend any form of verbal articulation and which belong to the realm of ineffable – not transcendent but simply not subject to verbal encapsulation - and are therefore inaccessible to the reader who

⁹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

⁹⁴ Rosário e Dorigatti, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

can only 'perceive' the fictional world through the words of the narrator. Once the narrator moves to give up verbal communication altogether, it simply becomes impossible for him to continue his account to the reader. The end of the novel coincides with the complete silence of the narrator and his simultaneous immersion in a form of subjective expressivity outside the arbitrary code of verbal language.

4.7 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have viewed the experiences of Noll's narrators and characters from a phenomenological perspective, as opposed to a more transcendent perspective, which is tied to a definition of consciousness associated with man's capacity for thought. For the phenomenologists, the consciousness of our existence is not a product of our minds but is an integrative experience originating from our contact with the world and others. By centering my attention on the relevance given to the body and to corporeal perception in Noll's works, I have proposed that the perceptual experiences described by the narrators always assume an important function in the narrative, either as the manifestation of their emotional feelings and subjective awareness or in the form of an interpersonal communication between the characters. Through their actions, perceptions and corporeal expressions, Noll's narrators and characters intermingle with the fictional world, offering the reader the 'raw material' of their experience, i.e. the narration of the perceptual experience at the very moment that it takes place and before any attempt to transform the experience into a logical account or to promote a rational judgement of it.

Amongst the many perceptual experiences described in Noll's texts, vision appears as a wholly integrative occurrence which involves the perceiver and what he perceives, blurring the dichotomies between object and subject and body and soul into mutual interdependency. In following my approach to Noll's works, I have sought to provide an alternative to the interpretation shared by some critics who suggest that the visual descriptions in the narrative are the neutral perception of a narrator who, assuming the function of a cinematographic camera, captures diffuse images from his environment

without establishing a coherent link between them. By the same token, I have also taken issue with those critics who consider the visual perceptions of Noll's narrators to be a passive response implying the annihilation of the individual's subjectivity, simply because he fails to offer a logical account of his perceptions. Following my discussion, I would suggest that the supposed 'neutrality' or 'objectivity' identified by these critics in the narrators' visual perceptions is inverted, in that the visual phenomena described in Noll's narratives – objects, landscapes, people and situations, real or imagined – in effect appears to demonstrate precisely how subjective the perception of Noll's protagonists - and by extension ourselves - really is.

Chapter 5

The body, corporeal perception and the phenomenology of the aesthetic experience in Noll's work

The aim of this chapter is to indicate how the narrator-protagonists of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, *Lorde* and *Berkeley em Bellagio*, themselves literary writers, emphasise the important role played by our perceptual bodies in the processes of aesthetic creation and reception. Before embarking on the discussion of these novels, I will briefly review Plato's conclusion of the *Republic* in which the philosopher condemns artistic creation for its deceitful appeal to human perceptual senses and where he subsequently defends an aesthetic production founded on purely rational activity: a proposition which has influenced art critics and aesthetic theoreticians especially since the eighteenth century. Based on propositions supported by a phenomenological approach, I shall indicate how the aesthetic experience is conceived in Noll's works as an occurrence which links the subject with the aesthetic object, blurring the distinctions between the artist and his audience, between perceiver and perceived, and between art and life, thereby corroborating the idea that a genuine aesthetic experience occurs 'not by exegesis or demonstration or proofs but directly, as a man knows apple in the mouth'.¹

The last section of this chapter will be devoted to the analysis of *Berkeley em Bellagio*, in which Noll seems to discuss his own literary project through the narrative of the novel's protagonist. I shall, among other things, demonstrate the influence exerted by poetry and music in Noll's narratives through the author's conscious choice of consonantal and alliterative words in his texts: a literary strategy which seems to prioritise the perceptual sonority of words over their semantic meanings. By the same token, I will consider how Noll's literature seems to invite the reader to engage in its fictional text through reflecting in his own body the perceptual experiences undergone by the narrator. Using as examples some passages from *A Fúria do Corpo*, I will expound how the formal aspects of Noll's texts succeed in

¹ Archibald MacLeish, *Poetry and Experience* (Boston: Bodley Head, 1961) p. 9.

bringing the reader, during the act of reading, closer to the perceptual and emotional experiences of the narrator.

5.1 Plato and the condemnation of 'irrationalism' in the aesthetic experience

The distinction between body and soul and the relevance of intellectual judgement for corporeal perception are, as I briefly presented in the preceding chapter, the main axis through which Plato presents his philosophical arguments in the *Republic*: a work which concludes with a severe condemnation of artists and art for the negative role they play in society. For Plato, artists produce their works by simply mimicking external objects as they appear to our senses. His assault on the aesthetic experience is based upon the difference between the complex attribute of knowledge and the simplistic, easy task of imitation in its relation to an external object. To exemplify this distinction between knowledge and mimicry, Plato refers to three distinct positions a man can take in relation to an object: that of a user, a manufacturer or an imitator. The user does not *know* how an object needs to be produced but only how to *operate* it, becoming consequently able to *discern* whether or not this object functions as it should. The manufacturer only *knows* how to produce the object without being necessarily acquainted with its use. The imitator occupies the lowest position in Plato's evaluative list: he does not possess knowledge either of the use or the production of the object that he chooses to depict.²

The painter, Plato argues, offers a good example of how an imitator works. What establishes his relationship to the things he portrays is not the pragmatic function of a

² Socrates, Plato's narrator, illustrates his explanation by offering his audience practical situations in which his logic can be applied. Choosing a pipe as an example, Socrates seeks to demonstrate that the piper knows exactly how his pipe must sound. Based on his knowledge of use, the musician is able to differentiate the good pipe from the bad one, at the same time that he can instruct the manufacturer in how a good pipe needs to sound. The manufacturer, who supposedly does not know how to play the instrument, then has to follow the specifications of the user in order to fabricate a pipe to be played by the musician. Socrates then presents the imitator, occupying the third and last rank in his evaluative scale, whose activity has no connection whatever with the true knowledge of an object. In the specific example of the pipe, he does not know its musical function or how to play it, nor does he know how to create the pipe as an instrument; his only concern is the way a pipe needs to *look* rather than what it *really* is. Appearance over reality: that is the choice of the imitator.

specific object to society, but the image of this object: ‘a painter creates an illusory shoemaker, when not only does he not understand anything about shoemaking, but his audience doesn’t either. They just base their conclusions on the colours and shapes they can see... An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him’.³ Recalling the ‘Allegory of the Cave’, discussed in the previous chapter, in Plato’s theory the artist seems to adopt the same contemplative behaviour shown by the cave dweller who lacks a diacritical attitude towards his circumscribed perceptions:

Poets, Plato writes, are the artists who exert the most damaging influence on society; compared to demagogic politicians, poets discuss experiences and situations in their works of which they have no factual knowledge. Working at a non-reflective level and appealing to the weakest part of the human soul – emotional feelings – poetry counters rational judgement - the pursuit of the philosopher - which is essential to achieving a just and democratic social system. After presenting his arguments, Plato suggests that poets must be banned from society: ‘since we’ve been giving poetry another hearing, there’s our defence: given its nature, we had good grounds for banishing it earlier from our community. No rational person could have done any different’.⁴ The poet, once exiled, would be re-accepted in society only after adopting the precepts of philosophy in its praise for rational enquiry: ‘if the kinds of poetry and representation which are designed merely to give pleasure can come up with a rational argument... we’d be delighted... to bring them back from exile’.⁵

The Platonic conception of artistic expression as an (ineffectual) imitation of objects and situations, together with the proposition of submitting artistic expression to the rules of rational judgement has pervaded explanations of the aesthetic experience to the present day. As Susan Sontag observes, ‘all reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation. It is through this theory that art as such – above and beyond given works of art –

³ Plato, *Republic*, translated with an introduction and notes by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 352.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁵ *Loc. cit.*

becomes problematic, in need of defense'.⁶ It is in this context of the defence of the freedom of art from the constraints of a rational order that I interpret Noll's works.

5.2 The aesthetic as a perceptual experience in Noll's work

The introduction of copyright in the English legal system in 1709, the foundation of national museums, art schools and the emergence of specialised art periodicals and magazines have established not only the career of the art expert but have also generated a whole system in which the aesthetic experience becomes categorised in terms of its applicability to theories and rational judgement.⁷ As Peter Bürger argues in his analysis about the institutionalisation of art,⁸ the confinement of works of art within museums, galleries and other institutional organisations was a direct consequence of the rise of bourgeois society in Europe. Art, like everything else in a bourgeois system, had been integrated into the commodity market. Its integration within consumer culture entailed a significant transformation in the way art was conceived: distanced from everyday life, art became the object of consumption by a specialised public: the art critic, the gallery owner, the art collector, etc.

With the increasing institutionalisation of art, which was initiated in Europe during the eighteenth century, the term 'aesthetic' became detached from its original meaning as a perceptual or sensory experience to express a more rational activity mediated by man's cognitive faculties. The work of Emmanuel Kant – particularly his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, which was published in 1790, offers one of the most powerful examples of how the term 'aesthetic' has become diverted from a form of sensual experience to become integrated into the category of rational thought. Kant constructs his arguments by differentiating aesthetic pleasure from sensual gratification. Contrary to sensual gratification which relates to the immediacy of 'agreeable' corporeal sensations such as the taste of wine or the scent of flowers, the

⁶ Susan Sontag, "Against interpretation," *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 1994 [1964]) p. 4.

⁷ Peter de Bolla, "Towards the materiality of aesthetic experience," *Diacritics* 32:1, Spring (2002) pp. 19-37.

⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw and foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

pleasure provided by the aesthetic experience is essentially based on our capacity for intellectual discernment. Reason enables us to recognise and judge our experiences of the beautiful or the sublime, even when we are not capable of arriving at a consensual definition of what the beautiful or the sublime are. Indeed, for Kant, the beautiful is presented as that ‘which pleases universally without a concept’.⁹ Without deepening my analysis of Kant’s aesthetic theory – a discussion which would exceed the scope of this chapter – my intention here is to illustrate how the term aesthetic re-emerged in the eighteenth century in an attempt to ‘salvage’ art from the grip of irrational emotions as was previously critiqued by Plato. What seems to be proposed in Kant’s theory is the reintegration of the aesthetic experience into the models of cognitive activity, dismissing the role played by the human body and its perceptual functions in the processes of aesthetic creation and reception. Without denying the importance of feelings as the basis for the aesthetic experience, Kant argues that the experience of the aesthetic must be conceived as a form of cognitive judgement rather than an emotional state direct linked to our perceptual activity. As Terry Eagleton rightly argues:

Kant’s turn to the subject is hardly a turn to the *body*, whose needs and desires fall outside the disinterestedness of aesthetic taste. The body cannot be figured or represented within the frame of Kantian aesthetics; and Kant ends up accordingly with a formalistic ethics, an abstract theory of political rights, and a ‘subjective’ but non-sensuous aesthetics.¹⁰

The unfeasibility of Plato’s proposal to submit aesthetic production to the rules of rational thought is one of the central themes invoked in some of Noll’s writings, especially in those novels in which the narrators are themselves writers who discuss the process of aesthetic production. More than simply providing an account of their subjective experiences in the fictional world, these narrators endorse the role of perception (rather than intellect) as being the central hub around which the communication between the artist and his audience can be accomplished. When recalling the origin of the word ‘aesthetics’, Terry Eagleton points to the fact that ‘the

⁹ Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited and translated by Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p. 104.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of The Aesthetic* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990) p. 21.

term refers not in the first place to art, but, as the Greek *aisthesis* would suggest, to the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought'.¹¹

The emphasis given to the material, corporeal aspect of the aesthetic experience is conveyed in many of the accounts offered by Noll's narrators. As Noll has expressed: '[a]cho que não existe o sublime, a transcendência sem essa atitude de quase prostração à materialidade humana, à fisicalidade. Temos que fazer um ritual de aceitação integral dessa matéria'.¹² Noll's thematisation of the process of fictional writing always points to the inability of the author to elaborate his works under the constraints of rational thought or conceptual order. Such restrictions not only jeopardise the autonomy of the author, who would have to transform the fictional account into a theoretical reflection of his 'real' world, but also deprive the reader of the possibility of bringing his personal interpretation to the literary work. Distancing himself from the Platonic tradition, which sets itself against 'all the desires and feelings of pleasure' that works of art can evoke in the individual, Noll's literary project seems to define the artistic experience as a subjective escape from the burden of societal impositions by offering the individual new forms of perceptions which are not always compatible with the cultural norms and social values that shape day-to-day perceptual experiences. As Noll comments when explaining his motivation for becoming a writer:

[t]here's something pretty common at the heart of the phenomenon of literary creation, the fact that it's born out of a tremendous unease, a tremendous discomfort, a feeling of enormous insufficiency in the face of what is real... this feeling is something I can remember ever since I've organized myself as a human being, since my childhood, I've always found existence to be something extremely difficult, something that could be better... The literature that has always interested me is a literature which might, so to speak, be a spiritual

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² José Weis, "João Gilberto Noll: o tempo da cigarra," *Brasil – Brazil: Revista de Literatura Brasileira* 17, ano 10 (1997) p. 84.

nourishment in as far as that feeling of insufficiency in the face of reality was and still is very great.¹³

The possibility offered by literature of articulating this ‘feeling of insufficiency in face of reality’ is what defines for Noll the function of the aesthetic experience. This articulation, however, does not follow a model of rational enquiry that searches for the ‘truth’ of a specific phenomenon. In his aesthetic production, the artist does not try to find an answer to his personal discomfort, but instead recurs to art as a means of examining all those subjective experiences which we are denied in society. For Noll, the function of the novel resides exactly in its potential to liberate the individual from the impositions of a societal order:

não há função mais própria do romance do que essa, a meu ver: mostrar justamente a discrepância brutal, aterradora, entre a aspiração individual e a carência imposta pela legislação social, a miséria imposta ao espriar desse desejo... E por isso o romance chega aí para, digamos assim, ser um escoadouro onde o humano pode respirar com mais liberdade, com mais senso libertário.¹⁴

This experience of liberty provided by literature is not the result of rational judgement of the literary narrative but instead that of a suspension of any cognitive activity by the reader who, in the act of reading, is invited to share his subjective perception of the fictional world with the protagonist. The freedom proposed by Noll when describing the function of literature seems to be promoted through challenging the perceptual conventions learned by the subject in society.

To conclude, Noll’s definition of literature as a form of liberty or escape from the cultural impositions which shape our everyday perceptions is aligned with the conception that:

[t]he literary work interrogates and transforms the implicit beliefs we bring to it, ‘disconfirms’ our routine habits of perception and so forces us to acknowledge

¹³ David Treece, “Interview with João Gilberto Noll,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 6:2 (November, 1997) p. 123.

¹⁴ Weis, *op. cit.*, p. 87/8.

them for the first time for what they are. Rather than merely reinforce our given perceptions, the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes for understanding.¹⁵

5.3 *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*: aesthetic creation as an act of subjective freedom

The discrepancy between rational activity and aesthetic experience is one of the central themes around which the narrative of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* revolves. The novel presents the account of a nineteen-year-old poet who is increasingly forced into social exclusion as a consequence of his aesthetic activities. At the beginning of the narrative, the young poet reveals to the reader how he tries to disguise his moments of poetic inspiration from his social environment:

[à]s vezes até que parava em filas de candidatos a algum emprego, puxava então qualquer pedaço de papel do bolso, uma caneta, se alguém me olhasse eu simulava um ar meio severo, como se estivesse anotando não uns versos que me vinham à cabeça, mas o lembrete de uma obrigação urgente.¹⁶

His desire to be engaged in a creative aesthetic act appears to be permeated by ambivalent feelings of personal rapture and social shame in that his poetic production is prejudicially considered to be an ‘baseless’ occupation carried out by ‘irrational’ beings and aimed at non-rational readers. As Michel Foucault argues in his study of insanity, the practice of psychiatry which emerged in the nineteenth century considered literature to be one of the main responsible agents for causing the ‘disorder of the senses’. Novels, in particular, were seen as encouragers of ‘irrational’ sentiments in disparity with the ‘natural’ behaviour of ‘rational’ people: ‘[t]he novel constitutes the milieu of perversion, *par excellence*, of all sensibility; it detaches the

¹⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory – An Introduction*, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1983]) p. 68.

¹⁶ João Gilberto Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997) p. 445.

soul from all that is immediate and natural in feeling and leads it into an imaginary world of sentiments violent in proportion to their unreality, and less controlled by the gentle laws of nature'.¹⁷ Discussing the revolutionary nature of poetry and the image of the poet as a social outcast in an epoch which prioritises 'scientific truth' over 'artistic imagination', the Mexican poet Octavio Paz remarks that '[t]he history of poetry in the twentieth century is, as it was in the nineteenth, a history of subversions, conversions, abjurations, heresies, aberrations. These words find their counterparts in other words: persecution, exile, insane asylum, suicide, prison, humiliation, solitude'.¹⁸ Noll himself is fully aware of the stigma of artistic production in a technocratic society. As the author comments in one of his interviews: 'a criação [estética] tenta exercer a liberdade num mundo em que tudo conspira contra... A criação sempre marginaliza, você sempre se arrisca a mexer em coisas que socialmente estigmatizam'.¹⁹ This link between literature and irrationality is reinforced for the protagonist of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* through the biographies of poets, whose lives are characterised by states of dissipation, libertinism or madness and consequently acts as a testimony to their renunciation of daily life and the destitution of rational behaviour:

eu muitas vezes como agora ia me sentar na Biblioteca Pública a alguns passos daquele sebo, pegava vidas de poetas, um mais estranho que o outro, tinha um que nunca correu atrás de uma trepada, nunca tinha fodido com ninguém, morreu assim, casto, outro cultivava escondido aparas de suas próprias unhas, botava as aparas num pequeno frasco e como que as reverenciava, *tangido por algum sentimento que ele não sabia decifrar* [my italics].²⁰

During the development of the novel, the narrator becomes an unwilling victim of successive forms of imprisonment and isolation. His gradual process of social

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason* (London: Routledge, 1971) p. 219.

¹⁸ Octávio Paz, *Children of the Mire. Modern Poetry From Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, 2nd edition, translated by Rachel Phillips (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991 [1974]) p. 110.

¹⁹ Geneton Moraes Netto, "Sonhar é preciso," *Jornal do Brasil*, 16/07/1988. Reprinted in Maria Flávia Armani Bueno Magalhães, *João Gilberto Noll: Um Escritor em Trânsito* (Unpublished MA dissertation, Campinas: UNICAMP de Campinas, 1993) p. 331.

²⁰ Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

exclusion is far from a conscious choice made by the artist, who retires from reality to assume a life in a contemplative world, but is a situation imposed on the narrator who does not understand or know how to escape from the situation in which he is forced to live. The young poet is taken to jail ignorant of the reasons for his incarceration: it is only later, when confronted with his picture on the front page of a local newspaper that he learns that he has been jailed for a rape which he is unaware of having committed. Later, the narrator is entrusted to a mysterious man whose physical appearance and inexplicable presence serve to intensify the sense of puzzlement experienced by the poet:

um homem de chapéu, um sobretudo preto, o homem me fez lembrar de uma foto que eu conhecia de uma rua de Viena lá dos anos trinta... e ele me passou um pacote, disse que ali havia livros de poesia e umas folhas para eu escrever... Olhei para o homem, ele parecia alguém impertubável.²¹

Once released from prison, the poet is taken to a clinic called Almanova where he is again kept in an involuntary exclusion. This time, however, his 'incarceration' is described through moments of bliss in which his poetic activity becomes undifferentiated from his everyday life: '[s]onhei que fazia um poema onde dois cavalos relinchavam. Quando acordei lá estavam eles, ainda a relinchar, só que agora fora do poema, a poucos passos de mim, e eu poderia montar neles se quisesse'.²² His sense of happiness and personal fulfilment intensifies as the narrator describes his idyllic life with Mariana, the alleged victim of his rape, and their newborn son: 'ia buscar leite no curral, agora eu praticava a ordenha todas as manhãs. Enquanto andava em direção ao curral, com a vasilha na mão, o sol vinha subindo, galos cantavam, passarada. Eu atravessava um caminho dentro de um campo de plantações rasas'.²³

The narrator's daily routine in the countryside provides him an all encompassing sense of freedom. The passage offers a sense of circular movement which refers both to the narrator's routine in the recurrence of a joyful activity – e.g. the early milking – as well as to the cyclical movement of nature itself through the activity performed by

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

²² *Loc. cit.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

the protagonist: feeding the cow whose milk feeds him. The milk, furthermore, seems to become a metaphor for the aesthetic experience: it does not belong exclusively to its producer – the artist – nor to its audience but instead interconnects both sides into a single experience of ‘spiritual nourishment’,²⁴ as Noll defines the function of literature.

This sense of freedom and total integration with the environment, which is depicted by the narrator as an account of real life events, is actually, as the reader is led to conclude, a hallucinatory manifestation resulting from the treatment administered to the narrator during his stay at the clinic. The protagonist’s progressive transition from a hallucinatory digression to the reality of his clinic room is described in the following paragraphs:

Abri a cancela, havia uma certa luz lá dentro, olhei para trás, vi que era a lua, mesmo que pálida, a clarear um pouco entre os animais. O gado começou a mugir. Fui andando para o fim do curral, onde estava o feno.

Parei, a poucos passos de mim tinha um vulto escuro.

Eu trazia uma lanterna no bolso, mirei o facho bem na fisionomia: era o homem que me tinha apanhado na delegacia e me alojara na Clínica Almanova. Mesmo que há muito não pensasse nesse trecho da minha vida, a lembrança desse homem me ocorreu naturalmente, sem qualquer esforço...

Dei uns passos atrás, recuando, eu não queria voltar.

O homem veio e me pegou no rosto, me fez olhar um quarto de paredes acizentadas que custei um pouco a reconhecer [my italics].²⁵

This passage refers to the poet’s incapacity to come in terms with his objective reality. The world of his dreams, which is an aesthetic experience that reflects his personal aspirations, appears to be much easier to comprehend than the reality in which he is compelled to live, which is more akin to a nightmare. The narrator’s puzzlement is augmented when he fails to recognise the image of his face reflected in a mirror. The

²⁴ Treece, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

²⁵ Noll, *O Quiet Animal da Esquina*, *op. cit.*, p. 455.

abrupt change in his physical appearance leads the poet to conclude that a long time has elapsed since his arrival at ‘Almanova’: ‘Eu de cabelos compridos, com uma barba crescida – nunca a deixara antes crescer. Algum tempo tinha se passado, *agora eu via*, e não pouco tempo: aqueles cabelos longos e a barba bem espessa eram alguns sinais dele’ [my italics].²⁶ Following his astonishment at his lack of temporal consciousness, the narrator is presented with some verses which, although unaware of having produced them, he acknowledges as his own by recognising his handwriting and signature: ‘poemas escritos com a minha letra, todos com a minha assinatura, um tanto trêmula, mas *eu via ali* o meu traço, não eram falsificações’ [my italics].²⁷

Lacking any explanation for his reclusion, the narrator still shows no interest in questioning the situation which has been imposed on him. All of the information he learns is acquired by chance, such as in the passage in which the narrator discovers the name of his mysterious caretaker while overhearing a conversation: ‘[e]scutei chamarem o homem de Kurt’.²⁸ After leaving the clinic, the narrator is taken to Kurt’s house where he lives a circumscribed existence in which everything appears to be controlled, organised and predicated thus transforming the poet into an obsequious, submissive being. At first, he cherishes his new location in which he is offered a comfortable life in exchange for his poetic production. Although puzzled by this strange situation, he does not try to elucidate the mysterious relation that links the other characters in Kurt’s house, nor does he question his own position there. His only concern is to maintain the security of his refuge, while not knowing what is expected from him in his shelter:

Eu nunca tinha comido tão bem, aquele vinho que eu esperava ver dali pra frente em todos os almoços, aquilo tudo me instigava a acreditar que chegara a minha vez, me agarraria com unhas e dentes àquela oportunidade única que eu não sabia de onde tinha vindo nem até onde iria, sim, eu não a deixaria escapar,

²⁶ *Loc. cit.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

²⁸ *Loc. cit.*

mesmo que tivesse de fazer exatamente o que eles esperassem de mim, aquilo era meu, eu bem que gostaria até que não houvesse muita explicação.²⁹

During his first days at the house, inspired by the novelty of his ‘mysterious situation’, the poet writes prolifically. In one of his creative moments, the narrator comments on the process of poetic inspiration:

Sentado à mesa do meu quarto procurava diariamente preencher as folhas da gaveta, ia escrevendo os meus versos olhando pela janela os eucaliptos, e enquanto escrevia, a imagem dos eucaliptos saía de si e ocupava todo o terreno dos meus olhos como algo que eu não pudesse mais distinguir, isso até eu voltar de golpe às coisas que me cercavam dentro do casarão.³⁰

What is described by the poet is not the ideas or emotional feelings conveyed in his poetry, but the very process of aesthetic creation: a moment of ecstatic experience which escapes any attempt at rational explanation.³¹ His aesthetic experience appears to have a metaphorical function when described in conjunction with the use of the word ‘*eucalipto*’. When analysed in each of its different morphemes (Eu – ‘*I*’ or ‘*self*’ in Portuguese – followed by the term ‘calipto’ – ‘Kaluptos’ meaning ‘*covered*’ in Greek – a verb that can be further reduced to the expression ‘cali’ or ‘Kalli’ which, in Greek, signifies *beauty*), the word ‘eucalyptus’ is detached from its generic meaning as a classification of a certain type of tree to become a poetic definition for the aesthetic experience as a subjective response to a perceived object in which the ‘self [becomes] covered by beauty’. The term ‘beauty’ as it is employed here does not designate the qualities or judgement of a specific object or landscape but instead

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ Using a similar example to describe the particular attitude assumed by the poet in relation to his perceptions by which he, the poet, becomes wholly integrated with the perceived object, the Argentinean writer Ernesto Sábato comments that ‘[e]l poeta que contempla un árbol y que describe el estremecimiento que la brisa produce en sus hojas, no hace un análisis físico del fenómeno, no recurre a los principios de la dinámica, no razona mediante las leyes matemáticas de la propagación luminosa: se atiene al fenómeno puro, a esa impresión candorosa y vivida, al puro y hermoso brillo y temblor de las hojas mecidas por el viento. Y contrariamente al físico, no intenta ni se le ocurre separar la forma de esas hojas, sus sutiles movimientos, su tierno color verde, el armonioso arabesco de las ramas, de su propia conciencia, sino que vive todo simultánea e indiscerniblemente, en una radical co-presencia: ni su yo puede prescindir del mundo, puesto que esas impresiones, esas emociones las experimenta por el mundo; ni el mundo puede prescindir de su yo, ya que ni ese árbol, ni esas hojas ni ese estremecimiento

relates to the feelings that a certain perception, in this case the perception of the trees, evokes in the subject. By emphasising the aesthetic experience as an intermingling between the perceptual subject and the perceived object, Noll seems to reject both the empirical explanation of beauty as a quality lying in the object as well as the immanent approach in which beauty is considered to be in the eye of the beholder. By focusing on the aesthetic experience as a phenomenological process in which object and subject are unified by a feeling of ecstasy, the vision of the eucalyptus trees by the narrator points to the fact that aesthetic experience 'is not only a state or mode of being of the subject; it is a mode of being of the subject which corresponds to a mode of being in the object. [The aesthetic feeling] is that in me which relates to a certain quality of the object through which the object manifests its intimacy'.³²

Other than illustrating the aesthetic experience as a phenomenon in which subject and object become connected by an unfathomable feeling of beauty, the passage also refers to the lack of separation between the processes of aesthetic creation and reception. As I have previously indicated, the narrator's aesthetic experience, which is triggered by the vision of the trees, occurs concomitantly with the process of aesthetic production. This fact leads us to consider two different though interrelated aspects of Noll's work. The first aspect points to Noll's consideration of aesthetic production, not in terms of mimesis (the simple reproduction of an object or situation as considered by Plato and Aristotle) but as an expressive activity in which the artist transmits his subjective perception of the world. As Noll has noted, '[e]u acho que toda a produção de qualquer artista, tem que dar conta da dinâmica da sua visão de mundo'.³³ In this view, the interest of the artist does not reside in the object he chooses to depict but in how this object becomes perceived. When emphasising the essential role of subjective perception in artistic production, Noll appears to share a similar position with that assumed by the phenomenologists. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, for instance, asserts that the uniqueness of each work of art does not lie in the artist's capacity to reproduce an object, but in his means of enquiry into what makes the

son separables de su conciencia'. Ernesto Sábato, *El Escritor y Sus Fantasmas*, 2a edición (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1964 [1963]) p. 84.

³² Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, translated with a foreword by Edward S. Casey (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) p. 376.

³³ Bueno Magalhães, "Encontro com João Gilberto Noll," *João Gilberto Noll: Um Escritor em Trânsito*, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

perception of objects possible. Centering his analysis on paintings the observer/thinker suggests that:

The painter, whatever he is, *while he is painting* practices a magical theory of vision... Light, lighting, shadows, reflection, colour, all the objects of his quest are not altogether real objects; like ghosts, they have only visual existence... the interrogation of painting looks towards this secret and feverish genesis of things in our body [author's emphasis].³⁴

Merleau-Ponty's definition of the work of the artist as a interrogation about the perceived object is shared by other phenomenologists such as Mikel Dufrenne, who writes that '[a]n artist chooses a particular subject because he is consubstantial with it and because the subject awakens a certain emotion within him and even seems to interrogate him at times. It is not a matter of copying this subject but of furnishing, through it, a sensuous equivalent'.³⁵ This conception of artistic creation as an enquiry based on the encounter between the subject and his world is what seems to characterise the aim of the fictional writer for Noll. What the novelist presents in his work is not the literal explanation of the fictional environment, but how this environment becomes perceived and experienced through the different perspectives of narrators and characters. Even in the realistic or autobiographical novel, which contains a description of 'real' events for the reader, these events can only be described from the singular perspective of the individual who offers his subjective perceptions of the world. The same rule can be applied to the third person narrator who, even without playing an active role in the plot, interrupts the narrative of the novel in order to expound the behaviour and attitudes of its characters. His intervention, far from being detached from the described events, represents a subjective position in an attempt to explain and judge the behaviour and perceptual activities of the novel's characters. As Noll proposes, novels do not simply depict a given situation but present how this situation is subjectively perceived by narrator

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *Aesthetics*, edited by Harold Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 62/3.

³⁵ Dufrenne, *op.cit.*, p. 316.

and/or character: '[g]eneticamente o romance se caracteriza por esse embate entre o 'eu' e o mundo... [mostrando] como esse mundo se processa'.³⁶

The second aspect to be considered in the description of the aesthetic experience that the narrator undergoes during his poetic production is the abolition of the separation between the artist and his audience. Artistic expression, as the term suggests, is not an 'invention' that belongs to the artist alone but is the 'sharing' of a perceptual experience between the creator and percipient. By the same token, the percipient can only be aesthetically involved in the work of art if he opens himself perceptually to the aesthetic object, thus re-enacting the same aesthetic experience undergone by its creator. As Mikel Dufrenne proposes:

the experience of the spectator exists in the image of the creator's experience... the relationship between creator and spectator first manifests itself, through the intermediary of the work, as a sort of corporeal complicity... faced with the aesthetic object, every spectator is a performer in his own fashion.³⁷

Although having no direct access to the poetry that the narrator is writing, the reader is nevertheless invited to share the poet's experience of aesthetic bliss. The vision of the eucalyptuses seems to blur the distinction between seer and seen, subject and object which, transposed onto a meta-literary level in the novel, serves as an allusion to the amalgamation between narrator and reader who are bound to each other in the fictional world during the process of reading. The image (of the trees) becomes detached from the object (the trees themselves) in the same way that the poet's gaze, completely occupied by this image, detaches the narrator from his surrounding environment as if he is being transported to another realm of existence. By this, Noll seems to suggest that the experiences of the artist and his audience are interconnected with each other: the artist becomes the audience of his own work during his process of creation in the same way that the audience gives continuity to the experience of the artist during its process of aesthetic reception. By actualising the perception of the artist at each new encounter with the work of art that we contemplate, we are in fact sharing one and the same experience with its creator: that of aesthetic ecstasy.

³⁶ Bueno Magalhães, "Encontro com João Gilberto Noll," *op. cit.*, p. 300.

³⁷ Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

The transformation of the subject's identity by the incorporation of the fictional character's self is what defines for phenomenological critics the process of literary experience. When describing the reader's situation during the process of reading, Wolfgang Iser suggests that:

[i]t is true that they [books] consist of ideas thought out by someone else, but in reading the reader becomes the subject that does the thinking. Thus there disappears the subject-object division that otherwise is a prerequisite for all knowledge and all observation, and the removal of this division puts reading in an apparently unique position as regards the possible absorption of new experiences... In thinking the thoughts of another, his own individuality temporarily recedes into the background since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focussed. As we read... we take as a theme for ourselves something that we are not.³⁸

Like Iser, Georges Poulet argues that by summoning up the thoughts of the fictional character during the act of reading, the reader experiences a suspension of his 'real' self:

[b]ecause of the strange invasion of my person by the thoughts of another [the fictional character], I am a self who is granted the experience of thinking thoughts foreign to him. I am the subject of thoughts other than my own... since every thought must have a subject to think it, this *thought* which is alien to me, must also have in me a *subject* which is alien to me.³⁹

³⁸ Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: a phenomenological approach," *New Literary Review* 3 (1971) p. 297/8.

³⁹ Georges Poulet, "Phenomenology of reading," *New Literary History* 1:1, October (1969) p. 56. For a more comprehensive discussion of the conversion of the reader's self into the fictional character's identity see Georges Poulet, *The Interior Distance*, translated by Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1952) and "Criticism and the experience of interiority," *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard A. Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970) pp. 56-72; Gabriele Schwab, "Reader-response and the Aesthetic Experience of Otherness," *Stanford Literature Review* 3:1 (1986) p. 107-136; Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: from reading response to literary anthropology* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Keith Oatley and Mitra Gholamain, "Emotions

The subjective transformation of the author and readers into the fictional other seems to assume, as I have stated, an essential role in Noll's conception of the aesthetic experience. However, in contrast to both Iser and Poulet, who emphasise 'thought' rather than 'perception' as being the primary factor which enables the reader to assume the self of the fictional characters, Noll seems to highlight the perceptual activities described by his narrators. I will discuss this in more detail in the next section of this chapter, as it is the central aspect which enables the reader to transmute the experiences of the fictional other through embodiment.

5.3.1 Rational order and the domestication of the artistic experience

In the development of the narrative of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, the narrator's feeling of security under Kurt's patronage, which was initially welcomed as favourable for the production of his poetry, soon becomes a major impediment to his aesthetic inspiration. Reflecting upon his imposed isolation, the narrator considers whether '[n]ão seria preferível abandonar aquele quarto e tentar esquecer a existência de Kurt, de Gerda, e ir atrás de uma situação menos cega, tão clara como a minha mão que se abria em leque sob o foco do abajur, os meus dedos os versos que eu gostaria de ter, sucintos'.⁴⁰ The gap felt between his poetic production and a more spontaneous perception of the world leads the narrator to compose his last poem: 'O quieto animal da esquina'. This poem, written on the occasion of Gerda's funeral, appears as a metaphor for the narrator's artistic death: 'The quiet animal on the corner', as the title suggests, refers to the poet as a tamed animal whose only function in life is to amuse and obey his owner. Unable to engage into a genuine mode of aesthetic expression, the poet reaches a state of absolute 'tameness' as a wild animal that becomes domesticated by suppressing its inner wild or ferocious nature.

At the end of the novel, the narrator finds himself caught between his constrained life and the option of death:

and Identification: Connections between readers and fiction," *Emotion and the Arts*, edited by Mette Hjort and Sue Laver (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) pp. 263-281.

⁴⁰ Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, *op. cit.*, p. 472.

preferi me calar, olhar o lago que se enchia de luz, o lago escuro e lodoso que naquele início tímido da manhã como que espelhava uma outra paisagem, uma espécie de plano esbranquiçado, não sei se da rala névoa, mas uma cor tão clara que cheguei a duvidar...

Aí nadei peito, deslizei, às vezes boiava e constatava que o dia já tomara o céu inteiro, um dia limpo de dezembro, me virei para tentar agora borboleta, ao me virar reparei que na margem do lago Kurt me olhava.⁴¹

All of the elements comprising the description in this passage point to the narrator's desire to bring a radical change to his existence. The arrival of a new day, the lake which seems to reflect another landscape, his attempt to swim a butterfly stroke in the lake: they all express the poet's urgent cry for an alternative escape route that would enable him to rescue his personal autonomy, which he has lost since the beginning of the narrative.

The sight of his caretaker at the shore of the lake reminds the young poet of his confinement. The hope for a radical change in his life is abruptly halted by the presence of Kurt, who offers his clothes to the narrator in a symbolic gesture that represents both protection and incarceration. To take Kurt's offer means to accept his authority and all the security it brings; to reject it is to revolt against a dictatorial power that supplants the poet's own freedom. Neither attending to Kurt's appeal nor expressly negating it, the poet chooses to plunge into the lake. Initially described as a game, the narrative soon changes its tone to that of a threat of suicide by drowning:

Eu olhava em posição vertical, ali não tinha pé, eu mexia as pernas como em bicicleta, às vezes descia um pouco para o fundo, só até a cabeça desaparecer, depois voltava à tona e olhava Kurt a me sorrir de um jeito como eu nunca vira antes, assim como quem sorri porque se sente pequeno diante de uma situação, ele me oferecia as roupas na ponta daquele braço estendido, e eu voltava para o fundo, fiz a contagem para saber até onde o meu fôlego ia no interior do lago, na

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 493.

imersão seguinte fiquei bem mais, depois abria a boca e puxava todo o ar para os pulmões, e outra vez a minha cabeça submersa, e novamente saía, os olhos para fora, Kurt a sorrir, ele não dizia nada, me mostrava a roupa que eu deveria trocar pela molhada, o que ele estava a me oferecer era uma camisa listrada e uma calça escura, ali, na margem do lago, e levei de novo a cabeça para dentro da água, pensei em contar mais uma vez os segundos que eu agüentava.⁴²

This, the last paragraph in the novel, alternates the poet's visual perception of the environment (when his head is above the lake) and his internal thoughts (when submerged in the water), as if accentuating the difference between perceptual freedom and rational constraint. Asphyxia, however, assumes this dual meaning in the novel's conclusion: it relates both to the narrator's physical situation under the water as well as to the impossibility of a true aesthetic production under Kurt's controlling gaze. Through the use of language, in a long paragraph concatenated by short phrases which are separated by commas, Noll succeeds in bringing to the reader the same experience of asphyxia lived by the poet. The commas enable the reader to capture brief moments in which he can come up for a breath of narrative air, simulating the position of the protagonist holding his head above the water while also re-enacting the narrator's own experience of a shortness of breath when under water. I will discuss Noll's literary style in more detail in the last section of this chapter, where the reader is invited to feel the physical experiences of the narrator through his body.

In the concluding moment of the narrative, the poet impulsively leaves the lake and, discarding his wet clothes as if divesting himself of his own subjectivity, confronts Kurt's offer:

era preciso aceitar aquelas roupas que Kurt me oferecia na mão trêmula, e quando cheguei perto me veio uma coisa, como se um veneno, e eu dei um berro, arranquei a camisa molhada do meu corpo de um só golpe, rasguei, os botões voaram, num ímpeto baixei a calça e a cueca, sacudi desembestado a perna para que a calça se

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 494.

desvencilhasse de mim, e agora eu vestiria a roupa seca que Kurt me dava, e depois eu iria para a cama, me sossegar, dormir quem sabe, sonhar.⁴³

The novel finishes with an open ending in which the reader is invited to provide his own interpretation for the actions performed by the poet. This open ending is signalled by the abrupt shift in the tense of the verbs: the scene in the lake which is described in the present changes tense after the adverb ‘now’, a word which express the exact time when the sequence of actions stops, just as the narrator, outside the water, has removed his last piece of wet clothing. The narrative is followed then by the use of the conditional verbs ‘vestiria’ and ‘iria’ indicating the possibility (or not) of actions taking place. Edu Otsuka suggests that ‘a narrativa de *O Quietos Animal da Esquina* termina com uma nota em grande medida otimista, em que os personagens se solidarizam no gesto do protagonista de aceitar as roupas que seu protetor lhe oferece’.⁴⁴ My interpretation of the novel’s conclusion differs from that proposed by Otsuka. The use of the conditional tense, as I have indicated, stresses the uncertainty of the unfolding of the actions, so that the reader does not know whether the narrator will indeed put on the clothes offered to him. What is more, were the poet to don Kurt’s clothes, the end of the novel would not express ‘optimism’ or ‘solidarity’, but would rather indicate an act of ‘pessimism’ and ‘resignation’ on the part of the narrator who, unable to escape Kurt’s patronage, had to resign himself to a feeling of numbness as if in a state of sleep.

5.4 *Lorde*: the incommunicability between aesthetic experience and rational order

In his most recent novel, *Lorde*, Noll depicts the experience of a Brazilian literary writer who, having accepted a scholarship to work in England, is haunted by feelings of fear and incertitude. Similar to the protagonist of *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, the

⁴³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁴ Edu Otsuka, *Marcas da Catástrofe: experiência urbana e indústria cultural em Rubem Fonseca, João Gilberto Noll e Chico Buarque* (São Paulo: Nankin Editorial, 2001) p. 135.

narrator of *Lorde* is completely unaware of his position in the unfamiliar country: he has no idea about the kind of activity he is expected to carry out during his stay in England, nor does he understand what is required by a foreign organisation – probably an academic institution or some form of intellectual environment – to be interested in his literary works. At the very beginning of the novel, the narrator expresses his scepticism in relation to the invitation:

[e]u estava chegando ao aeroporto de Heathrow, em Londres. Sendo chamado por um cidadão inglês para uma espécie de missão. Mas, embora ele tivesse me mandado as passagens Porto Alegre-São Paulo-Londres e tudo, não sei, algo em mim me dizia que ele ia faltar... ele talvez quisesse se vingar da minha credulidade para o seu convite, mal sabendo que eu não sofria exatamente de credulidade, vivera até o dia da viagem me retorcendo em dúvidas com relação às intenções dele, desse tal inglês: sim, a pura verdade vinha de que eu não tivera escolha. Então eu vim.⁴⁵

Although completely unaware of the reasons for his trip, the narrator decides to be obedient to his host, even when he knows that his compliance will be at odds with the possibility of experiencing an autonomous life:

[p]ara onde iríamos depois?, fiz menção de perguntar. No fundo eu sabia que ele se encarregaria de tudo até determinado ponto, e que tudo o que estivesse por fazer seria, não digo para o meu bem, mas se evidenciaria como o mais sensato, aquilo que deveria ser feito sob pena de eu não agüentar o tranco vindouro, pois dele viria o caminho até que eu pudesse, não, não dispensá-lo, isso jamais, mas *me ater a alguma autonomia que seria sempre limitada* [my italics].⁴⁶

This subjugation to the rules of his English host becomes increasingly evident in the unfolding of the narrative. The novelist recalls his first contact with the Englishman in Brazil, where the latter commented that: ‘precisava conhecer no meu trabalho aquilo que chamavam de *algo que não entendi* e que lhe vinha interessando muito nos últimos anos, ah, sobre o qual vinha escrevendo um livro. Se não me engano esse

⁴⁵ João Gilberto Noll, *Lorde* (São Paulo: Francis Editora, 2004) p. 9/10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

livro falava de alienígenas’ [my italics].⁴⁷ Although not understanding the academic jargon employed by the English writer nor able to figure out the relationship between his literary production and a scholarly book dealing with the subject of aliens, the narrator does not raise any objections with the person who he considers to be his *patrão* (master). All of these uncertainties start to reflect on his life (‘minha indefinição já era maior do que eu... nem o meu patrão inglês poderia enfim fazer alguma coisa para me devolver a mim... [eu] escreveria então uma outra história -, publicaria em inglês essa minha transformação num alienígena’⁴⁸) to the point in which the narrator becomes completely alienated from his own self whilst at the same time identifying himself with his English caretaker:

[s]e não aderisse cegamente àquele inglês que me chamara até Londres, se não o reinventasse dentro de mim e me pusesse a perder a mim próprio, sendo doravante ele em outro, neste mesmo que me acostumara a nomear de eu mas que se mostrava dissolvido ultimamente, pronto para receber a crua substância desse inglês, ora, sem isso não calcularia como prosseguir.⁴⁹

The trouble plaguing the protagonist is not his transformation into someone he doesn’t know or even understand, but how this personal conversion would interfere with his aesthetic production. The intellectual and controlling Englishman, on whom the narrator feels entirely reliant, appears to be completely insensitive to the narrator’s aesthetic needs. In the apartment chosen to accommodate the novelist, utilitarian materials are meticulously laid out as if reflecting the methodical habits and sense of order of his host:

[e]m cada aposento me esperava seu correspondente material de limpeza. No corredor que levava a uma escadaria, o balde com o líquido azulado já preparado; dentro uma dessas vassouras de trapos para limparem e secarem o piso. No banheiro, luvas de plástico, o esfregão e o detergente correspondente para a limpeza da banheira que parecia imaculadamente nova. O mesmo na cozinha; no balcão ao lado da pia outras luvas amarelas, esponjas, detergentes.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27/8.

Na sala, quarto, vassouras... Parecia que só tinha aquilo, uma casa desconhecida que [eu] teria de ocupar.⁵⁰

The abundance of serviceable objects in the house contrasts drastically with the absence of other less utilitarian or aesthetic items, such as mirrors or paintings. Through his window, the narrator can only see a leafless tree and some iron wreckage. Confronted by such a inhospitable view, the protagonist questions how this oppressive 'landscape' might interfere in his dreams, in which the oneiric element appears as a possible metaphor for his own process of aesthetic inspiration:

[c]omo seria sonhar naquele quarto sem cortina, a me mostrar a árvore sem folhas e os ferros e entulhos do que outrora talvez fosse resultado quase imediato da Revolução Industrial? Sonharia com a Natureza esquelética ou com engrenagens que me trituravam?⁵¹

The restricted view to which the protagonist has access is soon obstructed by the decision of the Englishman to place a curtain at the window: 'O inglês quer me esconder dos vizinhos. Vai me tirar a visão da árvore seca que se prepara para a primavera'.⁵² The narrator, analogous to the tree in winter crowded among the iron debris, seems barren, prevented from carrying out his creative function by the restrictions imposed by his English host. The seasonal alteration of the tree's appearance from barrenness to fruitfulness symbolises the possibility of engendering beauty for the narrator – the feeling conveyed through the aesthetic experience – even when subjected to an inhospitable background. What is more, by hiding the tree from the narrator, the Englishman denies the novelist the possibility of expressing himself through words. As the narrator comments, his first attempt at verbal communication was aroused by his contact with a tree: '[c]omecei a falar tarde, com seis anos. De repente a palavra começou a vir, foi no quintal, conversando com uma árvore'.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 39/40.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

5.4.1 Aesthetic experience as the embodiment of the other

The narrator's condition of subservience and isolation when ensconced in his apartment under the methodical – although not fully comprehensible – control of his English host makes it impossible for him to be engaged in the process of aesthetic production. This adverse situation is reversed during his wanderings through London. The sense of strangeness initially associated with the negative experience of isolation is immediately overturned when the narrator starts to intermingle with the city's anonymous and diverse passers-by. No longer experiencing difference as an obstacle to his integration in the foreign environment, the narrator immerses himself in the crowds in the streets within which he feels intimately identified. Contrary to the artistic attitude of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, who observes the crowd from a distance to later translate his impressions in the literary work, the narrator in *Lorde* experiences the amorphous mass as an extension of the self. The immersion into an unfamiliar environment is described by Noll as being one of the essential elements that provides material his literary production:

[p]oder me aventurar pelas ruas onde ninguém me conhece, é uma das coisas que eu mais curto. A coisa de poder viver a sua intimidade com o espaço não-familiar; isso me seduz. O espaço de uma rua, de uma cidade. Que não precisa ser completamente desconhecida, mas que não seja aquela em que eu esteja vivendo. A domesticidade é uma coisa que sempre me arrepiou um pouco... É bom poder contar com o espaço doméstico. Mas ao mesmo tempo ele te petrifica, não é? Você só pode sonhar com a aventura nesse espaço doméstico, e não viver a aventura.⁵⁴

In fact, it is only through this physical involvement with the crowd that the narrator in *Lorde* is able to achieve a feeling of subjective and aesthetic freedom:

[n]ão me importava que as pessoas que caminhavam pelas calçadas não me notassem, me confundissem com todas: era desse material difuso da multidão que eu construía o meu novo rosto, uma nova memória. Por enquanto, sim, eu

⁵⁴ Bueno Magalhães, "Entrevista com João Gilberto Noll," *op. cit.*, p. 314.

não era ninguém. Mas cedo eu chegaria a todo mundo e estaria então com a minha cara pronta, uma história que eu poderia relatar desde o primeiro verso, sim, seria escrita em versos, e eu os recitaria para novas audiências.⁵⁵

While suspending his personal sense of self, the narrator can share a single identity with the crowd whose participants – although unknown to each other – experience a physical proximity as if forming a single body. This reflects Noll’s own idea of the process of literary creation when comparing the position of the author with that of the actor. Both artists need to step outside their ‘real’ self in order to bring their fictional character into existence. As Noll has expressed, ‘eu acho que a experiência do narrar tem muito a ver com a experiência do ator também... de ser alguma coisa que não você mesmo’.⁵⁶

This incorporation of the other, however, is not an activity exclusively related to the artist during his aesthetic production. In fact, the reception of a specific aesthetic work also requires the percipient to perform the contents of his perception. As Umberto Eco proposes, ‘[e]very “reading”, “contemplation”, or “enjoyment” of a work of art represents a tacit or private form of “performance”’.⁵⁷ It is this idea of aesthetic reception as a performative process, by which the percipient enacts the experience of another, which seems to be evoked in the narrative of *Lorde* when the protagonist describes his aesthetic experience when contemplating a painting:

[d]ivisei de cara o prédio da National Gallery e pensei que era ali que eu ia entrar. Para minha grata surpresa era de graça a entrada. Em vez de olhar os quadros, embora *saiba* ter passado de raspão por um Rafael, fui à procura de um banheiro. Fiz xixi. O vasto banheiro vazio. Na frente do espelho percebi não haver o que esperar. Tirei a caixinha do bolso, retirei o estojo, abri-o e o passei lentamente pelas faces, testa. Se alguém me visse pensaria logo na performance de algum artista... Por isso tudo eu me maquiava no banheiro da National Gallery, sem que ninguém entrasse ou sáísse, como se eu estivesse no meu camarim para logo mais fazer a festa... Ninguém mais me reconheceria, já que

⁵⁵ Noll, *Lorde*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Bueno Magalhães, “Entrevista com João Gilberto Noll,” *op. cit.*, p. 316.

⁵⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) p. 65.

tinha feito uma reforma em cima de alguém que eu mesmo começava seriamente a estranhar. *Percebi* logo um enorme quadro de Murillo, Cristo curando o paralítico, em meio a outros homens estirados pelo chão, em dores. Existia outra saída senão curar o paralítico?, pensei *sentindo a canseira danada* de tanto caminhar por Londres naquele dia [my italics].⁵⁸

Before perceiving the works of art exposed at the National Gallery, the narrator undergoes a substantive process of transformation in which he divests himself of his own identity. This transformation does not happen only at a psychological level but is essentially experienced in the narrator's own body. On entering the museum he *knows* that the building contains impressive paintings of world famous artists. However, it is only after the suspension of his own self – an act indicated in the narrative by the make-up that the protagonist applies to his face, changing his own body in the same way that an actor prepares himself to perform his fictional character – that the narrator can be aesthetically engaged with the artistic expression by literally *enacting* its content. The perception of a painting depicting Christ amongst others who are suffering finds its echo in the narrator's own body: by perceiving the agonised expressions in the looks and faces portrayed by the artist, the narrator grasps the full significance of the scene. The narrator has to live the scene he perceives through his own body in the same way that the painter has pain as the point of reference which he so convincingly expresses in his work. By re-enacting the same perception of the artist, the protagonist re-creates the work of art corroborating the idea that:

to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent... Without an act of recreation the object is not perceived as a work of art... In both [artist and audience], there is a comprehension in its literal signification – that is, a gathering together of details and particulars physically scattered into an experienced whole. There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist. The one who is too lazy, idle, or indurated in convention to perform this work will not see or hear. His 'appreciation' will be a mixture of scraps of learning with conformity to norms of conventional admiration.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Noll, *Lorde, op. cit.*, p. 26/7.

⁵⁹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1980) p. 54.

Therefore, the aesthetic experience that occurs in the narrator is not the outcome of his intellectual knowledge or critical understanding of art as shared amongst art critics, but is rather a physical involvement with the subject of the painting which then becomes translated into his own body. The image of the painting is rearticulated in the narrator's body through a sensation of tiredness, as if physically translating the paralytic's own experience of tiredness following the recovery of movement in his legs after a long period of immobility.

The disassociation of the aesthetic experience from a mode of rational cognition is constantly recalled in the narrative of *Lorde*, such as in the passage in which the narrator comments on his encounter with a prostitute who:

falava numa língua com certeza africana, do Quênia, ela disse quando nos despedimos. Aquelas palavras sem semântica funcionavam para mim como um mantra, e como tal era hipnótico, me levava a um estado de indeterminação: um bulício acetinado sem jamais desabrochar em gesto, ação. Claro que eu ficaria ali pelo resto da vida se deixassem. Ela era sim uma verdadeira gueixa negra. Daria-lhe o triplo de grana se tivesse, para ficar um dia inteiro submerso naquele infra-êxtase. Sairia dali curado, pronto para aceitar o que fosse e ir até o fim sem olhar pra trás.⁶⁰

The search for sexual gratification when visiting the prostitute is replaced by another form of pleasure, one of aesthetics, which seems to indicate that like sexuality, aesthetic pleasure is mainly experienced through our physical bodies. The words uttered by the prostitute, although unintelligible to the narrator, are appreciated for their sonority and rhythmic structure. The compelling effect these words evoke in him is in no way different from the pleasure he could achieve through poetry, since for the poem the 'use of language takes priority over its utilitarian function, and for this reason semantic difficulty could never be a decisive objection to a poem or novel... To comprehend [the poem or the novel] is no longer to explain but to feel'.⁶¹ The aesthetic experience undergone by the narrator when hearing the prostitute's

⁶⁰ Noll, *Lorde, op. cit.*, p. 54/5.

⁶¹ Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

utterances is not related to the ideas or concepts that her words might evoke in him but to their rhythmic structure. The intonation in which a poem is recited plays a significant factor in arousing in the listener the feeling conveyed by the poetry, in the same way that the sequence of notes performed by the musician is a determining factor in bringing emotions to the audience. As Mikel Dufrenne comments, ‘the poetic word is understood only by means of the resonance it awakens, and the movement it induces, within me. The experience of signification occurs through the experience of the sensuous virtues the word has for the mouth proffering it or for the ear hearing it’.⁶² Other literary critics have stressed the important role played by sounds in literary works. Calvin Brown, for example, suggests that hearing takes priority over sight during the process of reading. When formulating his theory, the critic proposes that:

music and literature are intended to be heard... Does *Achilles* rhyme with *pastilles*? If the eye were the judge it would. And, in spite of the eye, *queue* rhymes with *you*. In fact, when we read we mentally hear sounds to such an extent that we instantly spot a halting line of poetry or a false rhyme... We are thus justified in the original statement that literature is an art presented to the ear rather than to the eye.⁶³

The emphasis given to the sonorous aspects of words rather than their semantic meaning suggests, furthermore, the close similarity between Noll’s narratives and poetry and music. As Noll has commented when defining his literary style:

[e]u comecei [a escrever] através da música... [e] eu acho que trago até hoje essa marca musical e... poética – porque eu acho que a poesia tem muito a ver com a música – quer dizer, eu acho que a poesia é a palavra em estado musical, ritmo, andamento... a minha maneira de escrever é muito ir às cegas para o papel, no

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁶³ Calvin S. Brown, *Music and Literature – a comparison of the arts* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987) p. 8/9. The relevance of the sonority of sentences in literary works is not restricted to novels or poetry alone. In fact, the sonority of a sentence plays a pivotal role in determining the meaning of a text for the theatrical audience. As the English dramatist Harold Pinter has suggested: ‘[i]f you hit a line with particular emphasis – within the rhythm – its meaning will become apparent. Listen to the sound first and the meaning will become clear through that. A half-hour debate can be more confusing than one clearly put sentence. Music and rhythm: they must be your guides’. Quoted in Michael Billington, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) p. 148.

caso, para o computador, sem saber muito bem o que é que vai dar, aonde é que eu vou chegar, e eu sou arrastado por ritmos, realmente ritmos, por voltagens musicais, digamos assim.⁶⁴

Noll's preference for a narrative with a poetic-musical style is precisely because of the relevance of both poetry and music to perceptual experience and emotional feelings rather than to that of abstract ideas. As José Miguel Wisnik has rightly indicated:

a música não refere nem nomeia coisas visíveis, como a linguagem verbal faz, mas aponta com uma força toda sua para o não verbalizável... [p]or isso mesmo é capaz de provocar as mais apaixonadas adesões e as mais incontroláveis recusas... a música, linguagem não referencial, que não designa objetos, não tem a capacidade de provocar medo, mas sim a de provocar angústia, ligada, segundo Freud, a um estado de expectativa indeterminada, que se dá na ausência do objeto.⁶⁵

The predominance of the sensuous over the rational in poetry and music, furthermore, is what determines for Noll the capacity to bring the audience to a genuine aesthetic experience without the preoccupation with *understanding* the poem or the music by the context of its creation:

⁶⁴ Miguel do Rosário e Bruno Dorigatti, "A literatura é muito perigosa," *Arte e Política*, http://www.artepolitica.com.br/entrevistas/entrevista_noll.html. (Web page accessed on 02/02/05) no pagination.

⁶⁵ José Miguel Wisnik, *O Som e o Sentido: uma outra história das músicas*, 2a Edição (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1998 [1989]) p.28/9. For Wisnik, our initial experiences with language are established not by the recognition of signs but essentially by the sounds we hear which are perceived, by different rhythms and intonations, as music: '[q]uando a criança ainda não aprendeu a falar, mas já percebeu que a linguagem significa, a voz da mãe, com suas melodias e seus toques, é pura música, ou é aquilo que depois continuaremos para sempre a ouvir na música: uma linguagem que se percebe no horizonte de um sentido que no entanto não se discrimina em signos isolados, mas que só se intui como uma globalidade em perpétuo recuo, não verbal, intraduzível, mas, à sua maneira, transparente'. *Ibid.*, p. 30. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the first thinkers to stress the importance of melody in determining the meaning of utterances while appealing to our subjective emotions: '[t]he sounds of a melody do not affect us merely as sounds, but as signs of our affections, of our feelings. It is thus that they excite in us the emotions which it expresses, whose image we recognize in it'. Jean Jacques-Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages which Treats of Melody and Musical Imitation*, translated with afterwords by John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) p. 59. For a more comprehensive study on the relevance of prosody in semantics see Ann Winnerstrom, *The Music of Everyday Speech: prosody and discourse analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

as minhas experiências mais verticais com relação à leitura, foram com poemas, muito mais do que com a prosa, sabe? Porque quando você lê um poema dos grandes, você não precisa ficar preocupado com a psicologia, com o quadro social explícito. Então isso para mim é de babar, é como ouvir música, não é?⁶⁶

Another attribute which seems to be indicated in the encounter between the narrator of *Lorde* and the prostitute is that the aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to the perception of the work of art in its institutionalised form⁶⁷ as it becomes configured by galleries and museums, theatre, the published book, etc. As Edward Casey rightly argues, ‘the aesthetic object and the work of art should not be confused with one another. The work of art... has a constant being which is not dependent on being experienced, while the aesthetic object exists only as appearance, that is, only as experienced by the spectator’.⁶⁸ By experiencing the aesthetic in his everyday life, the narrator seems to blur the boundaries between art and life showing that there is nothing about a specific object – no special property or function – that makes it a work of art, except the feelings of elation and rapture that this object can arise in its percipient.

In fact, the aesthetic experience undergone by Noll’s protagonists is always indicated as a subjective, corporeal sensation which escapes any attempt of explanation through rational understanding. Doubt rather than certitude is what allows his protagonists the necessary freedom to perceive the aesthetic object ascribing to it – through an unfathomable feeling of pleasure – a personal meaning. In one of his recurrent visits to London’s National Gallery, the narrator in *Lorde* expresses his indecision in choosing a painting for aesthetic contemplation:

⁶⁶ Bueno Magalhães, “Entrevista com João Gilberto Noll,” *op. cit.*, p. 313. When analysing *Berkeley em Bellagio* later in this chapter, I will return to discuss the importance of poetry and music in Noll’s narratives.

⁶⁷ The concept of ‘institutionalised art’ is used here in the same sense ascribed by Peter Bürger to designate the ‘productive and distributive apparatus [of the artistic market] and also... the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works’. Bürger, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

⁶⁸ Edward S. Casey, “Translator’s foreword,” in Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

Vou para a frente mesmo das banhistas?, me perguntei. Ou dos girassóis do Van Gogh?... não estava sentado nem na frente das banhistas de Cézanne, nem dos girassóis de Van Gogh; sabe-se lá por que cargas da sorte tinha escolhido como quadro de contemplação um vaso de flores de Gauguin, de fato o mais bonito dos três.⁶⁹

The unveiling of beauty in the painting is not determined by a process of critical analysis according to which works of art are ‘understood’ by the isolation of their constituent elements (the process by which the object is portrayed, the techniques employed in its construction, the conceptual or ideological message it might convey, the classification of the art work in subcategories of genres and schools, etc.), or ‘explained’ in terms of the artistic object’s social function and the historical context and psychological attribute of its authors and artists. What seems to be stressed in the narrator’s description is that the contemplation of the aesthetic object is not defined by a rational judgement carried out by the subject in relation to the artistic expression – the narrator doesn’t know how to explain his aesthetic choice through intellectual reflection – but by the conflation of the perceiver and perceived which makes the aesthetic experience possible. In trying to ‘decipher’ the hidden meanings of the work of art, the art critic or expert ends up reducing the complexity of the aesthetic experience to a collection of rational explanations which attempt to guide the perception of the audience who are invited to ‘understand’ the artistic expression rather than ascribe a subjective meaning to it. As Mikel Dufrenne has rightly observed:

[i]t is the function of the critic to forge ahead the public’s perception in order to orient this perception correctly and mark out its route. The mission of these ‘competent’ (in the Aristotelian sense of the word) critics is not only to pass judgement on the aesthetic object but to facilitate our access to it. Thus armed, our perception acquires intelligence, our attention is no longer surprised and sterile, and our body follows the lead of this critical knowledge (sometimes our body follows so well that it ends by preceding such knowledge).⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Noll, *Lorde, op. cit.*, p. 88/9.

⁷⁰ Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

For Noll, then, art can become a revolutionary force exactly by withstanding the reproduction of intellectual or ideological contents and turning its attention to the sensual aspects of the human body. When emphasising the important role played by the novelist in recovering in his literature the sensual pleasure of the reader's body, Noll states that:

[o] autor tem uma tarefa libidinal a cumprir, por isto torna a existência mais plausível em termos de conforto e bem estar. Não podemos esquecer que somos orgânicos. E este orgânico está hoje apartado do mundo, até por deficiências nutritivas num país como o Brasil. O que fazem com o corpo da humanidade é um descalabro. Aqui falta até o feijão com arroz. Então o libidinoso é um alento. E minha relação com as palavras é erótica. Por isto gosto da palavra menos prosaica, com voltagem poética, da sintaxe com veio musical. O sexo é importante na minha vida e na minha obra.⁷¹

What Noll seems to advocate through his literary project, among other factors, therefore, is the rescuing of artistic expression from the realm of *understanding* by proposing that to fully experience the aesthetic object, we need to 'recover our senses. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more... [and that] [i]n place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.⁷²

5.5 *Berkeley em Bellagio*: Noll's reflection on his literary project

In the narrative of *Berkeley em Bellagio*, we have, as in the case of *O Quiet Animal da Esquina* and *Lorde*, the account of a literary writer who expresses his sense of uneasiness and displacement while staying in an institution populated by intellectuals. However, in contrast with the two other novels that I have been analysing in this chapter, in *Berkeley em Bellagio* Noll seems to engage in a more direct reflection on

⁷¹ "As Ilusões Perdidas de João Gilberto Noll," *Jornal da Orla*, 24 de novembro de 1991. Reprinted in Bueno Magalhães, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

⁷² Sontag, *op.cit.*, p.10.

his own literary project.⁷³ The protagonist of the novel is invited to take part in a programme offered by an American institution in Italy. The aim of the programme, as suggested in the story, is to bring together academics and literary writers and offer them an opportunity to share their ideas. The programme, however, rather than promoting a valid and balanced dialogue between science and the arts, seems to stress the supremacy of rational knowledge over aesthetic experience. The notable presence of intellectuals in the institution is one of the many factors that substantiate the isolation lived by the protagonist in the foundation. When introducing himself to the other members of the community, the narrator explains how the programme's participants approach each other routinely by assuming an affiliation to academic institutions, as if the identity of the whole group would become established not by professional affinities or personal interests but by their common intellectual functions: '[ouvi] passos atrás de mim, pararam. Voltei-me. Era um guapo tipo bem latino. Adiantei-me e fiz as clássicas perguntas sempre de prontidão a cada novo encontro.

⁷³ Some critics consider the novel as an autobiographical account on the basis that the fictional experiences of the narrator are, in fact, the same personal experiences lived by Noll. In his review of *Berkeley em Bellagio* José Castello writes that the novel 'é, seguramente, o romance mais pessoal que Noll já escreveu'. Jose Castello, "Memórias desmemoriadas," *Jornal Valor*, 20-22 de setembro de 2002. Available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/res3.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination. Eliane Lobato and Marcelo Rezende are other critics who identify, like Castello, the personal conflation between the narrator of *Berkeley em Bellagio* and its author. Lobato considers the novel as bringing together 'realidade e ficção. O professor e escritor narrador do romance, assim como Noll, deu aulas na Universidade da Califórnia, em Berkeley, Estados Unidos, e foi escritor convidado na Fundação Rockefeller, em Bellagio'. Eliane Lobato, "Sintonia fina: João Gilberto Noll faz ótimo exercício de estilo," *Isto É*, 12 de dezembro de 2003. Available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/res3.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination. Rezende comments that '[e]m 'Berkeley em Bellagio'... o tom é explicitamente pessoal... sua máquina ficcional está com toda a atenção voltada apenas para João Gilberto Noll'. Marcelo Rezende, 'Noll parece ansioso por comunicar'. *Folha de São Paulo*, date not stated. Available from <http://www.joaogilbertonoll.com.br/res3.html>. (Web page accessed on 24/09/03) no pagination. Assuming a different opinion from these critics, I do not consider the novel an autobiographical account. In some of his interviews, Noll has vehemently rejected the position of those critics who approach his literary texts as an autobiographical account: '[o] questionamento do qual eu fujo como o diabo da cruz é sobre a autobiografia na minha obra de ficção. Evidentemente que só posso escrever sobre coisas que saem dos meus miolos, mas procuro me apartar o máximo do biográfico quando escrevo'. Moacyr Scliar, "A busca do romance sinfônico," *Leia* 100 (fevereiro, 1987) p. 19. In another interview, Noll re-endorses the distinction between his works and other forms of biographical accounts: 'não sou biografista, não costumo contar as coisas que me aconteceram, não tenho essa vocação jornalística ou memorialística'. Bueno Magalhães, "Encontro com João Gilberto Noll," *op. cit.*, p. 292). When commenting on the narrative of *Berkeley em Bellagio*, Noll attests that despite the mention to places and institutions which were visited by Noll himself, the experiences undergone by the novel's protagonist are almost completely fictional: '[n]o último livro que escrevi, 'Berkeley em Bellagio'... eu parto de uma experiência direta que eu tive... [o protagonista]... é o escritor que vai dar aula em Berkeley, como aconteceu comigo, e depois passa um tempo lá em Bellagio, só que em cima disso há muita ficção, eu não fiz um livro autobiográfico simplesmente, recriei muito aquela experiência'. Miguel do Rosário e Bruno Dorigatti, *op. cit.*, no pagination.). In my reading, *Berkeley em Bellagio* is not a factual biography of the person João Gilberto Noll but a metafictional reflection proposed by the author on his literary project.

De onde você é, o quê e onde leciona – já que ali era o reino quase absoluto dos *scholars*.⁷⁴

The few literary writers involved in the programme appear to be more interested in boasting about their own personal achievements and experiences as successful artists, rather than in engaging in a discussion on the content of their works:

[u]m professor de física da New York University cantava e tocava *standards* americanos ao piano; fui para perto de um grupo que ouvia atentamente a fala da poeta tcheca toda liquêfeita em vinho a relatar sua amizade estreita com João Paulo II; ganhou um prêmio do Vaticano, algo assim, talvez uma medalha católica dedicada aos poetas, tudo eu ouvia como sempre ouvia os cortesãos da Fundação, pegando pedaços, nacos de frases, logo me desinteressando, às vezes retornando pra verificar se daria para lastimar mais tarde ter passado ao largo do assunto que poderia me render mais romances, mais contos, mais novelas, quem sabe dessa vez um poema dramático *à la* T. S. Eliot, quem sabe coisa alguma, apenas uma fofoca a mais para que eu voltasse pro meu quarto sorrindo pelos corredores do castelo feito um cidadão feliz.⁷⁵

Lacking any ‘showy’ talent to impress his companions or even an amazing personal story to share with the crowd, the novelist resigns himself to silence. Although completely aloof from the discussions held by the different groups, he tries to avail himself of the conversations in the hope of finding in them, if not inspiration, at least some thematic material for his writings. At the end, worn out by all the fruitless stories he has heard, the novelist returns to his room pretending to the other members of the programme that he has attained a sort of personal and artistic satisfaction which he did not in fact experience within the institution.

The austerity of the building which is commonly referred to as the ‘Catedral Americana de Bellagio’⁷⁶ and the allusion to the foundation’s staff by the use of ecclesiastical titles such as ‘o ‘Bispo’ da fundação’,⁷⁷ denote the hierarchical and

⁷⁴ João Gilberto Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2002) p. 41.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

formal atmosphere of the programme. In this environment, the narrator identifies himself with the Irish bishop and philosopher Georges Berkeley, whose theoretical writings defended the importance of perceptual experience over rational thought in the processes of human experience and knowledge acquisition: '[e]u era Berkeley em Bellagio... o célebre filósofo sensualista que acreditava, dizem, que a subsistência das coisas dependeria da qualidade da percepção e não da feitiçaria da linguagem'.⁷⁸ In fact, George Berkeley was the first philosopher to consider that the notion of individual consciousness for ourselves and for others is directly tied to man's capacity of perception or, as Berkeley himself puts it: '*esse is percipi*' [to be is to be perceived].⁷⁹ For the philosopher, we are not able to conceive ideas or abstract thoughts without having previously perceived, through physical experience, the objects which are recalled through our minds. In order to conceive a chair abstractedly, for instance, we need to have had a physical contact with the object 'chair' so that we can mentally formulate its image. In the specific case of verbal communication, Berkeley suggests that words are not an impartial representation of objects but that, once perceived, they generate an emotional response from the subject. In this sense, the meaning of a word is not so much tied to the idea it might convey but is determined by our personal response to it. Words which are physically perceived by us through hearing or sight always provoke an emotional or physical reaction:

the communicating of ideas marked by words is not the chief and only end of language, as is commonly supposed. There are other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action... I entreat the reader to reflect with himself, and see if it doth not often happen, either in hearing or reading a discourse, that the passions of fear, love, hatred, admiration, disdain, and the like, arise immediately in his mind upon the perception of certain words, without any ideas coming between.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35/6.

⁷⁹ George Berkeley, "A treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge," *A New Theory of Vision and Other Writings*, introduction by A. D. Lindsay (London and New York: Everyman Library, 1957 [1710]) p. 114.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107/8.

Berkeley's interest in the sound of words as well as his belief that words have a potential to originate a subjective response seems to be shared by Noll. By focusing on poetry and music, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter, Noll's literature seeks to recover aesthetic experience from the domain of abstract thought to a mode of subjective response promoted by the feelings that words can arise, through their sonority, in the reader.

Returning to the analysis of the American institution portrayed in *Berkeley em Bellagio*, we can attest that the location's solemn aspects are adverse to the protagonist's process of aesthetic production, which seems to be based on the spontaneity and casualness of everyday life. For the narrator, this separation from everyday life experiences is equated to the annihilation of his own self. Death is in fact the only feeling he can experience in the American institution. The narrator associates the description of the lugubrious halls in the building ('naqueles corredores os corpos eram sempre penumbrosos'⁸¹) and the inscriptions of the names of the programme's participants on the doors of their rooms ('ao parar diante da minha porta com meu nome escrito num cartão com margens em finos arabescos de metal dourado') with the graveyard in the crypt of the old edifice:

[no] cemitério dos monges medievais no porão da 'Catedral' da fundação americana, capela do século XI – *Death Chapel* como chamam aqui –, [pego] a minha lanterna... [v]ou passando o foco pelas pinturas restauradas da Fundação, passando pelas paredes anciãs desse porão... deito no chão frio, a lanterna contra um nome desses mortos... falo em meu latim que aprendi no colégio do meu tempo de garoto, falo o que me vem à boca, ocupo em versículos meus lábios, meus dentes, gengivas – não interessa o que tenho para dizer na língua morta, eu mesmo já estou morto.⁸²

The sense of death that overcomes the narrator in the institutional environment is only reversed when the protagonist experiences corporeal pleasure after engaging in sexual contact with a young employee of the institution:

⁸¹ Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 35/6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50.

mesmo que o *ragazzo* não soubesse, não importa, era Deus que ele continha no seu peito arfante, não o deus que não saía das igrejas mas o deus que pulsava atrás da calça apertada do *ragazzo*... o Deus que ali se deixou ordenhar como um bovino e que ali se deixou beber não bem em vinho mas em leite que o nosso senhor gaúcho engoliu aos poucos, na carestia da idade, lembrando-se da Primeira Comunhão... de joelhos olhou o *ragazzo* como se rezasse pelos mortos seus amigos, por aqueles que não mais podiam aproveitar a vida desse jeito, sentindo sim o gosto áspero que ele não experimentava havia tanto, gosto desse nobre líquido que corre em seus microfilamentos – vários cavalos no páreo até um ter a sorte ou a infelicidade já não sei de fecundar a vítima. Era desse líquido com o inóspito gosto de rudimento da espécie que ele bebia ajoelhado, um líquido que talvez esperasse aflito seu dia de criar um santo ou um monstro nas entranhas de sua vítima e que agora se desperdiçava pela garganta sedenta de outro macho. O *ragazzo* limpou-se na cortina e o homem ajoelhado viu que sua liturgia estava finda... O escritor porto-alegrense continuava ali, ao vento mais que Minuano, sem saber se cuspiu no pedregulho ou se engolia mais e mais aquilo que lhe fizera um homem vivo... e assim [ele] voltava a acreditar nos velhos tempos carnavais litúrgicos encabeçados por coisas tipo o Corpo Místico de Cristo, a Comunhão dos Santos.⁸³

By holding the sperm of the *ragazzo* in his mouth, the protagonist becomes literally able to recover the taste of life. The dead language which *comes out* of his mouth while he is laying down on a grave is here reversed by the *taking in* of the semen of the other: the seed of life. For the protagonist, the American foundation represents the deadening of the aesthetic experience as a form of sensual pleasure in the same way that the hierocracy of the Catholic Church signifies the obliteration of the religious experience as a mode of corporeal ecstasy. In this way, sexual bliss, religious ecstasy and aesthetic pleasure appear to be associated by the writer as interconnected experiences. When receiving the semen of the other in his mouth, the narrator can materially experience the significance of the Christian communion: union, through ingestion, with the body of the other.⁸⁴ The description of sexual intercourse by the

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 29-31.

⁸⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the ritual of Christian communion as a physical integration with the body of others, see my analysis of *A Fúria do Corpo* in chapter 2.

use of poetic images and alliterative words such as the reference to sperm as ‘*desse líquido com o inóspito gosto de rudimento da espécie*’ [my italics], seems to indicate the close connection between sexual gratification and aesthetic pleasure as two experiences which take place in the individual’s body. This connection between sexuality and aesthetic pleasure has been emphasised in other Noll’s novels which deal with the theme of aesthetic creation. In *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, for example, the only moments in which the poet becomes engaged in the process of poetic creation are those followed by his physical contact with the external world, either by perception such as in the case of his vision of the eucalyptus tree, or by sexual contact with others such as is expressed in the following passages:

Amália nua da cintura para cima... e fui me chegando e fui lambendo os seios dela, chupando, e fui abrindo o fecho da minha calça... eu ia gozar na mão dela... e logo voltei a chupar e a morder os seios em desassossego... Dias depois escrevi de um jato um poema que chamei ‘Cenas de Guerra’, o estampido longínquo, o tremor em volta...⁸⁵

ela [Gerda] agora chegava a puxar a minha mão, sim, que eu fosse então puxado, arrancado de mim, e que eu deitasse sobre o corpo dela como fazia nesse instante e que eu a devorasse, e quando ela disse meu Deus, um espasmo, como um clarão seu corpo arrefeceu, murchou, paralisou, mas o meu não, o meu ainda vinha vindo e veio feito o ápice de um soluço, até se esvanecer sobre aquela mulher... [momentos depois] eu ainda estava ali, de pé, fazendo aquele poema, as palavras saindo aos borbotões, depois de mim vinha o corpo de Gerda... O tiro no jardim em frente / a unha empedernida crispando a terra morna, assim continuava o poema.⁸⁶

enconstei Naíra contra uma sobra de parede que ainda resistia no meio do terreno, levantei a saia dela, abri a minha calça, vem logo Naíra falou, e eu me enfiei inteiro pelo molhadinho dela, ai meu bem ela gemia... [ao chegar na casa de Kurt] peguei o guardanapo de papel com o poema [elaborado após o contato

⁸⁵ Noll, *O Quietos Animal da Esquina*, op. cit., p. 463/4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 474/5.

sexual com Gerda] que eu guardava no bolso... me perguntei se ‘O quieto animal da esquina’ não seria o título que aquele poema estava pedindo.⁸⁷

As we can observe in these passages, it is only after contact with the body of others through sexual pleasure that the writer can achieve the right moment of poetic inspiration. What is more, by enhancing the pleasurable nature of the aesthetic experience, the narrative of *O Quiet Animal da Esquina* could be also read as an allegory, which is in opposition to the position of the art critic who, in his attempt to offer a rational interpretation to the work of art, ends up reducing the aesthetic experience from a form of *perceptual feeling* to *rational understanding*. This allegorical aspect of the novel could be evidenced by the oppositional poles assumed by the narrator (the artist who feels – aesthetically, perceptually, and emotionally – and transmits his feelings to the reader) and Kurt (the rational person who, repressing his subjective emotions, seeks to control and to exert authority over others by seizing their liberty of expression).

5.5.1 The influence of music in Noll’s work

After the sexual act and still holding the sperm of the *ragazzo* in his mouth, the writer decides to leave the foundation’s building. During his wanderings through the idyllic surroundings of the ‘American Cathedral’, the protagonist experiences, for the first time in the narrative, a genuine aesthetic pleasure when he is unexpectedly taken over by a joyful feeling while listening to a pianist who plays Liszt in a hut in the middle of the forest. Enchanted by the melody, he approaches the shed in order to meet the musician:

[o] pianista... deu de cara com o homem que vinha da floresta tentando ouvir o Liszt que ele gerava acalorado. Ficaram parados... sem esboçar a mínima significância em seus corpos... eles eram agora bem menos do que identidades,

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 485/6.

portavam em suas figuras uma espécie de estranhamento original, dois seres embalados pela mesma melodia.⁸⁸

The encounter between the writer and the pianist, as in sexual intercourse, is determined by the merging of the two bodies which share a single physical pleasure attained through the melody. This encounter, furthermore, seems to express Noll's own attempt to recreate in literature the same aesthetic experience conveyed by music. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, Noll's expressive interest in words for their sonority rather than their meanings is a determinant aspect of his literary project, which prioritises corporeal perception over conceptual meaning.⁸⁹ Through the narratorial voice of *Berkeley em Bellagio*, Noll seems to enhance the relevant influence of poetry and music in his literary production:

mesmo sendo escritor, ouvia mais música do que abria livros; de uns tempos pra cá não queria mais saber de romances, novelas, contos, muito embora os escrevesse. Quando sentia agora a necessidade da palavra, ia direto a algum poema. Para ele a poesia era o verbo em estado musical, *se algum sentido ela expressava este não vinha de outra coisa que não da melodia deslizando pelas entrelinhas feito um veio d'água...* Nesse elã que ainda não se fixara em norma do sentido... nessa sutilização do significado que não o levava a parte alguma [my italics].⁹⁰

The influence exerted by music on the literary production of the writer-protagonist is reflected in the novel's narrative style, which is almost entirely prosodic in approach

⁸⁸ Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁸⁹ As Noll comments, 'a música não materializa idéias. E nada tem tanto o peso da matéria como a palavra, que é comprometida com a ideologia. Comparada com o romance, a música é uma estrutura mais física, mais sensual... Uma das funções do artista neste fim de século é cantar. Mas cantar no romance não é fácil'. Geneton Moraes Netto, "Sonhar é preciso," *Jornal do Brasil*, 16 de setembro de 1988. Reprinted in Bueno Magalhães, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

⁹⁰ Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 31/2. The association between the activity of the writer and that of the musician was also elaborated in Noll's metafictional short story "O cego e a dançarina" in which the narrator, a fictional writer, comments on his process of literary creation: 'sobretudo quando escrevo e a língua permanece em seu natural repouso, sinto que dedilho na máquina não as teclas, mas palavras insuspeitadas até ali, coisa que se parece mais com a música do que com a comunicação verbal, e tanto isso é verdade que muitas vezes tenho a sensação nítida de estar dizendo em andantino, em presto, em adágio'. João Gilberto Noll, "O cego e a dançarina," *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 771.

and arranges words in order to create a pleasant-sounding sequence in or among their respective sentences:

continuo a caminhar, pego a Praça da Alfândega, é de manhã, é de madrugada é de manhã como dizia o jovem Caetano no curso de MPB que eu dera em Berkeley, Bethânia é quem cantava bem me lembro, é de manhã, não mais de madrugada e sim manhã; sento na cadeira para engraxar os sapatos, é ainda o meu amigo que os engraxa, mora perto da praia do Lami lá no Guaíba, no verão seus filhos iam loucas pelas águas enfim limpas depois de décadas como asilo fecal, suas crianças iam loucas pelas águas nesse calor fora de época, ele contava me embriagando até as águas do Guaíba.⁹¹

While walking through the streets of Porto Alegre, the protagonist associates different memories, temporal perspectives and experiences which, at first sight, do not suggest a coherent connection with each other. However, what seems to be at stake in his account is not the presentation of a sequential order of events or interconnected memories but the sonorous composition of the evoked words. Music, which appears as a thematic feature in the passage by the recalling of Caetano Veloso's song, becomes in fact the structural foundation of the narrator's own account. The semantic aspect of his utterances is completely abandoned in favour of the sonority of his words, which are assembled by their melodic and rhythmic attributes. The melodious harmony of the passage is achieved by the juxtaposition of words with fricative ('limpas depois de décadas'), trilled ('mora perto da praia'), lateral ('Lami lá') and occlusive ('continuo a caminhar', 'Berkeley, Bethânia', 'águas do Guaíba') phonemes. Its rhythmic intonation is elaborated upon the alternation of long and short sentences – concatenated by commas – and by the irregular undulation due to the different stressed syllable of the compounding words in each sentence such as in 'é de manhã como dizia o jovem Caetano no curso de MPB' or in 'sento na cadeira para engraxar os sapatos'. The combination of acoustic harmony (the repetition of similar sounds through alliteration) and syncopation (the irregular alternation between tonic syllables/scales in assonant words/notes) delineates the musical style of Noll's

⁹¹ João Gilberto Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, op. cit., p. 96.

literature. As José Miguel Wisnik suggests, the essence of music is configured precisely by this dialectical tension between harmonisation and discordance:

uma das graças da música é justamente essa: juntar, num tecido muito fino e intrincado, padrões de recorrência e constância com acidentes que os desequilibram e instabilizam. Sendo sucessiva e simultânea (os sons acontecem um depois do outro, mas também juntos), a música é capaz de ritmar a repetição e a diferença, o mesmo e o diverso, o contínuo e o descontínuo... O som é um objeto subjetivo, que está dentro e fora, não pode ser tocado diretamente, mas nos toca com uma enorme precisão.⁹²

To sum up, what Noll seems to pursue in his narratives is the melodic aspects of sentence construction in order to create a musical text. The choice of the novel's title, '*Berkeley em Bellagio*', already gives a hint about both assonance and metrical variety, which renders the musical component to the narrative. Indeed, as Noll has stressed in his interviews, the capacity of music and poetry to evoke meanings through melodic and rhythmic structure rather than by an arbitrary semantic relation is one of the central aspects to delineate his literary project:

[e]u acho que essa preferência pela poesia vem das minhas raízes de ligação com a música. Eu acho que a poesia é a palavra em estado musical, quer dizer, a palavra na poesia ela é muito mais objeto em si mesma do que algo que apresente uma relação direta com alguma referência social... [a] palavra na poesia, ela tem essa dimensão do ritmo, da palavra enquanto objeto... a minha prosa, ela é uma prosa poética, eu estou radicalizando cada vez mais isso.⁹³

Music, in addition to offering the model upon which the writer of *Berkeley em Bellagio* constructs his narratives, inspires the writer to 'create' the fictional world depicted in his novels. The melody heard by the protagonist is immediately translated into visual perceptions through which the fictional story starts to take shape for the writer. The narrative of the events does not seem to be determined by the author, but

⁹² Wisnik, *op.cit.*, p. 27/8.

⁹³ Rosário e Dorigatti, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

is presented to him and he then perceives, even if in his imagination the corporeal expressions, physical aspects and movements of his characters:

[p]ois no fundo era ali que [o escritor] queria ficar, quem sabe mais uma vez ouvindo Liszt, sem a ansiedade de precisar dar ao seu corpo um rumo diferente... de repente, assim, sem mais, vi surgir uma mulher ao lado dele [pianista] e essa mulher estava vestida com um traje dos oitocentos, verdadeira heroína de uma história que eu começava a ficar louco para conhecer... Mas essa mulher parecia não ter chegado a nada além de uma personagem.⁹⁴

The passage provides a good analogy to Noll's own literary project in his attempt to incorporate other artistic fields such as music and performance arts into literature: '[m]e deixo arrastar por movimentos que lembram a música, mais do que por temas'.⁹⁵ Like the musician who creates his work while playing his instrument, Noll constructs his narratives at the very moment of writing without pre-establishing a guideline of conceptual parameters for the actions of his protagonists:

[é] um pouco compulsiva a maneira de escrever para mim. Não programo mesmo, eu não sei o que vai acontecer com o personagem. Que é que ele vai encontrar... E eu acho que esse meu método de fabricação de textos, está muito evidenciado na própria narrativa minha, que geralmente trata de personagens em trânsito.⁹⁶

This spontaneous and improvisational method of literary creation is one of the central aspects which differentiates Noll's literary project from the more traditional forms of novelistic accounts. Through the voice of his writer-protagonist in *Berkeley em*

⁹⁴ Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 34. The physical interaction between the writer and his characters and the intermingling between real and fictional worlds is also a theme which appears in the narrative of "O cego e dançarina." When commenting on his process of literary creation, the writer-narrator is addressed by his own characters as they assume an autonomous existence which can be no longer be determined by their creators. The character's existence becomes literally independent from the control of the writer who, conversely, becomes a fateful victim of his character. The "death of the author" is indeed a term shared by some literary critics to indicate that the writer has no final decision over the meaning of his own narrative which is constantly re-created during the act of reading of each reader.

⁹⁵ "João Gilberto Noll: um cúmplice de seus personagens," *O Globo*, 11 de maio de 1985. Reprinted in Bueno Magalhães, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

⁹⁶ Bueno Magalhães, "Encontro com João Gilberto Noll," *op. cit.*, p. 290.

Bellagio, Noll seems to formulate his literary project to his readers. This occurs, for instance, when the protagonist tries to explain his fictional work to a fellow American writer:

[t]rata-se de um escritor de Chicago... ele pergunta sobre o que eu escrevo, vou lá filosofando em torno do meu personagem de sempre que aparece a cada livro; ele pergunta meio irritado o que acontece de fato nos meus livros, digo que não sei contar talvez porque nada aconteça de fato nessas minhas histórias, mas conte, conte o que de fato acontece nesse não-acontecer –, nada, pára!, respondo no meu inglês irretocável, de um golpe entendo na pele o *mood* americano para a ação, tá certo, fora da ação eles não ficam muito tempo, querem sempre o movimento em progressão, mais e mais, e mais ainda, não importa para quê, se para matar, dominar, construir, morrer, salvar, amar, mas que siga adiante.⁹⁷

The difficulty encountered by the American writer in conceiving a fictional story deprived of a single thematic and formal structure, in which actions are presented in a sequential continuity between scenes, might also be shared by the reader who, accustomed to more traditional novelistic forms, becomes bewildered and frustrated by the lack of a logical and predictable development of the plot in Noll's narratives. Indeed, as I have discussed in the third chapter, one of the objectives pursued by Noll in his works is to destabilise the reader's confidence in the author as being the one who will provide a conclusive answer to the questions posed by his narrator throughout the account. In the same way that a concert audience would interpret a musical piece subjectively by recalling his/her personal feelings and experiences during the process of listening, Noll's literature seems to engage the reader in a search of his own experiences in order to find an equivalent to what is being described in the narrative, i.e. the reader assumes an active role in the fictional account by ascribing a subjective meaning to the text. As Noll himself acknowledges: 'Não me [deixo] guiar pelo desejo de confortar o leitor... O leitor tem de trabalhar comigo durante a leitura'.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 57/8.

⁹⁸ Castello, *op. cit.*, no pagination. Nelson Vieira identifies a growing interest among contemporary Brazilian writers in the use of metafictional devices in order to incite 'their readers to be suspicious and aware of those established codes, discourses and patterns, exuding power, control and authority. These writers begin to alert their readers to the pervasiveness of authority by signalling and dismantling the

5.6 The embodiment of the reader in Noll's narratives

The revolutionary potential of literature for Noll does not reside in the commitment of a literary work in supporting an ideology or transmitting a political message to the reader, but is instead based upon the feeling of elatedness arising from the contact with the fictional text: 'as pessoas têm que ir para um romance... como vão para um lugar onde se possa sentir êxtase, onde se possa sentir transe'.⁹⁹ This possibility of a sensation of ecstasy caused by literature can only be accomplished when the reader, challenged by the literary account, feels invited to participate in the narrative by recreating it through his own perceptual experiences. It is in this sense that Noll affirms that 'eu acho que a literatura sempre tem um grito erótico muito profundo, é um espernear erótico bastante intenso'.¹⁰⁰

By enhancing the erotic character of literature, Noll does not refer to the content of a literary text which narrates the erotic experiences of its characters and is intended to sexually arouse the reader. In fact, as Roland Barthes suggests, the erotic component of the literary work resides in the form in which the text is constructed, i.e. in its capacity to surprise the reader by frustrating his predetermined expectations in relation to the fictional narrative:

[t]ext of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language... the opposition between the text of pleasure and the text of bliss [is that] pleasure can be expressed in words, bliss cannot.¹⁰¹

insidious control behind a narrator's or author's **author**-itarian stance'[author's emphasis]. Nelson H. Vieira, "Metafiction and the question of authority in the postmodern novel from Brazil," *Hispania* 74 (September, 1991) p. 584.

⁹⁹ Weis, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁰ Rosário e Dorigatti, *op. cit.*, no pagination.

¹⁰¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated from the French by Richard Miller with a note on the text by Richard Howard (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990 [1973]) pp. 14, 21.

Based on this differentiation between a text which gives pleasure to its readership and one which takes the reader into a state of bliss, I want to suggest that Noll's narratives belong to the second category. The more traditional novel which presents a chronological and casual order of events, a unity of time and place, or an unproblematic and unambiguous narrative perspective is entirely subverted in Noll's texts. What is more, the incorporation of other artistic languages such as those belonging to cinema, theatre, music and poetry provoke a sense of indeterminacy in the reader so that the classification of Noll's works within the customary parameters of a 'fictional novel' becomes untenable. The sense of indeterminacy provoked in the reader is further evidenced by the internal structure of Noll's narratives, of which *Berkeley em Bellagio* seems to offer one of the most radical examples. In fact, *Berkeley em Bellagio* is the only novel in which Noll intermingles the narratorial voice between the protagonist and an impersonal narrator. The change of perspective in the narrative which occurs unexpectedly in the novel does not seem to exert any relevant function in the text, such as to present fictional details or to explain a situation, thought or behaviour to the reader which has not been verbalised by the protagonist. The narrator as a character within his own story, as the stranger upon whom he reflects, is sometimes described from the more 'objective' third person standpoint; he addresses himself directly to the reader such as in the passage 'olha ele ali sentado na frente de um café de Bellagio, como se fosse apenas o gerador de um olhar que nada reconhecia mais'.¹⁰² In other times, this impersonal narrator appears encompassed within a single thought of the protagonist: 'além das minhas próprias malas *quero* carregar agora o mundo inteiro às costas, um Atlas desvalido, tudo bem, mas com uma boa vontade que *lhe* assoma tão forte de repente que *ele* só tem tempo mesmo de tentar levar o mundo às costas, entende?' [my italics].¹⁰³ The close resemblance between the novel's fictional protagonist and its factual author is also another aspect which offers a sense of indetermination in the narrative. The protagonist, a novelist whose first name is João, was born in Porto Alegre and who has the same literary experiences of those undergone by Noll in The United States and Italy, cannot however be fully identified with Noll himself who discharges the biographical aspect of his works, although he does confirm that his novels blend fiction with real experiences. The tight interweaving of biography and fiction makes it

¹⁰² Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 77

impossible for the reader to disentangle strands of depicted reality from the strands of fiction: we are left in a state of indecision about who is narrating the story: Noll himself or his fictional character, or even both at the same time.

The apparent cohesion of the novel, which is constructed as a single and uninterrupted paragraph, is counter posed by the disarray of the internal elements in the narrative: the unexpected shifting of the narratorial voice between the protagonist and a third person narrator; the alternation of temporal and spatial perspectives between past and present and between the United States, Italy and Brazil; the communicational barrier experienced by the narrator in these different geographic environments; and the discontinuous aspect of the novel in the narration of diverse and sometimes unrelated fictional events, are some of the elements which indicate the feelings of puzzlement and doubts which afflict the writer. The sense of temporal and spatial confusion is further attested to in the story by the narrator's own inability to discern between past, present and future: 'quando penso estar no passado é no presente que me vejo, quantas vezes penso estar vivendo agora e quando me apercebo ainda estou por ter a experiência no futuro, ah, não imaginas a confusão de instantes, tudo anda amalgamado em mim, tudo é massa informe'.¹⁰⁴ This puzzlement felt by the narrator through the muddling of different geographical localities, languages and temporal perspectives is, in fact, the central hub around which the narrative revolves. In another passage, after waking up from a dream, the narrator comments on his inability to discern where he is, which language he should speak in order to address himself to others or even the temporal context in which he is immersed:

ando para encontrar em Porto Alegre em mais essa manhã o garoto bonito que serve o meu café... *Bongiorno*, alguém me acorda, ei!, abro os olhos e não há ninguém –, levanto, abro as cortinas, vejo a mesma paisagem cansativa imponente dos Alpes, ah, certo, é essa a hora de enfrentar o dia, na *early morning*, eu sei, mas não ouço 'Las mañanitas' que esperava ouvir quando acordasse hoje, e hoje é meu aniversário?, me pergunto e digo sim, é hoje, faço tantos anos que já me perdi na conta'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ João Gilberto Noll, *Berkeley em Bellagio*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Language, however, emerges in the narrative as one of the main barriers found by the protagonist in establishing a genuine contact with others. His unfamiliarity with the English language at the beginning of the narrative while living in the United States restricts his interaction with people in his environment: ‘[à] primeira vista, nada saía do lugar, ele próprio parecia estar estagnado desde que viera para um país do qual não falava a língua’.¹⁰⁶ During his stay in Italy, the protagonist forgets his own language, Portuguese, almost as if he had been ‘infected’ by the English spoken by the community in the American Institution: ‘*It’s ok, it’s ok*, me surpreendi parlando desse jeito num repente... já não conseguia processar um pensamento que não fosse em inglês... tudo o que eu fora levado a conversar com angloparlantes dessa *villa* da lombardia tinha se blindado de tal modo que não se deixava penetrar mais pelo vírus de nenhuma outra lingual’.¹⁰⁷ His new linguistic condition becomes another obstacle which hampers his communication with others: ‘só entendo o inglês, mas na Itália o português teria mais utilidade: um dia fui pedir a *small coke* e me vieram com um vaso de porcelana, não digo nada, pego o vaso, vou em frente, na primeira ruela de degraus eu desço e jogo o vaso escada abaixo’.¹⁰⁸ Unable to speak any language other than English, the narrator anticipates his isolation when returning to Porto Alegre, where he will no longer be able to communicate with others: ‘[como] chegar... em Porto Alegre, me dirigir ao meu apartamento sem ter como me comunicar com a esmagadora maioria monoglota dos vizinhos, só eu no meu inglês pela sala... como diz esse inglês que, traiçoeiro, não quer me deixar de novo só com o português[?]’¹⁰⁹ The novel concludes, as does *Harmada*, which was discussed in the previous chapter, with the protagonist’s discovery that interpersonal communication is not dependent on verbal language but is primarily a process performed and translated by our physical bodies. Back in Porto Alegre, the writer takes Sarita, the child of his lover, to a refugee camp which serves as a shelter for Arab people fleeing from wars in their respective countries. When meeting a girl in the camp, Sarita engages in a more primordial form of communication with the other child without the mediation of verbal language:

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

Soltei a mão de Sarita, deixei-a que andasse a caminho da outra. Sarita disse oh, assim mesmo, oh, como se não soubesse falar, virgem de semântica... como se estalasse o primeiro sentido da espécie, o espanto!, espanto diante do outro com o meu corpo... Sarita [tira] do bolso um botão perdido, talvez de sua própria roupa, um grande botão vermelho cor de sangue... Sarita passava o botão vermelho para a mão da outra menina que olhou para mim não bem com um sorriso, mas olhou parecendo suspirar pacificada...¹¹⁰

It is important to stress here that this spatial, temporal and linguistic confusion causes the narrator to raise questions about his own self: ‘Quem... me confere alguma garantia de que eu não seja um outro que de fato sou, um estrangeiro de mim mesmo entre norte-americanos (embora pisando em solo italiano)?’¹¹¹ These feelings of confusion are not *explained to* but *experienced by* the reader, as if Noll’s narratives were structured with the purpose of recreating in the reader the same perceptual experiences undergone by the story’s narrator. In *A Fúria do Corpo*, for instance, the reader parallels the same perceptual state experienced by the protagonist. One of the many moments in which the reader recreates the experiences of the novel’s narrator occurs during the latter’s arrival at Cidade de Deus, a poor district in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, with his lover:

Até que os passos do menino foram se tornando lentos e escassos. Os cachorros e eu obedecemos... o menino estava ali parado porque um barraco tinha aparecido e nesse barraco ele chagava com muito cuidado, nesse barraco havia alguma coisa que o mantinha como em suspenso por segundos, nesse barraco havia quem sabe o fim da sua busca, era ali dentro desse barraco que talvez o mistério do menino iria surgir a descoberto para mim, foi só nesse momento que pensei verdadeiramente em recuar... logo surgiu o corpo todo comido na boca orelha nariz olhos pés envolto num longo pano branco imundo rasgado. Um leproso. A primeira coisa que me bateu na cabeça foi uma figura do Evangelho. Mas o leproso envolto nos frangalhos do pano trazia com dificuldade uma arma de fogo na mão. Eu estava num morro da Cidade de Deus. O menino falou mais

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

uma vez fica na tua esse cara é gente fina. O menino fez menção para que eu me aproximasse.¹¹²

The alteration in the punctuation marks which comprise the description appears to be directly related to the narrator's own responses to his subjective perceptions. The long sentences separated by commas seem to suggest the narrator's hesitation as he is seeking answers to his own questions. His uncertainties are further enhanced by the use of verbs in the imperfect and the conditional tenses and by the utilisation of adverbs such as 'talvez' or other expressions conveying doubt such as 'quem sabe?' The use of short sentences seem to reflect the moments of extreme tension experienced by the narrator when approaching a dangerous situation or when he is staggered by the presence of a frightening character. In his apprehensive state, the narrator can only describe what he perceives without being able to clearly speculate about his own fears. The third type of sentence employed in the passage ignores the necessary grammatical punctuation in order to separate the different components of the clause such as in the case of: 'logo surgiu o corpo todo comido na boca orelha nariz olhos pés envolto num longo pano branco imundo rasgado'. The intentional omission of the commas and the conjunction 'e' graphically reproduce the narrator's visual impressions for the reader. When looking at the leper, the narrator is unable to distinguish the different elements which together compose the other's body: the physical aspect of the leper is in such a state of decay that the protagonist can barely distinguish the former pale, bloody and lacerated body from the white, grimy and torn vest that he is wearing.

The reader's embodiment of the narrator's perceptual experiences is further reinforced in the development of the plot:

O leproso que falava com o menino entrou no barraco e saiu de lá com um pacote de alguns quilos, sentou-se (com um extraordinário esforço) no chão, todos os seguiram inclusive eu e fez-se uma enorme roda em volta do pacote. O leproso que falava com o menino abriu o pacote e mostrou o pó. Depois enrolou uma nota de um cruzeiro novinha, pegou um pedaço de vidro com dez fileiras

¹¹² Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo* in *Romances e Contos Reunidos*, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

de pó, meteu a nota pela cavidade do nariz sem narinas e aspirou quatro fileiras passou o vidro para o menino que cheirou cinco o menino passou o vidro pra mim e eu cherei quatro passei para outro leproso e assim eles foram passando um pro outro e o vidro ia passando e mais fileiras eram postas e a grande ceia de pó entrava noite adentro os leprosos andando alguns tortos outros com seus cajados e outros ainda aninhando-se sobre uma pedra envoltos nos seus panos e conversavam alegrias bobagens festejando a reunião em altas gargalhadas algumas escopetas deitadas no capim outras fixas em alguns pedaços de mãos e eu e o menino nos sentamos juntos debaixo de uma paineira e começamos a andar por conversas que nos deixavam muito próximos quase em cócegas e o menino contava sobre os leprosos... e que ele tava assim duro agora porque ele não guardava a grana fora do bolso porque não sou otário não seu doutor de guardar a grana por aí no bolso...¹¹³

Here again, the presence or omission of punctuation marks indicate the different perceptual moments of the narrator in the text. After being introduced to the leper community, the protagonist's tension and fears are reduced. Freed from his initial anxiety, the narrator is now able to articulate his impressions through longer sentences and even to add some personal comments to his descriptions about his perceptual experiences such as 'sentou-se (com um extraordinário esforço) no chão'. The act of sitting down on the floor, which is outside the parentheses, is an activity clearly performed by the leper and perceived by the narrator. The sentence 'with extraordinary effort', which is located within parentheses, seems to indicate the narrator's subjective interpretation during his perceptions. The punctuation marks are completely omitted from the text at the exact moment when the narrator starts to sniff cocaine with the group of lepers. The sentences in this long paragraph, which extends for almost two pages in the novel, are all interconnected with each other, reproducing structurally in the text the perceptual experiences of the narrator who, under the effects of the drug, is unable to organise his perceptions into a coherent order, instead overlapping and mingling different actions, stories and narratorial voices. During the reading, the reader physically reproduces the protagonist's agitated state. The lack of punctuation in the paragraph makes it impossible for the reader to pause his reading as

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

if he himself were experiencing the effects of cocaine in the explicit agitation promoted by his reading.

The reader's physical response to the text through the embodiment of the experiences of the narrator is diminished, however, in the situations in which the narrator and characters are afflicted by extreme feelings such as physical pain or emotional grief. When commenting at the moment in which the character Afrodite is hit by a bullet, the narrator affirms that: 'só Afrodite sabe o quanto lhe dói a bala cravada no calcanhar... Afrodite geme com o olhar perdido, o olhar típico de quem de repente se confronta com o desatino trágico desse mundo e espera com o olhar perdido como reagir diante da inusitada pena'.¹¹⁴ Afrodite's pain, a phenomenon intrinsically connected to her body, exemplifies the singularity of an experience incapable of being verbally articulated due to the fact that '[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language'.¹¹⁵ For the reader, as for the narrator himself, Afrodite's pain can only be described and/or perceived through her gaze. There are no words or even metaphors able to fully transmit the complexity of her experience of pain to others.

In another moment, when discovering the dead body of his lover, the narrator is unable to express his emotional experience to the reader through verbal language:

olhei para o interior de uma sala à esquerda e o que vi eu vi e ninguém nunca saberá o quanto eu vi o menino o meu menino jogado no chão, nu, morto o meu menino com um tiro cavernoso no coração, corri para o encontro dele... me ajoelhei e peguei sua cabeça, e seu corpo, frio, eu pus sobre meus joelhos e éramos como do mesmo mármore, da mesma pedra como a madona e o seu filho.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.32.

¹¹⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) p. 4.

¹¹⁶ Noll, *A Fúria do Corpo*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

The only possible way for the narrator to transmit the intensity of his feelings is by recalling, allusively, the reader's perceptual experience through the multiple meanings attached to the term 'marble'. In order to re-enact the physical contact with the dead body held by the narrator, the reader needs to search in his own perceptual framework, thus the experience lived through his body, for the qualities of coldness, hardness and stillness which are physically perceived by the touch of a piece of marble. The indication of the marble in the narrative seems to further allude to the pale image of the dead body as well as to the narrator's countenance which is affected as he experiences the emotional shock. In a final significant allusion, the marble appears to indicate the material aspect of the *pietá*, a sculpture depicting the scene in which the Holy Mary holds the corpse of her son: an iconography with which the reader is very probably familiar. The strong connotation of death and despair expressed in the images of Christ and his mother translates the lifeless aspect of his lover and the emotional state of the narrator. It is, thus, only by rapport with tactile and visual perceptual experiences that the narrator becomes able to represent, even if on a reduced scale, his emotional impact to the reader.

5.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter has focused on an examination of Noll's works from the perspective of his writer-protagonists. Central to such an analysis is the consideration of the aesthetic experience as it appears in Noll's narratives. Distancing themselves from a more conceptual approach to the aesthetic experience as a form of rational activity, Noll's protagonists seem to emphasise the important role played by our corporeal perceptions in the process of aesthetic pleasure. When submitted to an environment in which rational behaviour prevails over a more spontaneous form of expressiveness, these protagonists are not only unable to create their work but are also overtaken by a sense of isolation and imprisonment. Conversely, it is only when they are exposed to unexpected experiences that they can produce a genuine literary expression. Furthermore, I have indicated how Noll's narrators are engaged in aesthetic

contemplation, not by assuming a passive position in relation to the aesthetic object but by re-enacting the physical sensations depicted in the work of art.

Also central for Noll's literary project is the engagement of the reader in the fictional account. The immersion of the reader in the fictional world is manifested in the stylistic and formal elements in which Noll's narratives are constructed. Temporal and spatial fragmentation, the loss of an omniscient perspective, the disorderly manner in which the fictional experiences are expounded and the excessive use or entire omission of punctuation marks in the text, are all elements employed by Noll to ensure that his works cannot arrive at a neat and conclusive ending, thereby bringing the reader to assume an active participation in the text by re-creating the narrator's experiences and thus offering a subjective interpretation. As Noll expresses: 'gosto do ambíguo, de não fechar o significado, de deixar que o leitor faça uma viagem paralela à do autor'.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Kátia Borges, "No compasso da linguagem," *Jornal de Poesia*. Available from <http://www.secrel.com.br/jpoesia/katb3.html>. (Web page accessed on 02/02/05) no pagination.

Conclusion

In this conclusion, I shall first briefly summarise the central ideas addressed in my doctoral dissertation and then move on to a brief discussion of other possible territories for research into the fiction of João Gilberto Noll, as well as the field of contemporary Brazilian literature. When I read João Gilberto Noll's work for the first time, I was immediately struck by the references to the body and the descriptions of physical movement and corporeal perceptions. This initial impression was not only intriguing but also extremely challenging since it was not entirely clear what Noll's literary purpose was in placing so much emphasis on the human body and its perceptual experiences.

During the first stage of my research, I assessed many academic articles, theses and books written on Noll's fiction in order to find an answer to what I considered to be one of the central and recurrent aspects of his literary production. These studies, on the whole, interpret Noll's reference to the body and corporeal perception from two main perspectives. The first perspective draws a parallel between Noll's literary style and cinematographic techniques in such a way that the author's preference for external physical descriptions over the narration of the characters' internal conceptual thoughts has the same effect on the reader as watching a film. Alternatively, others studies suggest that the descriptions of physical movements and perceptual activities in Noll's works illustrate the condition of contemporary man in that the individual in postmodern society is no longer able to understand or volitionally respond to the multitude of stimuli and situations which are taking place in his immediate environment.

Although both original and interesting, these studies did not satisfy my curiosity. Feeling that my initial observation was not properly explained by these perspectives, I was left with a sense of bewilderment over Noll's emphasis on the description of his character's bodies and their corporeal perceptions. My 'unanswered' query then became the question which I have sought to answer in this doctoral dissertation: in the process of focusing on the relevance of the body and corporeal perception in Noll's fiction, I realised that there were other approaches that could be drawn from Noll's

fictional *corpus* but which had hitherto not been adequately addressed by scholars and critics, thereby leading us to new textual interpretations of his narratives.

My research interest was initially framed by the reading of Noll's early works, which were written between 1980 and 1996 within the political and cultural context of Brazil in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. This period of Brazilian history witnessed the transition from military dictatorship to the consolidation of a democratic political state. In the first two chapters, I established a parallel between Noll's fictional production and the then emerging discourses of the social minority groups for which the body, considered to be the one of the primary places upon which social oppression was imposed, assumed a central role in their discussions. In the third chapter, I analysed Noll's work in the light of the emerging politicised novelistic production in the 1970s: *romance reportagem*.

In the two last chapters, I moved the focus of my analysis from the political and cultural contexts of Noll's works to a discussion of the philosophical and aesthetic implications of his literary production. Within this analysis, I directed a great part of my attention towards Noll's more recent novels written between 1998 and 2004. Here, basing my arguments on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 'phenomenology of perception', I sought to show how Noll rejects the metaphysical understanding of personal consciousness as 'thought' in order to embrace a more materialistic, corporeal approach to the concept of self-awareness. Finally, I argued in the concluding chapter how Noll's work pursues the processes of aesthetic creation and reception as phenomena directly tied to our bodies and our perceptual faculties.

During the development of this thesis, I was constantly confronted with other questions concerning the body and corporeal perception both in the work of João Gilberto Noll as well as in other forms of contemporary Brazilian artistic expression. One of the questions I thought to be relevant for discussion was the extent to which other artistic movements that engaged in the discussion of gender and sexuality in the 1970s, such as *Tropicalismo* in music and *poesia marginal* in literature, have exerted an influence on Noll's work. However, due to the parameters which I set for this dissertation, I chose not to investigate the correlation between Noll's literary production and other forms of Brazilian artistic expression.

Another area which I did not discuss but which would be an interesting focus for a future research project is an analysis of the work of other contemporary Brazilian literary figures such as Silviano Santiago, Sérgio Sant'Anna and Chico Buarque de Hollanda in order to explore the degree to which their literary productions place an emphasis on the body and corporeal perception. It would prove interesting if the conclusions which I have drawn in this thesis could also be inferred in the novels of other contemporary Brazilian authors.

As a last word, I hope that the ideas presented in this doctoral thesis will trigger the interest and curiosity of readers, inviting them to discover the fascinating universe of João Gilberto Noll's fiction. Similarly, I do hope that this dissertation will encourage other literary researchers to contribute further innovative and provoking readings of Noll's work, thus continuing to open up and explore the multiple interpretational possibilities offered by his fiction.

Appendix I

List of João Gilberto Noll's Work (1st Editions)

O Cego e a Dançarina. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1980.

A Fúria do Corpo. Rio de Janeiro: Record Editora, 1981.

Bandoleiros. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 1985

Rastros do Verão. Porto Alegre: L & PM Editora, 1986.

Hotel Atlântico. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco Editora, 1989.

Harmada. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993.

A Céu Aberto. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1996.

Romances e Contos Reunidos. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.

Canoas e Marolas. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 1999.

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Mínimos Múltiplos Comuns. São Paulo: Francis Editora, 2003.

Lorde. São Paulo: Francis Editora, 2004.

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