


## The decaying word: an author in search of writing in the short story

*As três toucas brancas*, by Breno Accioly /

*A palavra em declínio: um autor à procura da escrita no conto As três toucas brancas*, de Breno Accioly


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### ABSTRACT

This article offers a commented reading of the short story *As três toucas brancas*, focusing on the analysis of how the narrative voice was structured. This piece constitutes Breno Accioly's (1921-1966) debut short-story book, *João Urso*, published by EPASA in 1944. As confirmed by the fragments of footnotes published in journals, which also featured on the fourth cover of the first edition of the book, *João Urso* was acclaimed by the literary community and was responsible for honoring the writer with two important awards: Graça Aranha and Afonso Arinos. *As três toucas brancas* is told by a first-person narrator, Sigismundo, a man who, despite having a degree in medicine, has always desired to write. In the narrative, the protagonist narrator is afflicted by a double torment: the financial problems he has to cope with and a deep inability to write. It is under the weight of this anguish that he considers a peculiar offer - a painter, who is traveling the city, wishes to paint his wife's breasts. Sigismundo, then, finds himself in the dilemma of telling or not telling his wife of the proposal he had received. A man from the

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Brazilian Sertão, Sigismundo stands out in the torturous universe of tormented characters created by Breno Accioly, whose autobiographical work is little known to the current reading public.

**KEYWORDS:** Breno Accioly; João Urso; literature of Alagoas.

### RESUMO

Este artigo propõe-se a analisar, por meio de uma leitura comentada que privilegia o exame da estruturação da voz narrativa, o conto *As três toucas brancas*, que integra o livro de estreia de Breno Accioly (1921-1966), *João Urso*, lançado em 1944 pela EPASA. Como atestam os fragmentos de rodapés publicados em periódicos e que estampam a quarta capa da primeira edição do livro, essa obra foi bem acolhida pelo meio literário e rendeu ao escritor dois importantes prêmios: o Graça Aranha e o Afonso Arinos. *As três toucas brancas* tem por narrador Sigismundo, médico de formação cujo desejo sempre foi escrever. Esse narrador-protagonista aflige-se, no momento da enunciação, por um duplo tormento: às dificuldades financeiras que atravessa soma-se uma enorme incapacidade de escrever. É sob o peso dessa angústia que recebe, de um pintor que percorre a cidade, a oferta singular para pintar os seios de sua esposa. Sigismundo, então, vê-se tomado pelo dilema de contar ou não à mulher a proposta que receberá. Homem subterrâneo do Sertão, Sigismundo destaca-se no torturante universo de personagens atormentadas criadas por Breno Accioly, cuja obra, de teor autobiográfico, é pouco conhecida do público leitor atual.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Breno Accioly; João Urso; Literatura alagoana.

## 1 Introduction

The present article analyzes *As três toucas brancas*, by Breno Accioly, a short story writer from Alagoas mostly unknown to the readers of our days<sup>1</sup>. It offers a commented reading that privileges the analysis of how the narrative voice was structured in this story. Born in Santana do Ipanema, a small rural city in Alagoas in 1921, Accioly lived part of his childhood in Maceió. At 17, he moved to Recife-PE and started medical school. There, Accioly met writers such as João Cabral de Melo Neto, Gilberto Freyre and José Octávio de Freitas Júnior, and published some of his first short stories in the local edition of *Jornal do Commercio*. In 1943, Accioly moved to Rio de Janeiro, where he completed his medical training and published his first book, *João Urso*, by EPASA (in a beautiful edition illustrated by Santa Rosa).

The debut edition won a preface signed by José Lins do Rego<sup>2</sup>, to whom Accioly also dedicated the eponymous story. In this introductory text, Rego informs Accioly's readers that part of the ten stories that make up the book had already been published in journals. These impressions were well received by

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<sup>1</sup> Some writers have worked hard to bring Breno Accioly's work to the fore. This was true for Ricardo Ramos – responsible for the selection and publication of a collection of "Best short stories" by Global publisher in 1984 – and also for scholars such as Edilma Acioli Bomfim. Dedicated to the study of madness in Accioly's debut book, Bomfim's doctoral dissertation was published under the title *Razão mutilada: ficção e loucura em Breno Accioly*, by UFAL publisher in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> This preface integrates the four existing editions of the book. In the work *Obras Reunidas* published by Escrituras in 1999, the introductory text written by Lins do Rego is moved to the section Fortuna Crítica, at the end of the volume. As aforementioned, the first edition of *João Urso* was published by EPASA. The subsequent editions were published by Edições Cruzeiro in 1953 and by Civilização Brasileira in 1963 (as part of the Vera Cruz Collection, v. 56). A last edition was published by Civilização Brasileira in 1995. This edition, whose cover bears the signature of Cândido Portinari, was the same we have used to engage in this analysis.



the literary community, as revealed by the fragments of footnotes published in journals and in magazines, also featured as the fourth cover of the first edition of the book (among which we highlight those signed by Mário de Andrade, Lúcio Cardoso, Vinicius de Moraes and Otávio de Faria<sup>3</sup>). The book edition was highly appraised and honored Breno Accioly with the Graça Aranha award from the Graça Aranha Foundation and the Afonso Arinos award from the Academia Brasileira de Letras.

The short story *As três toucas brancas* is told by a first-person narrator, Sigismundo, a man who, despite having a degree in medicine, has always desired to write. In the narrative, he is afflicted by a double torment: in addition to the financial difficulties he is going through, there exists an inability – ephemeral or not – to deal with words, which he lacks both in speech and in writing. It is under the weight of this anguish that he receives an unusual offer: when walking along a nearby beach, he is approached by an unknown painter who saw his wife, Virginia, in the distance and wished, in exchange for a good payment, to have her breasts portrayed. The plot follows with the hero's indecision to tell his wife of the offer he had received. Two main reasons seem to impel him to accept the proposal, namely: the lack of money and the disapproval of his option for literature and of his writing. The revelation, however, never happens for, observing the hats she has been knitting, he is struck with the news that his wife expects a baby.

## 2 Sigismundo: an author in search of the word

The raw material for this short story is Sigismundo's life. From his tormented gaze, we are introduced to his life and shown the corroded world that surrounds him.

Let us consider the incipit of the short story<sup>4</sup>: “Writing some articles would perhaps improve my situation, no longer having to pawn objects, but when I try to write anything, my fingers, my will, my brain feel inhibited”<sup>5</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89). In this dismayed introduction, the two adversities against which the protagonist struggles, and which overlap throughout the narrative, will constitute the engine of his speech (and his existence): the lack of money and the inability to write. If his lack of words were healed, his financial problems would be remedied. This is because Sigismundo – as some of his peers, namely

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<sup>3</sup> These fragments reappear in subsequent editions of *João Urso*.

<sup>4</sup> Given the inexistence of a published translation of *João Urso*, the translator has provided a free version of all quotations to English. The original version in Portuguese will follow in the footnotes.

<sup>5</sup> Original: “Escrevendo uns artigos, talvez melhorasse a minha situação deixando de empenhar objetos, mas, quando tento escrever qualquer coisa, sinto uma inibição nos dedos, na vontade, no cérebro”. (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).



Luís da Silva who wrote *Angústia*<sup>6</sup>, and, very likely, Breno Accioly himself – puts his pen down to write for pay, desirous of performing his literary velleities. Something, though, stops him from writing, and it does not seem to be just the vision of his empty wallet.

This impotence is intensified when he considers where he finds himself. With a certain lyricism, he apprehends the wordless beauty that surrounds him – “... what is the purpose of writing if the wind makes the roses whisper, rubs like wings on the towels hung up on the clothesline, vibrating in the reeds sounds of flutes?”<sup>7</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89) – and inevitably confronts it with his incomplete and unsuccessful life. As soon as he notices the vulgarity of his comparison between reeds and flutes, he finds himself incapable of imagining and writing anything of value. In fact, what is writing when compared to the secret whisper of the wind and rose bushes? The wind appears to him like an antagonist, owner of beautiful and hidden words and of certain freedom (which unfurls on the towels hung up on the clothesline) that he might be able to aspire to once he writes again.

It is on the threshold of the house – on the porch, area that separates indoor and outdoor environments – that the uncertain narrator is positioned. It is from this ambiguous space that Sigismundo watches the dance of the wind and, as will be seen below, contemplates Virginia, his wife, knitting a pair of socks. His irruption in the narrative is so abrupt that one has the impression that it is seen elsewhere, at another time. His incursion into the short story takes on the contours of memory: “Virginia’s face is sunburnt, still, although the sun has blushed it, one sees that her paleness is hiding, veiled under her skin”<sup>8</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89). To the sunburnt (fiery?) skin that makes itself visible, another one, a pale (modest?) skin is protected. The latter image is perhaps only known to Sigismundo.

I haven’t said anything yet, although I think she will even smile.  
I don’t even know how to start. Say it all at once? Get around the topic or be straight and immediately convince her? I can foresee Virginia’s face, miserable, filled with shame, avoiding my eyes, avoiding seeing anyone, staring at a spot, losing it in a vacuum. (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Na rua dos lampiões apagados*, one of João Urso’s short stories, is dedicated to Graciliano Ramos.

<sup>7</sup> Original: “[...] para que escrever se o vento deixa as roseiras sussurrando, roça como asas nas toalhas estendidas no arame, vibrando nos caniços sons de flautas?” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).

<sup>8</sup> Original: “O rosto de Virgínia está queimado, mas, apesar do sol da praia tê-lo enrubescido, vê-se que uma palidez se esconde, oculta-se-lhe debaixo da pele” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).

<sup>9</sup> Original: “Ainda não lhe disse nada, todavia, creio que ela até irá sorrir./ Nem sei como principiar. Dizer tudo de uma vez? Fazer arroteios ou convencê-la imediatamente? Imagino desde já o rosto de Virgínia abatido pela vergonha, sem querer me olhar, ver ninguém, fitando um ponto, perdendo-o no vácuo.” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).



Sigismundo watches Virginia apparently from the porch, i.e., still immersed in a space that, albeit domestic, is a place of transit and passing; a non-place<sup>10</sup> (AUGÉ, 1995) that connects the outside world to the intimacy of the house. He hesitates to confide her anything. In addition to the absent words, can courage be missing too? Crossing the porch threshold – and exposing himself in an unprotected open field – is as difficult as breaking the silence that is established in the short space that separates the two bodies. Sigismundo considers, powerless, the woman's possible reactions to such a revelation. To Virginia's presumed refusal or rejection, he would reply: "But, Virginia, it's the purest thing in the world!"<sup>11</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89), aware, nonetheless, of his "betrayal". That is, regardless of the (im)moral content of his words, he knew that what would be said did not fit "Virginia's world".

In Sigismundo's world, betraying is speaking. In fact, little is known of him: Virginia's world is the one being built (real or imaginary, since it is woven by the voice of others), one that is immaculate, limpid and righteous as her name is<sup>12</sup>. In contrast, the narrator's world would be the opposite: degenerate, nonsensical and obscure. Despite this, Sigismundo sees in Virginia's purity a sign of perversion, which reveals more about him and his concealed debauchery than about her – perhaps a lapse of a frustrated and inept writer?

What would be Sigismundo's secret, a mystery able to inhibit his speech and that, if enunciated, would make Virginia so embarrassed? It certainly would not be their financial ruin (even if it could be a result of it), because the term "pure" could not be applied to such an ordinary situation in the lives of many. Nonetheless, "behind the veil of dark threads [in which] her shame and a wounded feeling would be covered [...]"<sup>13</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89), Virginia would finally acquiesce.

She would then hug me, talking to me softly as if she were afraid to hear herself:

– All right, Sigismundo, I will do as you wish.

This whole scene crosses my mind to a point that I think it becomes real and I get terrified of my own thinking.<sup>14</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 90).

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<sup>10</sup> Concept adjusted to a narrative space that is distinguished from the public spaces of great circulation – airports, train stations or supermarkets – as mentioned by Augé. Like such spaces, however, the porch is the place where Sigismundo puts himself in "non-places", in a "world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral" (AUGÉ, 1995, p. 78).

<sup>11</sup> Original: "Mas, Virginia, é a coisa mais pura deste mundo!" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).

<sup>12</sup> The presence of female characters who are manifestly virtuous (and submissive) or depraved (and free) is recurrent in Accioly's narratives, theme that, although only noted here, deserves further investigation.

<sup>13</sup> Original: "por trás do véu de fios escuros [nos quais] se ocultaria sua vergonha [...] e um sentimento ferido". (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).

<sup>14</sup> Original: "Depois ela abraçar-me-ia, falando-me baixinho como se estivesse com medo de se ouvir: – Está bem, Sigismundo, farei o que você me pede. Passa pela minha cabeça toda essa cena, chego a pensar que tal coisa sucede e sinto pavor do meu próprio pensamento." (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 90).

In Virginia's reply we, as readers, are revealed the narrator's name. If the primary meaning of Virginia's name is manifest, that of Sigismundo is not. We explain: although it happens only after the opening pages, one can concretely relate Virginia's name to her character seeing in that meaning a trace of her personality, whereas the meaning behind Sigismundo's name is not so evident and emerges as an index of what he is not: someone who fortunately protects with his hands. Such index seems ironic, since the voice that speaks resembles its etymological reverse by its dismay and ineptitude. The hands that are willing to take care of Virginia are powerless, unable to write.

In this moment of silence, Sigismundo and Virginia find themselves inhabiting an empty space, which leads the narrator to a "state of suspension". This emptiness prompts Sigismundo's memory of what happened a few days ago, the center of the dilemma that torments him. As he walked along the beach with his wife, he came across a painter. Virginia was far away... Taking advantage of the distance that separated them, the painter said something whose meaning Sigismundo did not immediately understand, because he was much more attentive to its form than to its content: "The voice of that painter came out softly; at the same time he asked and apologized. At first I did not understand him well, my face must have closed, because the painter softened the words even harder. Polishing them"<sup>15</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 90). The narrator, facing his most vain struggle in the sterile field of white sheets of paper, dazzles the carved, refined and sparkling beauty of the words used by the painter, who, due to the presumptuous sharpness in dealing with the vernacular, seems to Sigismundo as someone who has something he lacks.

The narrative then returns to the present (and to Sigismundo's elucubrations). The painter's proposal consumes Virginia's husband, who, aware of his cowardice and fear, grieved less for the offer, which he is willing to accept, than for Virginia's reaction when she hears the proposal. As read in the excerpt: "had my life proceeded as before, I would certainly have revolted me, raised my voice"<sup>16</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91). Still, this state of defeat is not innate: at some point in his history Sigismundo found himself inert at the edge of the precipice; and the voice, which previously prevailed, fell silent: "I feel ruined, all my strength is lost"<sup>17</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91). Would this be a result or cause of his financial collapse?

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<sup>15</sup> Original: "A voz daquele pintor saía mansa, pedia e ao mesmo tempo se desculpava. A princípio não o entendi bem, o meu rosto deveria ter-se fechado, porque o pintor ainda mais suavizava as palavras. Polindo-as" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 90).

<sup>16</sup> Original: "se minha vida prosseguisse no ritmo de outrora certamente teria me revoltado, levantado a voz" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91)

<sup>17</sup> Original: "sinto-me arruinado, todas as minhas forças perdidas" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91).





I feel like calling Virginia, explaining that the old man on the beach is a painter, a painter who is eager to paint her breasts. I would then show her the notes, the letters, including the last one that highlights the unusual offer. It seems, though, that a mysterious force drags me to remain silent. (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91).<sup>18</sup>

This explains what afflicts the narrator, what he aspires to tell Virginia and cannot. He who had lost all vigor is now moved by an unknown force that leads him to inaction; it is a force that sustains his inability to reveal the “unusual offer” that would free them from poverty. Sigismundo is afflicted with a double evil: he lacks money and words, and without the former, the latter seems impossible to reappear. The narrator suffers not only from an increasing deprivation that sediments the silence separating him from his wife; his world and that of Virginia seem incompatible. Even if Virginia's innocence is apprehended – embodied in the pale dawn of her skin – he seems to remain distant from her. To him, only the strip of dermis once brutalized by the sun is exposed.

In a corner of the room, inside this heavy room of silence, Virginia's hands stitch. The thought of having her breasts catching the attention of a painter could by no means cross her mind; she would be a woman of bright breasts, too artistic, too pure. What if Virginia consented? (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91).<sup>19</sup>

The void of words that is established between them is, in the narrative, filled with imaginary conversations, fragments of dialogues that invariably end with Virginia's consent. In this taciturn universe, in which nothing is said, everything is hidden and little is seen (either in the corner of the “heavy room of silence”, a space in which Sigismundo and Virginia transit like two specters, or under the blazing and blinding sun of that coastal city), Virginia's breasts shine – glimpsed and idealized by an outsider.

Symbol of life and femininity, breasts are among the most represented parts of the human body in the arts in general (in all times and places). In Sigismundo's digressions, Virginia turns into a new Venus, into freedom to guide her husband towards debt relief and creative redemption in a beachy Olympia. The husband imagines his wife naked before an easel, and such a scene revives his desire for her body: “(...) desire to also have those breasts that were being painted, to tenderly kiss their areolas, the same areolas that filled the background of a canvas with the opulence of their pink shade”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Original: “Tenho vontade de chamar Virginia, explicar-lhe que o velho da praia é um pintor, mas um pintor que está doído para desenhar-lhe os seios. Mostrar-lhe-ia os bilhetes, as cartas, até mesmo mostrar-lhe-ia a última que salienta uma oferta incomum. Mas parece que uma força misteriosa me obriga a permanecer calado.” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91).

<sup>19</sup> Original: “Num canto da sala, dentro desta sala pesada de silêncio, as mãos de Virginia cosem. E nem por sonho deverá chegar à cabeça de Virginia que os seios do seu corpo chamaram a atenção de um pintor; ela seria uma mulher de seios iluminados, demasiadamente artísticos, puros. E se Virginia consentisse?” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 91).

<sup>20</sup> Original: “(...) desejo de também possuir aqueles seios que estavam sendo pintados, de beijar ternamente suas auréolas, as mesmas auréolas que enchem o fundo de uma tela com a opulência de seu róseo” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92).

(ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92). Would this desire be motivated by Sigismundo's jealousy over Virginia? Or by his jealousy over the painter, who, because of the muse's body, could create another piece of art? These breasts thus acquire monetary and aesthetic value, as they can bear both the money that would remedy the couple's financial problems and the incentive for the painter to produce a new painting (and for the narrator, with any luck, to recover the dormant talent). If Virginia's breasts are able to fill a canvas with their splendor and beauty, perhaps they will also illuminate Sigismundo to transpose them onto a sheet of paper.

These thoughts do not unfold without contradictions. Sigismundo, guilty, deplores his lost strength and condemns himself by imagining "Virginia displaying her nude breasts in the ways of a strange prostitute"<sup>21</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92). At the same time, though, he is pleased with his self-image – relative to someone who has ascended socially – reconstructed on the vilest stereotypes of masculinity:

How good it would be to receive a thousand *cruzeiros* for an hour that Virginia had her breasts painted on a canvas, perhaps displayed so differently that could bear no resemblance to the real ones!

[...]

And I, visiting a studio, cold as a capitalist, asking prices, smoking an enormous cigar...

[...]

And I would keep on smoking, striding, hands in my pockets, looking at that voluptuous flesh with contempt.<sup>22</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92).

In disagreement with himself and the world, Sigismundo, deprived of words, sees himself being deceived by the word. If he says "yes", he will only denude Virginia, a woman reduced to her breasts, a prostitute to whom he attributes the guilt he is unable to admit. If he says "no", it will suffice him to bring to the old painter's attention – from an old school, used to the old servile imitation that he seems to repudiate – that he owns his wife and to suggest that he looks for another woman, a double, for there are as many breasts similar to Virginia's as he wants to find!

Under this impasse underlies the narrator's surreptitious criticism of the painter's poetics and the coward justification for his inaction, from which pour bitterness and resentment. Unlike his rival, Sigismundo (and here we turn to the opening lines of the short story) would not allow himself to be ruined "in vulgar poetry"<sup>23</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89). Staring at Virginia in search of an answer, he sees a woman

<sup>21</sup> Original: "Virginia com os peitos de fora à maneira de uma estranha prostituta" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92).

<sup>22</sup> Original: "Como seria bom receber mil cruzeiros por uma hora que Virginia deixasse seus seios numa tela, talvez pintados tão diferentes que de nada sugerissem os verdadeiros! [...] E eu visitando um ateliê, frio como um capitalista, indagando preços, fumando um enorme charuto... [...] E eu continuaria fumando, caminhando a passos largos, mãos nos bolsos, olhando com desprezo aquelas carnes." (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 92).

<sup>23</sup> Original: "numa poesia vulgar" (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 89).





whose inertia suggests she is posing. Nothing except her fingers move, as if they were – and the antagonism of the comparisons rightly reflects Sigismundo's contradictions – shaking or praying.

Both sacred and profane perceptions intensify the narrator's detachment, who, also dormant, seeks refuge in memories, including that of the support he had received from Virginia when he decided to hold a public position (despite his approval, he was not hired). A recent image is added to these (imaginary or real) memories, “the story of Virginia's breasts”, which according to the narrator “has just transformed [him] into a visionary, despite having always lived in the world of visions”<sup>24</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

At a time when “everything is certainly lost and foggy”<sup>25</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94), Sigismundo also evokes two figures – one from the past, the other from the present – with whom he shared his literary experiences: Judge Olavo and the guarantor of his apartment.

Even at the time when Judge Olavo used to advise me, writing long letters, I would remain in the world I got used to inhabiting. Today, while that world no longer exists for me, the habit endures.

[...]

When Judge Olavo saw me typing pages, writing short stories, he would warn me in a slow, low voice:

– Literature only brings distress, kid. – Literature is as enemy and treacherous as politics. Drop it all, kid, go and endeavor to succeed in your medical studies.<sup>26</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

Sigismundo has long adapted to a particular world, consisting of his own views. Not even the long advices of Judge Olavo, registered in writing, took him from the displaced and shattered space he had created for himself. Yet, something existed no more. What exactly? His literary verve, his enthusiasm, his creative genius? His literary making seems no longer possible. As if he were immersed in moving sand, Sigismundo does not envision another field of action. Today, banned from the world of ideas, Sigismundo finds himself a visionary of a different order.

The protagonist narrator, who is also a short story writer as we come to know, recalls the past and remembers that his “well-established” friend had suggested full dedication to his area of training,

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<sup>24</sup> Original: “a história dos seios de Virgínia”, que, afirma o narrador, “acaba de transform[á-lo] num visionário, apesar de sempre ter vivido no mundo das visões” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

<sup>25</sup> Original: “tudo está positivamente perdido e nevoado” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

<sup>26</sup> Original: “Mesmo no tempo em que o Desembargador Olavo me aconselhava, escrevendo-me cartas enormes, eu continuava naquele mundo que me habituou a viver dentro dele. Hoje, esse mundo não existe mais para mim, porém aquele hábito perdura. [...] Desembargador Olavo falava assim, quando me via datilografando páginas, escrevendo contos: – Literatura só traz contrariedade, menino – dizia numa pausada voz grave. – Literatura é tão inimiga e traiçoeira como política. Largue tudo isso, menino, vá se aperfeiçoar na sua Medicina.” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

Medicine<sup>27</sup>. Here the metaliterary content of the narrative becomes explicit. Entangled or not by the plots with which he dreamed – and which he aspired to put on paper – Sigismundo did not accept the Judge's suggestion. The latter, aware of the “kid's” interest in the new, in the imaginary, in invention, tried in vain one last argument: “– Why don't you discover a microbe?”<sup>28</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94). Although dead, his voice remains alive and well, echoing in Sigismundo's ears, who repeats twice the suggestion of the friend of whom he feels the absence today and to whom he would like to apologize for not having heard him. Unlike the fate that the laboratory once attended by Sigismundo might have for him, literature has not allowed Sigismundo to engender the new, the still unsaid (is that possible?), the original.

In a flashback, the narrator recalls his move to Rio de Janeiro, attracted by the “fabulous stories” according to which he would be treated like a prince and would have the women he wanted in the beds he would choose like the lyrical self of Manuel Bandeira. Actually, from Rio, he would take only his diploma and Virginia, whom he had met a year after his arrival.

The truth is that every week I get rid of objects. I had no qualms. I pawned everything, I pawned it all. I made Virginia quit her job as a telephone operator, I did not find any of those women who support their lover's life, but Virginia gives me much more than they can possibly do.<sup>29</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 95).

After this brief tour through his past memories, Sigismundo concludes that his ambitions were by no means satisfied, for he had lost much more than achieved in his life. He got rid of the lovers from Rio he never got to know, the research he never carried out, the books he never wrote. Soon, his home will be as hollow as his wallet or the pages that rest on his desk.

The lack of money made him lose the affection shown by the “fat poet” who served as his guarantor. Sigismundo, moaning, affirms that “he did not find technical flaws in [Sigismundo's] short stories, nor did he quote European short story writers to influence [him]”<sup>30</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, pp. 95-96), forgetting, however, that friends are friends – even in letters – as long as business is kept apart.

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<sup>27</sup> This content is both metaliterary and autobiographical, for, as stated at the beginning of this study, like Sigismundo, Breno Accioly also graduated as a physician. In addition, both author and character moved across similar spaces – notably in the cities of Recife and Rio de Janeiro – and published fictional texts in journals (on the autobiographical traits in Accioly's short stories, especially those relating to childhood, see ROCHA, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Original: “– Por que não descobre um micróbio?” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 94).

<sup>29</sup> Original: “A verdade é que todas as semanas desfaço-me de objetos. Não tive escrúpulos. Penhorei tudo, pus tudo no prego. Fiz Virgínia abandonar o emprego de telefonista, não encontrei nenhuma dessas mulheres que sustentam a vida do amante, mas Virgínia me dá mais que todas elas.” (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 95).

<sup>30</sup> Original: “antes ele não encontrava defeitos de técnica nos [seus] contos, nem citava contistas europeus [o] influenciando” (ACCIOLY, 1995, pp. 95-96).



It is a fact that Sigismundo had managed to thrive during his time in Rio despite the advice of Judge Olavo. Now the narrator is aware that his writing is decaying. Keeping an eye on the past, he finds that his choice neither allowed him to discover new microbes nor prevented him (according to his guarantor) from imitating European authors. His failure, then, resonates strongly and brings him back to the room where Virginia is.

Finally, the anger at the painter's "dirty" proposal, the remorse for not having accepted the Judge's advice, the pain for the frankness (or backbiting) of the guarantor's critical notes and the most poignant perception of his defeat converge. At this moment, Sigismundo sees himself ready to reveal the offer to his wife. Nevertheless, his voice is annulled once again. Virginia notices the desperation that overwhelms him ("Are you fine, Sigismundo?"), yet she is unable to persuade her husband to say what ails him. Sitting on the floor, she unsuccessfully insists he speaks.

Sigismundo is taken by the desire to join his hands – those that should protect, write, produce – to those of his wife. Again inhibited, they stop in the air, *nel mezzo del cammin*. His gaze then strays to the crochet hooks. In them, he sees a baby hat woven!

In the long crochet hooks a ball of wool takes the shape of a hat. I get scared, and a sudden idea renders everything transparent.

– Is it possible, Virginia? Is it possible that you are pregnant?

[...]

– Didn't you want it, Sigismundo?

[...]

– I only knitted one hat, Sigismundo; there are still two left.<sup>31</sup> (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 96).

Long self-absorbed in his own problems, Sigismundo had not seen his wife's belly and breasts grow. He had not seen that her hands, unlike his, worked, built, protected a future that was being announced. Her hands, paraphrasing a beautiful and sensitive essay by Bosi, open the wound and think of it, bristle the hair and caress it, are the voice of the mute and the deaf and prepare food. Her hands thread the needle, sew and baste, weave, prepare and embroider. Her hands will take care of the coming child. The hands that are willing to scabble, sketch, write, rewrite, erase and amend, for now, do nothing but cancel and erase (BOSI, 1995).

Sigismundo fights against the emptiness of words in a place that appeared to him as an empty space, despite the silent presence of his wife. In the end, he finds out that in this barren environment there

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<sup>31</sup> Original: "Nas agulhas compridas de crochê um novelo de lã toma a forma de uma touca. Assusto-me, e uma ideia repentina me esclarece tudo. – Será possível, Virgínia? Será possível que você esteja grávida? [...] – Não foi você quem quis, Sigismundo? [...] – Só fiz uma touca, Sigismundo, mas ainda faltam duas." (ACCIOLY, 1995, p. 96).

is a full, pregnant organism: Virginia. The three hats she weaves correspond to the new number of family members, a number that represents order, the Christian divinity, and totality. The white color (only mentioned in the title) expresses rebirth, grace, transfiguration.

The short story reaches its dramatic end without announcing its readers if the narrator will tell his wife of the painter's proposal. Contemplative, Sigismundo observes the first of the three hats the same way he had gazed at the towels spread in the clothesline. However, he is no longer the same. Nobody knows whether he will write again or not; at least he has recovered his ability to narrate...

### Final remarks

In *As três toucas brancas*, Breno Accioly constitutes a narrative voice that, seeing itself devoid of words, reveals with words its weaknesses, its frustrations and its (non)understanding of the world. Using his life as a narrative raw material, the first-person narrator witnesses the events he proposes to tell, of which he has, nevertheless and very presumably, a limited or distorted view. An example is his imaginary dialogues with Virginia in which the woman repeatedly answers what he would like to hear.

The decaying word follows *pari passu* Sigismundo's collapse. His writing languishes and degrades like him, who takes refuge in the past<sup>32</sup> – where he seeks to rediscover who he was or thinks he was – and in the memories of a time when he was able to write (and which may be nothing more than an idealization of something that has never occurred). Bewildered, he seems to be in a fleeting space in which his life and writing are not fully realized.

Distinguishing between bad dreams and reality, Sigismundo, a man from the Brazilian Sertão, turns his life into a nightmare with no way out. Entangled in his aspirations and frustrations, the narrator seems to watch his fall dormant. Yet, the announcement of a child opens, if not the way to social and literary ascension, at least the possibility of reunion with the other (and, eventually, with the word) in a movement similar to that of other characters from Breno Accioly's debut book.

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<sup>32</sup> In this sense, the porch where Sigismundo constantly retreats could be seen both as a “non-place” and as a kind of “temporal heterotopy” (FOUCAULT, 2006), a place where he could live in his time and out of it.



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