

The Belt

Graciliano Ramos de Oliveira

Graciliano Ramos de Oliveira (1892-1953) foi um romancista, cronista, contista, jornalista, político e memorialista brasileiro, considerado um dos maiores nomes da literatura brasileira.

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My relationship with justice was painful and left me with a deep impression. I was around four or maybe five years old and was put in the position of a defendant. Surely, I had been put in that position already, but nobody had helped me understand that it was at a trial. They beat me because they could beat me, and that was natural.

The strikes I received before the belt situation, purely physical, disappeared when the pain was gone. One time my mother beat me with a knotty rope that painted my back with bloodstains. Sore, hardly turning my head, I could see big red gashes in my ribs. They lay me down and wrapped me sheets with salt and water, and there was a family discussion. My grandmother, who was visiting us, doomed her daughter's procedure, thus distressing her. Annoyed, she hurt me for nothing, unintentionally. I didn't hold a grudge to my mother: the knot was the guilty one. If it wasn't for the knot, the whipping should have caused less damage. And it would be forgotten. The history of the belt, which came a little before, revived it.

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My father slept in the hammock placed in the big room. Everything is cloudy. Walls extremely far away from each other, infinite hammock, the hooks too far, and my father waking up, getting up in a bad mood, stomping his leather slippers on the floor, and a rusty face. Naturally I don't remember the rust, the wrinkles, the hoarse voice, the time he spent growling a requirement. I know he was really angry, and it brought my usual cowardice. I wished to see him throwing it to my mother and to José Baía, big people who didn't take hits. I anxiously tried to hold on to this delicate hope. My father's strength would find resistance and would dissolve into words. Weak and ignorant, unable to speak or defend, I went to curl up in a corner, far from the big green boxes. If fear didn't hold me, I would try to run away: from the front door I would go to the pond; from the hall door I would find the Jerusalem thorn¹. I might have thought about it, still, behind the boxes. I just wanted that my mother, *sinhá*² Leopoldina, Amaro e José Baía suddenly appeared, saving me from that danger.

— Nobody came, my father found me crouching and breathless, glued to the wall, and violently took me off from that place, asking for a belt. Where was the belt? I didn't know, but it was hard to explain: my words got mixed up, I stuttered, brutalized, without knowing the reason for the anger. His brutal and choleric ways held me back; those hard sounds died, devoid of meaning.

I can't reproduce the whole scene. Putting together vague memories of it to facts that happened after, I imagine my father's screams, the terrible anger, my unfortunate shivery. Probably I was shaken. The astonishment froze my blood, opening my eyes wide.

Where was the belt? Impossible to answer. Even if the infamous object was hidden, I was speechless by how scared I found myself. This kind of situation made the most torture moments of my childhood, and their consequences followed me.

The man didn't ask me if I had kept the miserable buckle: he ordered to give it to him immediately. His screams entered my head, never did someone shout that way.

Where was the belt? Nowadays I can't hear anyone speak loudly. My heart pounds, flatten, as if it's going to stop, my voice disappears, my vision becomes dark, a freak anger stirs dormant things

¹ In the source text the narrator mentions the plant species *Pé de turco*, this common name can refer to two species found in *Caatinga*, the biome usually referenced in Graciliano Ramos' works. To this translation I prefer to mention the species known as *Parkinsonia Aculeata* L, a tree, instead of *Echinocactus horizontalis*, a little cactus that is also referred as *Pé de turco* in some parts of *Caatinga*.

² N.d.T. *Sinha* is a form of address used to assert dominance when referring to women, it has its origin in slavery, but in Graciliano Ramos' text is common to find this form like in *Vidas Secas*, which the matriarch of the protagonist family is called *Sinha Vitória*.

inside me. The horrible sensation that pierced my eardrums with red-hot iron tips. Where was the belt? The repeated question stayed in my memory: like it was hammered.

The mad fury would increase, causing me serious distress. I would remain there, fainting, curled up, moving my cold fingers, my lips trembling and silent. If the boy José or a dog entered the room, perhaps the blows would be transferred. The boy and the dogs were innocent, but that wasn't the point. By blaming any of them, my father would forget me, let me run away, hide by the dam or in the yard. My mother, José Baía, Amaro, *sinhá* Leopoldina, the boy, and the farm dogs abandoned me. A tightness in my throat, the house spinning, my body falling slowly, flying, bees from all the slums filling my ears — and, in that buzzing, the dreadful question. Nausea, sleep. Where was the belt? Sleep a lot, behind the coffins, free from torment. There was fog, and I couldn't quite make out my father's movement my father's movements. I didn't see him approach the lathe and pick up the whip. The hairy hand grabbed me, dragged me to the middle of the room, the leather sheet whipped my back. Howls, useless clamor, wheezing. By then I should have known that pleas and flattery exasperated the executioner. No help. José Baía, my friend, was a poor devil.

I was in the desert. The house was dark and sad; the people were sad. I think with horror of that wasteland, I remember graveyards and haunted ruins. The doors and windows were closed, from the dark ceiling cobwebs hung. In the gloomy rooms my little sister crawled, beginning the painful learning process.

With me, a furious man, grabbing me by the arm, whipping me. Perhaps the beatings were not so severe: compared to what I felt later when they taught me the ABCs, they were worth less. Certainly, my crying, jumping, and attempts to spin around the room like a spinning top were less a sign of pain than an explosion of repressed fear. I had been motionless, barely breathing. Now I emptied my lungs and moved in desperation.

The torment lasted a long time, but, however prolonged it may have been, it did not equal the mortification of the preparatory phase: the hard eye magnetizing me, the threatening gestures, the hoarse voice chewing on an incomprehensible question. Once released, I curled up near the coffins, scratched my bruises, swallowed my sobs, moaned softly, and rocked myself with my moans. Before falling asleep, exhausted, I saw my father go to the hammock, push the screens aside, sit down, and then get up, grabbing a strip of leather, the damn belt, which had come loose when he lay down. He grumbled and began to pace agitatedly. I had the impression that he was going to talk to me: he lowered his head, his wrinkled face calmed down, his eyes dimmed, they

sought refuge where I lay, annihilated. It seemed to me that his imposing figure was dwindling—and my misfortune diminished. If my father had approached me, I would have received him without the chill that his presence always gave me. He did not come close: he remained distant, pacing restlessly. Then he walked away.

Alone, I saw him again, cruel and strong, blowing, foaming. And there I remained, small, insignificant, as insignificant and small as the spiders working on the black roof tile. That was my first encounter with justice.

Referência

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