

“José da Silva Lisboa and the Pathology of Revolution”

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Abstract: Focusing on José da Silva Lisboa’s *Constituição Moral e Deveres do Cidadão* (1824/1825), this article explores how the image of Revolution, modeled on the “catastrophic” experiences of France and Haiti, projects itself onto the scenario of the nascent Brazilian empire. For Lisboa, the moralizing discourse should be capable of founding a new order in the tropics, of protecting “Brazilian youth” from the seduction of renovating principles, of maintaining well-tied the knots of a social fabric threatened by the madness of revolutionaries, who brought to the horizon of a young nation the danger of dissolution and corruption of the body politic.

Keywords: Viscount of Cairu, morality and literature, Brazilian empire, conservative thought, madness and politics.

José da Silva Lisboa, viscount of Cairu, is a well-known author among historians and social scientists in Brazil. Famous for his writings in economics and for his political career, Lisboa served as one of the principal court censors in Brazil, as one of the planners for the opening of the ports in 1808, and as constitutional deputy in 1823. Like many of his Brazilian contemporaries, he was educated at a University of Coimbra supposedly swept clean of traces of the old Scholasticism; as such he was connected to many modern philosophical, moral, and economic discussions at a time when morality and economics had only begun to distinguish themselves. The future viscount was particularly well-informed, especially given the provincial nature of the court in Rio de Janeiro.¹

Lisboa was a conscientious and astute reader, who knew how to detect with precision the power of the individual works that he read in his role as censor. His perception was such that many of the works censored and hidden from his compatriots appeared, repurposed, in his moral magnum opus, *Constituição Moral e Deveres do Cidadão* (published between 1824 and 1825 by the Royal Press of Rio de Janeiro.) In this work, certain prohibited sources pass through a sort of moralizing filter: in endowing them with a peculiar frame through which they are “explained” to the reader, the author attempts to purge censored writings of their damaging effects. Most notable is the case of La Rochefoucauld’s maxims. Here, the empire of self-love proposed by La Rochefoucauld is figured as a terrible poison, and is recast as an inverted ethics: the exact opposite of what young readers on the path of good and pure actions should follow.

In the heat of Brazil’s current political moment, when the theme of passions, conservatism, and nationalism is so much in evidence, it seems appropriate to revisit Lisboa’s ardently nationalistic discourse, seeking in particular to pinpoint the *fear* these same passions caused him. Here we should think of *passions* in its archaic and original, pre-Enlightenment sense, that is, not desire that originates in the subject, but the movement of the soul that is independent of our will. I refer to the passions that assault human beings: that foundational Homeric ire, or, in a closer and more comprehensible manifestation, the depictions of the passions by Charles le Brun. His drawings were published in France in 1727, by Audran, who refers to Le Brun remembering that the master had intentionally followed the ancient philosophers in his consideration of the passions as a movement of the soul. The painter says that what causes the Soul passion will also cause the body to perform certain movements and produce certain facial alterations (Le Brun, 1). Le Brun’s drawings perform a drama that claims the face, that makes itself known in the contorted features of a visage subjugated by the concrete force of a particular passion. It is a rapture, a taking-over or intrusion of another creature that seizes human beings, disfiguring them:



Fig.1. Charles le Brun. *Expressions des passions de l'Ame*. (Admiration, Sadness, Anger, Desire.)
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gallica Bibliothèque Numérique.

While Lisboa seems to tread a path between the modern and archaic conceptions of the passions, it is productive in this case to consider the word in its earlier meaning, as something that affects human beings, that imposes itself, that blinds them, that forces them out of themselves and their nature, that turns them into mad, possessed creatures.

Lisboa's reflections on the passions as deviant and deforming draw directly upon Aristotelian ideas. In the second volume of *Constituição Moral*, he addresses his young readers, reminding them that "Conscience" should make itself a "Voice of Nature," carrying out the "Moral Order," which should be the infallible guide to action. The author continues:

...the *physical monsters* are not the exemplars of creation, nor should they be deemed *models of nature*. Aristotle rightly says "that which is natural,

should be considered among the things that operate according to their perfect state, and not among those in which one finds corruption.” The savages are the monsters of the human Species, who even deform their physiognomy. (Lisboa 2: 93)

The deviation described here refers to the inobservance of nature, in defiance of the greatest teaching of Aristotelian ethics.

Immediately following this passage, Lisboa plunges into a theological discussion on the savage, that first and most tragic deviation of human beings, in order to suggest, perhaps in keeping with the tenets of the Second Scholasticism, that the instincts and emotions of Humanity were not completely extinguished in savage peoples. From this follows the possibility of a type of *redemption of the savage through a civilizing message*, even if the savage is not the tabula rasa that it was, for example, for one of the first Jesuits, Manuel da Nóbrega. The redemption of the savage through the civilizing message is the end, perhaps the backbone of Lisboa’s preaching. Novais and Jobson note the clearly *missionary* aspect of his work (19), an aspect all the more curious in light of the fact that Lisboa, like any good graduate of a reformed, post-Pombal University of Coimbra, was a steadfast anti-Jesuit.

But what merits focus, in this line of argument, is the idea of savagery as a deviation of nature; a deviation that terrifies every lover of order, as is the case with Lisboa and many of his nineteenth-century contemporaries in Latin America. In *Constituição Moral*, Lisboa frequently associates the danger of deviation with the catastrophe of Santo Domingo; the fear that the savagery of Toussaint Louverture’s followers would repeat itself south of the Equator (what historians later termed the “Hatianism” of the elites,) permeates the text.²

Though his writings perhaps reveal staunch, *avant la lettre* “abolitionist” tendencies, we note that Lisboa’s real fear was the possibility that an “Ethiopia,” or in his own words, a “Nigrícia,” would be established in Brazil. The issue is exactly the *deviation from nature* that arises with this establishment of an Ethiopia in Brazil, with the intrusion of the black element. Lisboa poses a strange question in defense of an end to the slave trade:

It is as if the Europeans had not seen in this the most enormous violation of the Cosmological Order, for had not the Ruler of the Universe separated the African and American Continents by almost or more than one thousand leagues? How had they not perceived on the political horizon the danger in the extinction of the Puritan progeny, necessary effect of the progressive accumulation of smoldering coals, that later would erupt in flames in the Queen of the Antilles? (5: 85-101)

Directly following this passage, Lisboa proposes that Brazil model itself on the United States and extinguish the traffic that had introduced the “Barbaric Cancer.” It is crucial to note here that in the richness of these images, notwithstanding their ominous character, Lisboa seems to reveal himself as a writer exactly at the moment his words allow themselves to be overwhelmed with a normative power that, almost instantaneously, converts itself into a punitive power. As strange as it may seem, I suggest that as Lisboa’s writing becomes more authoritarian and prejudiced, it also becomes more aesthetically powerful. Perhaps this is because he allows himself to be caught up in the passion of writing, which in his case is a political passion for a rigid hierarchy of spirit and duties.

My second point is the organic imaginary that appears to grow from this “Barbaric Cancer,” or rather, from the sickness caused by the uncivilized element that can abruptly seize power of the body, corrupting the social fabric. At this moment the passions—the old Greek *páthoi*—transform themselves into the diverse *pathologies* of the organism. The path from Le Brun to Giovanni Battista della Porta and Cesare Lombroso is a long and tortuous one, but the depiction of the deviant individual in the criminological imagination closely mirrors the *physiognomonie* that marks Le Brun’s signs of deviation in the human face itself. In the nineteenth century, we witness the birth of modern sociology as a discourse of order, a time of the search for and discovery of correctives for social pathology. Lisboa, although perhaps never having read Auguste Comte, borrowed the topic of the “social physics” from scientific discourse precisely in order to point up the correct organization for the collective body, that is, the definition of the correct *nature* of society, with deviation controlled within in its proper term and limit.

An examination of a cross section of Lisboa's argument reveals, once again, that his philanthropic defense of the end of the slave trade has more to do with the fear caused by the black presence than merely with humanitarianism. Building upon this fear, Lisboa would imagine a combination of the Haitian Revolution, that (for him) horrific deviation from the natural order, and the French Revolution, which, as a good reader and even translator of Edmund Burke, Lisboa considered the largest and most calamitous modern catastrophe. It is interesting to note that he found space to recreate, in the actual text, the formidable and monstrous evil of this double revolution:

The catastrophe of the Queen of the Antilles, and, in a manner of speaking, the Metamorphosis of the Leeward Islands in New Nigricia, against the Cosmological System, and the Demarcation of the inhabitants of Earth, according to the declaration of the Apostle of the Peoples in the Acts of the Apostles, are *Evils* all, that go against all calculus, and that have resulted from the madness of the Enthusiasts of the French Revolution, who ordained in the National Assembly, in a moment of vertigo, the Decree immediately freeing the slaves. Those *Architects of Ruins* cried out: "Let the Colonies perish to save our principles from perishing." (3: 98-99)

This is quite a rich passage. It is worth highlighting here a slightly slanted understanding of St. Paul's message, which appears frequently in this work. The author relies on St. Paul's Epistles as his principal intertext precisely because of the force of their message regarding the Lost City and the Whore of Babylon, a biblical image that vividly evokes the revolutionary Paris of 1789. The Epistles then are a civilizing message directed against urban decadence. Nevertheless, the universalizing aspect of St. Paul's sermon is completely lost when Lisboa inserts the patriotic demarcation of boundaries between peoples: Africans there, "us" here.

Furthermore, the image of the revolutionaries as architects of destruction conjures up Lisboa's constant criticism of the Masons as "architects of ruins."³ *Constituição Moral* begins with a passage from Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which the good plant of Christian civilization

grows in the soil of the ruins of the Roman Empire. The analogy is plausible: Rome, the sinful city, allows itself to be supplanted by the new Christian civilization. Paris, scene of revolutionary barbarism, offers a frame of perdition against which (and after its destruction) will arise a new civilization, this time in the tropics, but recovering the foundations and good constructions of Antiquity. This would also be, notably, an architecture against the time of revolution.

As we have seen, the revolution as *deviation of order* is, above all, a physical question. Lisboa continually weaves palpable, forceful images into his argument, and these images are frequently organic in nature. It is no coincidence, then, that one of the principal villains for this careful reader of Latin and Greek should be the philosopher Epicurus. Epicurian philosophy suggests that the moment of deviation and the impossibility of predetermining what the world will be in the next moment preserve liberty. After Epicurus, one dares to imagine a physics of infinite worlds and therefore infinite possibilities. In fact, Lisboa's Scholastic universe and all of its political architecture (the architecture of a perfecting city), would not resist the world of the "slight deviations" suggested by Epicurus and passed down to us through Diogenes Laertius's Latin text.

In the following beautiful passage from *Constituição moral*, Revolution, as deviation from the correct nature of the social body, associates itself undoubtedly with the name of Epicurus:

One of the greatest evils of the Revolutions is the relaxation of subordinating ties, of the duty of regular and patient work that belonged to the industrious classes, in its place giving individuals insolent presumptions to overstep their proper sphere (Mirabeau, one of the more bilious Leaders of France's Revolutionary Cabal, preached that we should punish in the rich the crimes of the poor, as their ultimate cause), and of, in the place of each worker having the rightful competitiveness to vie for price and workmanship in his craft among his equals, and (in a manner of speaking) achieve the excellence and elevation of mastery and status in his respective class, through the preeminence of his ability and dexterity; instead the workers recklessly hurl themselves into the chaotic vacuum of disordered ambition for political sovereignty, more brazen and disoriented than Epicurus's

atoms in the immensity of space, or of water molecules reduced from saltpeter to vapor by the explosion of gun powder. (5: 19-20)

There looms on the horizon of the Revolution a veritable Epicurean powder keg, a sufficiently eloquent image as to suggest that reason was lost in deviation and order perished in the face of chaos. Note in this passage that the *individuals*—who in liberal reasoning should occupy themselves with their rightful abilities or “trades,” (*mesteres* in the original Portuguese, in this significant lexical intrusion of the archaic into the discursive fabric of a liberalism with modern pretensions), suddenly lose themselves in the world of the city, the universe of the *polis*, of politics: they “recklessly hurl themselves into the chaotic vacuum of disordered ambition for political sovereignty, more brazen and disoriented than Epicurus’s atoms in the immensity of space, or of water molecules reduced from saltpeter to vapor by the explosion of gun powder.” What sets off this terrible explosion—the very image of Revolution—is the ambition and disorientation of the atoms.

Cicero translated Epicurus’s *atoms* into the Latin *individua* (Kany-Turpin 470). The translation is precise: *atom* is the *individual*, that which is indivisible. But in a text written for the foundation of an empire, with the nineteenth century well under way, and set against the French and Haitian Revolutions, the political charge of this word—*individual*—is unequivocal. The drama ignites at this terrible moment when the individual, the atom, dares deviate from his original trajectory. We know that deviation, from the Epicurean point of view, occurs in the encounter with the void, with the vacuum, with emptiness. Nothing is more contrary to civilization (which is the essence of *construction*) than emptiness, or the void that threatens all edification.

In studying Lisboa’s text and its rich intertextual web, we might ask what was so fascinating and terrible in this abyss of dissolution as to obsess a man who so firmly pronounced the discourse of order. As we follow the path opened by the text, we find that Lisboa’s order becomes, within the plan of organic metaphors in which he operates, the very homeostasis to which the body returns *after a shock*; that reverses, or altogether avoids, the corruption of the fabric and decomposition of the body. The idea of a “feverish shock” suggests that

civilization draws strength from, even requires and feeds on, this fear of deviation—an inaugural idea of classical French sociology.

In a last quotation, I cite an excerpt from the *Sermons* of the Scottish moralist Hugh Blair, from the eighteenth century, that Lisboa translates and cites in his *Moral Constitution*:

The divine hand is ... apparent in the ... effects which it is appointed to produce to nations and societies. When wars and commotions shake the earth when factions rage, and intestine divisions embroil kingdoms that before were flourishing, Providence seems, at first view, to have abandoned public affairs to the misrule of human passions. Yet from the midst of this confusion order is often made to spring; and from these mischiefs lasting advantages to arise. By such convulsions, nations are roused from that dangerous lethargy into which flowing wealth, long peace, and growing effeminacy of manners had sunk them. They are awakened to discern their true interests; and taught to take proper measures for security and defense against all their foes. Inveterate prejudices are corrected; and latent sources of danger are discovered. Public spirit is called forth; and larger views of national happiness are formed. The corruptions to which every government is liable, are often rectified by a ferment in the political body, as noxious humors made against a wise and well-established civil constitution tend in the issue to strengthen it; and the disorders of licentiousness and faction, teach men more highly to prize the blessings of tranquility and legal protection. (2: 84-85)

In closing, a deliberately anachronistic leap perhaps allows for a clarification of the power and the poetics of Lisboa's discourse on order. I was originally writing this article in 2001, when I came across one of the beautiful yet terrible photographs of 9/11 by Edward Keating, who would later win a Pulitzer prize, and whose pictures can be seen on his website. I was reading *The New York Times* online, when one of Keating's photographs, in which firemen walk through the debris of the Twin Towers a few days after the attack, caught my attention. The floodlights instilled a phantasmagoric quality, and the battle, we sadly knew at that point, was fought against emptiness, against the void.

The firefighters were agents of order that literally emerged from the ruins of a civilization. We might even say that in the poetic and terrible construction of that image, the human beings that seek to reinstate order not only work against the ruins but also grow from them.

The coincidences were unsettling. The online caption of the American newspaper read: “Firefighters on the rubble two days after the collapse of the twin towers. Gradually, a rhythm descended upon the rescue efforts and order emerged from chaos.” Let us here stress this *descent* that almost approaches a blessing: “a rhythm *descended upon...*” If we remember the providential aspect (divine, or natural?) of the shock necessary to the proper maintenance of the body, then the affinity with the moralizing discourse of the eighteenth century prompts further thought.

It is not appropriate, perhaps, to risk a sustained, anachronistic analysis, but the suggestion of the possible poetic richness of conservative discourses remains, especially when they avail themselves of organic and medical metaphors to reaffirm the integrity of the body politic against the threat of disintegration. This threat is itself a necessary specter haunting all construction of a civilizing discourse. In summary, my suggestion is that we read Lisboa and the other conservatives with more care. Perhaps we have much more in common with them than we are able to or would like to admit.⁴

Notes

¹ José da Silva Lisboa would be granted the title of viscount of Cairu in 1826. (Monteiro, 35)

² An interesting passage from *Constituição Moral*, cited only partially here, suggests a good path for future research. In a brief recounting of the transatlantic saga of the Africans, the slave ships appear as “undulating tombs,” and the captive slaves as figures in a phantasmagoria that waste away and wither like “shriveled skeletons, and walking sepulchers.” Here, Cairu perhaps foreshadows some well-known topics of Brazilian Romantic poetry (Lisboa 5: 85-101).

³ Lisboa’s principle adversary is Gonçalves Ledo. On the author’s relation with the Masons, and his role in the turbulent arena of political discussions of the 1820s in Brazil, see Lustosa, *Cairu, panfletário* and *Insultos impressos*.

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