

## THE DELIRIUM OF SPACE, IN *THE BOOK OF JOHN*, BY ROSÁRIO FUSCO

### O DELÍRIO DO ESPAÇO EM *O LIVRO DE JOÃO*, DE ROSÁRIO FUSCO

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**Abstract:** *The Book of John* (*O livro de João*), published in 1944, is the second fictional work by the Brazilian author Rosario Fusco. John is the protagonist of the story. He narrates from a first-person point of view the reminiscences of a certain time of his life marked by unusual facts. John is accused of being the lover of an unknown woman, Carmélia, by her husband. He attempts to save himself by telling stories and realizes that there are correspondences between the images created by his imagination and his real situation. No accident, John initiates the narrative of his recollections describing the spaces of his home and his workplace. In the Fusquian fiction, the spaces are very important and requires a topoanalysis. Therefore, we intend to study the space of the novel *The Book of John* comparing it to surrealist ideas and conceptions, since this analysis reveals in the Fusquian prose, among other things, the predomination of the urban spaces, the relation between certain spaces and the psychological condition of the protagonist, the irruption of randomness, the existence of correspondences between the internal (subjective) and external (objective) space, all of which are common features of the surrealist narrative.

**Keywords:** Rosário Fusco; Brazilian literature; space; surrealism.

**RESUMO:** *O livro de João*, publicado em 1944, é a segunda obra ficcional do mineiro Rosário Fusco. João é o protagonista da história e aquele que narra, em primeira pessoa, as reminiscências de um certo período de sua vida marcado por acontecimentos insólitos. Acusado de ser amante de uma mulher que ele não conhece, Carmélia, pelo marido dela, inventa histórias para salvar sua pele e passa a constatar a existência de correspondências entre as imagens criadas pela sua imaginação e a situação real, objetiva. Não por acaso, João inicia o relato de suas reminiscências descrevendo o espaço onde morava e trabalhava. Na ficção fusquiiana, os espaços são de grande importância e solicitam a topoanálise. Assim, nos propomos aproximar, por meio do estudo do espaço, a prosa fusquiiana *de O livro de João*, das ideias e concepções surrealistas, uma vez que a topoanálise revela, entre outras coisas, o predomínio dos espaços urbanos, a relação entre determinados espaços e a condição psicológica do protagonista, a irrupção do acaso, a existência de correspondências entre o espaço de dentro (subjetivo) e os espaços de fora (objetivo), características comuns à narrativa surrealista.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Rosário Fusco; literatura brasileira; espaço; surrealismo.

The book of John, published in 1944, is the second fictional work of Rosario Fusco, writer from the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. The unusual, the conflict between desire and morality, the individual and society, the

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fragmentation of the protagonist, the boundary barely delimited between the imagination, the daydream and the reality and the acid irony are traces found in this work and common in almost all Fusco's prose. Biblical references, always present, could not be more explicit here.

The book of John is a book about virtue, love, eternal life, yet, for being marked by a series of ideas and surrealist conceptions, presents itself like the reverse of the apostle's book.

### **The encounter with the unusual**

Our protagonist, John, is the narrator who feels the need to scavenge his memory in search of (re)constructing very striking facts of his life:

These reminiscences begin on an October day when I was accused of being Carmelia's lover by her own husband (FUSCO, 1944, p.9)<sup>2</sup>.

On that October day, John, when arriving in the hostel room where he lived, was surprised by an armed man feeling dishonored and accusing him of being his wife Carmelia's lover. The point is that John did not know any Carmelia. The narrator proposes to recall this capital encounter with the supposedly betrayed husband, Moreira, and the series of events that have followed - since then - and have introduced him into the field of the unusual<sup>3</sup>. In the face of such an attempt, how can we not think of André Breton's *Nadja*? "I intend to narrate [...] only the remarkable episodes of my life [...] to the extent that it is confined to chances" (BRETON, 2007: 27).

The place where John lived and worked is presented, in the first paragraph of the book, in order to insinuate the importance of the spaces in the constitution of the own character.

At that time I worked in a clinical laboratory that was in the middle of a prostitution zone, near my house. This one, constituted of two floors, was a solid imperial construction, wide walls, majestic façade (p.9).

Space plays a very important role in Fusco's prose as well as in the surrealist's. For Breton, it is fundamental to the narrator, who turns his eyes back because memory is the impossibility of faithful reconstruction of the past

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<sup>2</sup>All references to the work under analysis will only appear with the page indication.

<sup>3</sup>Unusual refers here to everything that is perceived as abnormal within a coherent, continuous and predictable becoming.

and space comes to his aid. Its importance is not due to the fact that space is an immovable, silent testimony of the past and therefore reliable, but because it allows compensating for forgetfulness. The memory and the image of a place clarify the synthesis of the immemorial, since memory and imagination work together. However, it asks the narrator to mingle with the history of the place, or of the places. For this reason, Breton thinks that it is impossible to take the architectural structures of the city as solely physical and considers them as privileged structures because they make more conscious what makes us oscillate as much as what gives us balance<sup>4</sup>.

John emphasizes the qualities of the place where he lived: solid imperial construction with wide walls and majestic façade. The Brazilian imperial architecture was born of a historical process related to the French invasion in Lusitanian territory, to the moving of the Portuguese royal family in 1808 to Brazil, to the yet shy process of urbanization of our cities, and, later, in 1826, to the foundation, in Rio de Janeiro, of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. It was the neoclassical style that ruled the architecture of the largest cities of the Imperial Brazil. A style characterized, above all, by constructive clarity, formal simplicity, symmetry, and pastel colors, which aspired to be an example of beauty and virtue. The fact is that the non self that protects the Self carries many values at the same time because "the sheltered being sensitizes boundaries of its shelter. It lives the house in its reality and virtuality through thoughts and dreams" (BACHELARD, 1978, p.200). Thus, the image of the palace, described by John,

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<sup>4</sup>In Pont Neuf, Breton (1979, pp. 280-1) reflects on the reasons that lead an individual, not impelled by an external necessity, to return, during his life, to the same places of a city. Precisely because Paris is an old city and, therefore, with a rich past, the surrealist attributes to the places a trans-historical character. The phenomenon of trans-historicity concerns every space that bears witness to many historical events. The decoding of the symbolic content of places demands work analogous to that of the archaeologist; it is necessary to "excavate" so that its historical stratification will be revealed. However, in the absence of material evidence, the imagination of the individual who remembers is requested and mixes with the history of the place, and this, in turn, provides the encounter with the past, the present and the future. We can

say that the place has a triple personality, because it is tributary of the History, of a singular history (its history) and invested with knowledge that the individual, who calls him in the work of reconstructing his past, will only have access to its meaning a posteriori. Breton's reflections on the trans-historical character of places are sparse in the cluster of his prose work: *Nadja* (2007), *Amor louco* (1971), *Arcano 17* (1986).

houses the dreams of the first nest: secure and solid. And by analogy, we can say that John saw himself as a measured, discreet, conservative man. But the time of Imperial Brazil had already passed and the mansion, transformed into a hostel, near the zone of prostitution, represented the decay of all that the construction one day represented. "There [sic], the only modernity was the deplorable walls of badly painted boards, subdividing, for greater income, the countless rooms distributed on a whim, in the prediction of many guests" (p. 9).

John's room was on the ground floor of the "solid imperial building"; to get there, he had to cross a courtyard and sometimes he "felt a strange sensation" while hearing his steps resounding in time (p.10). The "steps resounding in time" refer to the time that is "continuum where past, present and future are to be found" (KOOPMANN, 1996, p.46) and they point out that the image of the space in which John lived reveals his virtuous past, his decadent present and his future: the collapse into vice. And John's fall would begin on that day of October.

In the face of the stranger, who was armed and accusing him, the fear, the immeasurable terror that at first seized John, was soon replaced by something "strange, scorching" that rose up to his throat. Seconds later he burst out laughing and invented an alibi. How could he be Carmelia's lover if he was attracted to the young man who works with him as a servant in the laboratory? It would all have begun on a day when the silence and emptiness of the laboratory glasses where John worked would have suddenly given way to the realization that the young servant was the bearer of singular beauty: voice and feminine outlines. And the chemical reaction that John prepared was accompanied by a reaction felt in his own body: "trembling fingers, voice more or less choked, the blood scalding in his veins" (p.17). John requested the dishonored husband to rethink the serious accusation against his wife; invented arguments, composed the oddest situations, such as the conflict he had in relation to the boy: the age difference, the jealousy he felt for him, the unbridled

passion... all to save his skin. And while confessing his "misery for the first time," he turned the accuser into his confidant. Moreira, the supposedly betrayed husband, was moved by the sincere tone of John's words; he seemed another man, talked about himself: married man, photographer, two kids. From then on, John connected to him and, later, to his wife.

The next day, when questioning the doorman of the hostel where he lived, John discovered what had really happened on that day that marked his life. In his absence, the hostel room was relocated to "discreet" wharf and, therefore, the doorman had left Moreira come in. Besides that, the man was looking for some "John". Outraged by what he heard from the doorman and fearing that Moreira might come back and find out his lies, John decided he would move.

This random chance, generated by the coincidence between the name "John" (Moreira asked the doorman arbitrarily for "John", he could have said "Joseph") had been succeeded by two more strange events. After the dialogue with the doorman, John, who took the street on his way to the laboratory, saw the lab servant coming down from the tram and, in astonishment, began to notice the existence of correspondences between the images created by his imagination and the real objective situation: "When I saw him, I felt, in fact, everything that I imaginatively [sic] described to the photographer" (p. 21) then he was interrupted by a man who addressed him the following words: "— Look here fellow: you were the only one who saw. Let's 'split' the profit "(p 22). This new random chance caused John to involuntarily connect with another photographer (a thief, a trickster who would become a murderer to the supposed lover of his cohabiting partner) and his wife. The successions of random chances indicate the protagonist's fate<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Random Chance is one of the possibilities of manifestation of the unusual. To perceive the unusual is to perceive the distance or difference between what is predicted and what is given. For the surrealists, the unusual, in promoting the difference between the predicted and the given situation is positive, because it implicitly carries a "solution" to the problem. However, this "solution", "by reason of its very nature, could not prevent us by means of ordinary logics" (CHÉNIEUXGENDRON, 2014, p. 145). It will always be an excessive solution because it is

strictly adapted and therefore superior to the needs. For the surrealists, the superiority of discovery, the result of random chance, is very expensive because it is the superiority of non-logic over logic, it is the power of the unpredictable.

### **The Conflict**

At the new hostel, John soon gained the owner's sympathy and confidence. It was no different with the room neighbor, a retired clerk. Avid reader, the neighbor was aware of an article, published in a journal years ago, authored by John, about the social function of the pharmacist. The complimentary comment on the article began a friendly relationship between them, and we, the readers, are surprised by the following revelation from the narrator:

This was our first contact, of which my pride was fully satisfied. Not that I had literary whims. But for verifying that the lines I wrote, without the slightest pretense, found a suitable field. I liked, I always liked, to compare the writer's mission with that of a man who sows in a stony field: and the clerk came to furnish me, as an order, the proof of this (p.42).

Satisfied with the beginning of the new friendship, John synthesized his life trajectory for the clerk: from Minas Gerais State, thirty-nine years old, single, a pharmacist who lived in the capital for eleven years, and when he arrived there, he worked as a newspaper reviewer, as a teacher, and for a certain period he was responsible for a small suburban pharmacy. Other facets of John, among them the one that relates to his taste for writing, we come to know.

On a typical Sunday day, a sudden impulse took John to the Mass. "It was the first time in thirty years that this desire came to me like this, without any preliminary adjustment, without consulting my current convictions" (p. 45). At the Mass, the "breeze gently stirred the flames of the altar candles" (p. 46) and John's thoughts. It came to him that when he was a teenager his parents wanted him to be "a laborer in the vineyard of the Lord" (p. 46) and lamented that, in the face of the latest events, his life was destined for vice even though it had come to him through virtue:

What compensation does virtue receive, exemplary behavior? A phrase that is heard, an occurrence that is invented and a whole destiny conforms to that. Moreira received betrayals in exchange [sic] for love. He [sic] wanted to kill me: I opened my

mouth, I lied, I involved the reputation of a third party in my defense and I was able to ease him [...] He left [sic] the bedroom positive of her fidelity: This benefit cost me, conversely, a confused feeling (p. 46-47).

In an attempt to save his innocent skin and restore dignity to Moreira, John changed, like lightning, from virtuous to vicious. At least that was how he came to consider his life. His encounter with Moreira, and the consequences of it, did not leave his mind.

### **The encounter with the tragic**

Fearing another surprise visit from her husband who thought had been betrayed and thinking about saving, he thought it would be best to share the room with someone. He waited anxiously for the day when the roommate would arrive, a company would do him good. And behold, the day came when the bed beside his was occupied: his roommate was a dying old man.

The room was taking on the features of the dying man: dark, damp, gloomy. And John was absorbing the problems, the anguish of the people who became, by chance, connected to him. He reflected on the mystery that involuntarily linked him to these people (all linked to stories of love and betrayal) and from which revelation such a mystery would be the bearer. He felt a little responsible for maintaining the rest of his roommate's life. For a while, the laboratory servant went to his room because he was assigned to administer daily injections to the dying man, but he chose to leave the laboratory to focus on his study, and the injections were applied to the old man by John himself.

The change of the living space of John also altered the internal dispositions of the protagonist narrator. He felt more and more confused and needed to be freed from the seduction he attributed to the young laboratory servant. The attraction he felt for the boy was, according to him, the punishment inflicted by the story he invented. John considered himself; A cynic, an amoral, a vagrant, and began to be consumed by conflicts of a moral order. And because he believed that every word, every gesture, every intention was submitted to the final judgment, began to fear and to suffer. He said to himself: "Only those who feel guilty aspire to salvation" (p. 109). John had left his shell of imperial house and felt transformed, discovering himself to be another.

From the unity of the body we are hurriedly brought into the unity of the soul, although we may harbor many consciences, and that their vows may well place in us two opposing ideas in the condition of a tie (BRETON 1988: 234)

John's trajectory, from beginning to end, is in full agreement with the Bretonian conception of irreducible but dynamic subjectivity that is defined in his acts<sup>6</sup>. And a shock is enough, an impulse or a transgression to disorganize the provisional balance, to balance the apparent solidity of a building erected under the "good values", the "good manners", to crack its walls by opening a chink through which the individual will look for another level of poise. John's foundations are shaken from two encounters: first, as we discussed, with the unusual, and then with Eros.

One day, John was introduced by Moreira to Carmélia. The narrator describes her as elegant and attractive and was attracted to her. John became more and more confused: the images of the young man and of Moreira's wife merged, confused in each other. Desires in full bloom, began to be softened by alcohol. John unbridled himself. The attraction to the woman of the one who had become his friend was interpreted as yet another punishment; however, this attraction made him feel alive, he emphasized.

The encounter with the unusual had worked as a kind of stimulus, of appeal to desire. Desire, "reactivated by stimuli, reactivates them [...] in a flexible reciprocal docility"<sup>7</sup> (CHÉNIEUX-GENDRON, 2014, p. 144), guaranteeing the sensation of "feeling alive" and the exercise of a mysterious intersubjectivity. But if, on one hand, John felt alive, his roommate, the dying man, became more and more, in the narrator's words, a "rubble man."

One night, returning to the hostel after some binge drinking, John remembered a popular proverb: "Anyone who sees a house does not see a resident" (p. 122). And immediately he questioned the proverb:

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<sup>6</sup>John is not the only character in the whole of Fuschian prose to deny the idea that there is in the subject a timeless essence, a precious core that needs to be preserved from every external solicitation. On the contrary, its protagonists correspond to the Breton idea that the individual is pure movement that defines itself in time and in a singular way.



<sup>7</sup>All translations by our authorship.

"They say the walls do not feel: but they hear, they feel, and they feel themselves, they live "(122). John seemed to predict what was waiting for him: the roommate's situation had worsened, and the room felt the presence of death. After the death of the roommate, John notes that the hostel "had no relations with the others, was not nice" (p.130). This space could not have relations with the other houses, with other external spaces, but it has close relation with another space, with John's interior. The house sheltered relations between adulterers, traitors, sinners, vicious, victims and accomplices, in a close correspondence between John, his "friends" brought by the wind of chance and his fate. John's interior space was analogous to the house and, above all, his dark alcove where mysterious forces rested ready to overflow, to free themselves, as the dying man freed himself from suffering with the arrival of death.

In fact, death stalked John since the arrival of the dying roommate, as if he were announcing the symbolic death of a John, fearful of the judgment of God and men, and the birth of another one, a fearless John. And the death of the companion revealed, to the narrator / protagonist, the tragic dimension of life: "Death was horrible for the indifference of the world" (p. 124), John affirms, on the other hand, frees the individual from all guilt because the self, the other, the others, no longer matter:

The end of the world, the outside world, is expected from minute to minute. [...] What do I care what they say about me since I do not know who speaks, to whom I speak and in what interest of this do we speak? I forgot [...] I forgot [...] all the best and the worst things that happened to me [...] only indifference is admirable (BRETON, 1970, p. 15).

Indifference occupies a prominent place in Breton's reflection because, according to the Surrealist, "the terrible psychology", heir / exponent of western dualism, considers only two states of our emotions, good and evil, and therefore leaves indifference aside. And this is precisely why indifference is beyond the control of the world's balance. It is in the condition of indifference, says Breton, "that I try to practice my memory, to fables without morality, to neutral impressions, to incomplete statistics" (BRETON, 1970, p. 15-6).

The reflection on the tragic dimension of life is accompanied by another, the one that everything is related: the destiny of one is linked to the destiny of another; one simple object, like a clock (given as a present to the young servant), connected him to an event that never happened, which would never happen (a love affair between them).

In this passage, the external space is once again related to John's inner space, but to express another John (or the other of John), rebellious, fearless, indifferent, who takes time in his hands: "there isn't ever [time] because the time is mine, it lives in me, inside me, in a place where there are no walls separating the present from the past and the past from the future, where everything is linked, because everything was born connected with the world" (p. 135). The walls — improvised of boards that separated the rooms of the pensioners in the old imperial house where John lived — as if separating the various Johns, collapsed.

### **Eros and the delirium of space**

After the death of his roommate, John moved to Moreira's home, a suburban family home, with flowers on the porch. He was treated as if he were one of the family and played a crucial role in the couple's relationship: he worked as a ground cord that prevented the shock, the conflicts between the husband who, because of his wife's betrayal, betrayed her, and the perfect wife, even in her discretion of her possible (and never proved) adulterous life.

At Moreira's request, John began to carry the urine of Carmélia to the laboratory on a monthly basis to submit it to the pregnancy examination. The first time, mixed emotions blended in the test tube where Moreira's wife's urine was to be analyzed. John reports the impossibility of describing, with exactness, the pleasure he felt when he came into contact with the smell that exhaled from the urine of his friend's wife. He was overcome by a torpor he had already experienced (in his imagination) in relation to the servant, but now, he admitted, it was much more intense what he felt. In the laboratory, John wondered if the

urine would amount to the false love story between him and the boy? The alchemical transformation took place in him, John, as in the test tube.

The months passed and with them the attraction and interest of John for Carmelia grew. The discomfort of the situation and the suffering it caused him were stamped on his face. He told half-truth to Moreira: he was madly in love with a woman, but he did not know if it was requited. The friend not only celebrated and told the novelty to the wife as he believed to be responsible for the "transformation" of the friend, since he guided him through the good way of the brothels of life.

Many doubts hovered in John's mind: did Carmelia know of his feelings? Why did she ignore it? Would she have lovers?

John decides to explain his feelings to Carmelia, but how to do it if his desire, like a lightning bolt, struck him without prior consultation? He wondered if what was to stop him was not just desire itself? And he responded to himself by saying that his hesitation came not only from desire, but from ignorance of the reaction of the object.

One night, during the customary card game with the whole family of the couple, inebriated with the breathing and the breath of Carmelia, who was sitting next to him, John pretended to wipe his forehead with one hand while the other was disappointed with the leg (of Carmelia) who fled from it. However, that evening Carmelia asked for the cookery book promised by John and arranged for a meeting the next day at the downtown bakery to receive the promised book. But the meeting only took place in John's imagination and, frustrated, he ran through all the bars that night.

A few days later, in the dead of night and in the expected absence of Moreira, John already in his pajamas heard "her voice, drawn, sensual:" - Come "(219). Doubt paralyzed John; was she calling him, Moreira or the supposed lover? John's initiative to enter the room of the couple was soon interrupted with the arrival of Moreira and, in the sequence, the malaise that struck Carmélia.

Moreira's house was far from the city, closer to nature. Sometimes John opened the bedroom window and stared up at the sky. Far from downtown, John was farther and farther away from his gravitational center. To paraphrase Andre Breton (1970, p.14), we can say: "Here, the magnetized needle has gone mad." Fed up with insinuating himself to Carmelia, fed up with her insinuations and accusations that he would not be a man to overflow and under the command of the Eros uprising, John is disturbed by the delirium of space<sup>8</sup>: "the Self seeks to get hold of the Other, without dialectizing his relationship with him" (Chenieux-Gendron, 2014, p.146). His folly, a few days after hearing "come", is expressed as follows:

I was loose on the tops of the earth, between unknown gases and dust, parallels and meridians, scratching my head in the constellations. I tested my hands in the tropics and walked on skates in the wires of the polar circles, intimate of the stars, without witnesses and without connections (p.272)<sup>9</sup>

John is absorbed by this cosmic image. He, who at the beginning of his history inhabited the ground floor, at the end, felt his feet moving away from the Earth, and as they walked away from it, John allowed himself to invade the open, unlimited space. It was night and, as usual, Moreira was not at home and John was transfigured:

I was another positively when I entered the alcove. Standing in the doorway, Carmelia gazed at me, calm, as if she did not believe me to be there, pale, eyes injected, trembling voice. [...] As calmly as possible, after minutes of undisturbed silence, she asked me if I needed anything [...] I was treated with [...] an intimate defensive indifference to her, disconcerting to me. [...] The slapping boomed in the room with a bang [...] With one blow, I would take her in my arms, my hand on her mouth so she would not scream [...] I could not stop going on with the action that had begun, and I continued [...] without mercy (p. 276-7).

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<sup>8</sup>It is in a passage of *Crazy Love*, by André Breton (1971), in which the author refers to an episode of *Nouvelle Justine*, of the Marquis de Sade, that we find the expression of what we consider "delirium of space": "One day when I was watching Etna, whose breast vomited flames, I felt the desire to be this volcano ..." (SADE apud BRETON, 1971, 122). According to Breton (idem), "the invocation of Etna ... is intended to highlight the figure of the chemist Amani" who together with the hero Jérôme want to perpetuate evil in close collaboration with nature. Thus, the "delirium of space" refers to the absorption of man by nature through a crime.

<sup>9</sup>The similarity between this passage from *The Book of John* and that of "La Mort Rose" by André Breton confirms once again that Rosario Fusco was a reader of Breton and a bricoleur of ideas: "You will see the horizon open and everything will be over with a sudden kiss of space. But the fear will no longer exist and the tiles of the sky and the sea. They will fly in the wind stronger than us" (BRETON apud CHÉNIEUX-GENDRON, 2014, p.150).

John, under Eros's rules, kills Carmelia by suffocating her with a pillow. He joined nature to destroy the cause of his uprising and storm - Carmelia. About this union with nature, by means of evil Breton (1971: 123) asks: "we have to know if this is not another way, the most crazy and indisputable, to love."

It was Eros who breathed life into John's lungs and led him to transgress his limits and to launch himself in the search for indivisible love: "he who does not separate lovers and, above all, does not separate himself into hatred and love" (CHENAYUX-GENDRON, 2014, p. 151), on the contrary, the one who does not know such a dichotomy.

The book of John, besides revealing characteristics common to the surrealist account - the predominance of urban spaces, the relation between spaces and the psychological condition of the protagonist, the irruption of random chance, the existence of "correspondences" between the space within (subjective) and the spaces of outside (objective) and between people and objects, — it also reveals itself as metafiction. In the last pages, the reader understands that in telling his story, John writes his book. Thus, John's drama, his conflicts, the impossibility of controlling his own life, are also the problems of that John who writes, who launches himself into "literary space"<sup>2</sup>. Finally, he delegates to us, readers, the final judgment about his trajectory, whose fall is also the ascent to the heavens and whose account is the bet on eternal life.

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<sup>2</sup> On the metafiction in Fuschian prose and the Blanchotian concept (BLANCHOT, 1987) of "literary space", it does not suit here, within the limited scope of this article, to go beyond mere observation.

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Received February 10, 2017  
Accepted March 20, 2017