

Action and Death in *Othello* and *Dom Casmurro*

Bajonas Teixeira de Brito Junior

In this essay, I will consider the relationship between two literary works: *Othello* by Shakespeare, and *Dom Casmurro* by Machado de Assis. I cannot emphasize enough the risks of such an arbitrary endeavor. Along with the temporal distance separating the two works, and the differences between the cultural references and the narrative genres, there seems to be sufficient reason to discourage the comparison. In favor of this project, let us say we do not intend anything more than to reach, by contrast, a certain reciprocal enlightenment between the two works. In this case, the distance itself helps emphasize the contrast even more. It is without question that an even greater difficulty could appear; namely, the fact that a contrast cannot be made in the absence of a shared space. Therefore, it would be necessary to establish the prerogatives of a certain familiar place, and to circumscribe them properly, before it will be possible for us to outline contrasts and divergences.

Machado's novel's own narrative introduces a certain kinship to *Othello* in chapter 135, entitled "Othello": Bento enters in Shakespeare's scene as spectator. While he is watching a performance of *Othello*, he is absorbed thinking over his jealousy and reviewing allusions of Cupitu's possible guilt. Moreover, as it could not be any other way, the drama itself places a counter argument in front of Bento's own eyes, calling into question his disturbed spirit. As in other places, the voice of reason shows here its powerlessness, thus, in a certain way, it is against *Othello*'s message, if the work carries on messages at all: it is in spite of evidence that the husband is going to draw his conclusions. Thus, in a fragment that deserves careful consideration, he comments on the reaction of the audience that, in the scene of the murder of Desdemona by the Moor, frantically applauds her murder:

E era inocente, vinha eu dizendo rua abaixo: "que faria o público, se ela de veras fosse culpada, tão culpada como Capitu? E que morte lhe daria o mouro? Um travesseiro não bastaria; era preciso sangue e fogo, um fogo intenso e vasto, que a consumisse de todo, e a reduzisse a pó, e o pó seria lançado ao vento, como eterna extinção... (Machado 935)

And she was innocent, I said to myself as I walked home. What would the audience do if she'd been guilty, as guilty as Capitu? And how would the Moor kill her? A pillow would not serve; it would need blood and fire, a huge roaring fire to consume her

entirely, reduces her to dust –a dust that the wind would whirl away to everlasting extinction... (Scott-Buccleuch 126)

Jealousy makes Santiago desire a second death for Desdemona, the latter even more definitive than the former in the form of an “eternal extinction.” His jealousy and the desire for revenge, as a second and third shared trait, depict the “kinship” and connect Dom Casmurro to Othello. However, we observe in this passage that Bento speculates about the Moor’s action as a pretext of Capitu’s guilt but not about Desdemona’s innocence. A curious example of counterfactual reasoning, since he would not feel for Othello just for having been convinced of Desdemona’s guilt; he carried out his action against her in the name of justice and honor to the end. In fact, the imaginary conjecture functions precisely and significantly in the economy of actions in *Dom Casmurro*: it makes Othello, the implacable avenger, appear for a moment as an agent or intermediary of the imaginary realization of an action that Bento would be unable to make. In addition, here we are in a new place of confluence—certainly not of identity—between the two works: the bonds between actions, work, and death. Both in *Othello* and *Dom Casmurro*, death appears as a requirement or an imperative through action, finding in each case, however, solutions as different as incompatible. It is precisely these diverse articulations of action and death that, assuming they are productive, we intend to explore in this essay.

As the quoted passage above indicates, the fantasy of Bento’s action, motivated by jealousy, presents a hyperbolic character—not just to kill, but to murder with an absolute death: “era preciso sangue e fogo, um fogo intenso e vasto, que a consumisse de todo, e a reduzisse a pó, e o pó seria lançado ao vento, como eterna extinção” (Machado 935) [“it would need blood and fire, a huge roaring fire to consume her entirely, reduce her to dust –a dust that the wind would whirl away to everlasting extinction” (Scott-Buccleuch 126)]. Could it be accidental that this extreme action, whose target is indefinable, has as counterpart an equally absolute impotence to carry through? Contrasted with this fantasy, Desdemona’s death perpetrated by Othello seems singularly mediocre—a worthless asphyxia. In this way, her death would be a death-less-death. Nevertheless, the fact is that in Shakespeare’s work we observe the complaints of opposite motives, as decisions and consummation of actions. Of actions that result, with Shakespearean frequency, in death. Some of these deaths are so well known that we do not need to talk about them. On the contrary, in *Dom Casmurro*, the phrase exceeded—as Marx would say in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)—the content. Each time, it is under the sign of an action, which is frustrated or revealed, as the plot develops. Examples occur on almost every page: the rebuilding of Gloria’s house; the desire to write about jurisprudence, philosophy, politics, the suicide attempt...

Roberto Schwarz observes that the great romances of Machado's adulthood all end in nothing. We could add that some of them begin as nothing, as in *Memórias Póstumas* and *Dom Casmurro*. Nevertheless, we have not gone any further if we neglect the meaning of this nothingness because, at least from a philosophic perspective, nothingness does exist. Let us say then, in order to go further, that this nothingness has a strong bond with one form of death and one form of action, both of which we must observe closer.

There is an intimate bond between the formation of a sense of the meaning of life and perspective of death in Western culture, at least since Fedon precludes his death in Socrates' reflections. In Hegel, who is particularly important here for his profound considerations on Shakespearean work, death acquires a particular status in relation to an action: an action, which is in fact nothing more than a more determined way to say "life." In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the dialectic of the master and the slave, Hegel defines death as the "absolute Lord" (132). The anguish when faced with death, as an "initial absolute fear" (133) ["die erste absolute Furcht" (154)] is consummated in the action as the shaping of the object, that is to say, work. In this act of shaping, consciousness shapes itself: "In the lord, the being-for-self is an 'other' for the bondsman, or is only for him [i.e. is not his own]; in fear, the being-for-self is present in the bondsman himself; in fashioning the thing, he becomes aware that being-for-self-belongs to him, that he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right" (118).

However, conscience does not find itself because it reacts as it desires. On the contrary, it is because when working, the conscience tries out desire, postponing and going beyond what it shapes. "Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing" (118).

What emerges from this action, from the action mediated by the fear of death, is the production of the permanent. In other words, it is the production of the universal. Thus, it is the action of conscience motivated by the fear of death that the experience of death propitiates—that leads beyond extinction. However, it is not the only way of action thought by Hegel. He has, in fact, a higher interest in actions and their ways of performing. It comes from his idea that the merely subjective is not effective. The truly effective is always a synthesis between subjectivity and objectivity, which always presupposes the mediation of action. Between the modes of action thought by Hegel, what interests us in this context is the poetic action. This is one of the central categories of Hegel's Aesthetics. His point of departure is a collision, or crash, of opposing perspectives that disturbs the state of harmony of the world. The arts face the challenge of representing the fight of opposing perspectives as a way of reestablishing harmony. Based on this criterion, Hegel can establish the hierarchy of arts: sculpture, painting, drama, and poetry. Only in this hierarchy, the representation of the collision is reached

perfectly, and therefore, is the best place for staging actions as well. Shakespeare holds a particular privilege here. Inside the Christian world with its profusion of “powers foreign to man”—“Witches, specters, ghostly apparitions, and more of the like” in which “folly and caprice” guarantee its presence—Hegel states that “In this matter in particular, the artist must go straight for the fact that freedom and independence of decision are continually reserved for man. Of this Shakespeare has afforded the finest examples” (*Aesthetics* 230-31). Thus, taking one of them, the ghost in *Hamlet*, Hegel would say, “is treated as just an objective form of Hamlet’s inner presentiment” (*Aesthetics* 231).

Yet the exemplary place that Shakespeare’s drama represents for Hegel’s *Aesthetics* does not end there. We find it again in the subject of character and individualities that embody the pathos of action. In this direction, Hegel will say, “Shakespeare excels, precisely owing to the decisiveness and tautness of his characters, even in the purely formal greatness and firmness of evil” (*Aesthetics* 244). That is, in Shakespeare, not only noble characters are determined, but also weak natures if we are allowed here to paraphrase Hegel’s ethical criteria. All of them behave with determination and control their own destinies to the end. Seen from this perspective, we are faced with the trouble of action and death. It is not merely about accepting that, given the conflict, the consequent resolution ends in death. Death is not something in the end, as a blind and mechanical consequence, of a going-to-being of action. On the contrary, death is foreseen by the action. In this sense, we can perhaps say that death is, or constitutes the course of action in a kind of anticipated attitude as a being towards death (*Sein zum Tode*).

Without any intention of giving too many examples, we have solely analyzed Othello’s plot. Nevertheless, we need to remember that Iago makes the relationship between action and death explicit in the dialog with Rodrigo in the end of the first act: “Seek thou rather to be hang’d in compassing thy joy, than to be drown’d, and go without her” (Shakespeare 45). In the same way, the Moor announces death as the only possible action through betrayal: “Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace / Shall ne’er look back [. . .]” (88). It is clear that there can be no death, but only in the case that there is no betrayal. From the moment death happens, or better, from the moment it is “proved,” death is the only conclusion because the unfaithful lovers ought to be “[t]ill that a capable and wide revenge / Swallow them up. [. . .]” (88). Death—Desdemona’s and Cassio’s—operates as a compensatory principle able to reconstitute equilibrium, or in other words, do justice. However, in the way in which the course of action reveals itself as the work of the decoy, again death—this time Iago’s and Othello’s—enters the scene to close justice’s accounts. Thus, even the actions, which emerge from Iago’s evilness—or maybe them above all—are anchored in the search of justice. He was neglected in spite of pretending to have larger merits than Cassio, and furthermore his conjugal bed—according to certain rumors—was frequented by

Othello and his lieutenant. Therefore, preceding the truth or falseness of facts, we find a figure, whose legitimacy is out of discussion, that is: death as the only solution for extreme offenses. Perhaps Hegel thought about this extreme reparation, as death operating as absolute compensation, when taking the “mission of art” as the reestablishment of the loss of harmony.

As in *Othello*, in *Dom Casmurro*, death is omnipresent. However, in spite of jealousy, which seems to invite us to see Bento Santiago as a Shakespearean character, the axes of action and death are very different. What appears strongest throughout the work—at least for the reader whose uncooperativeness prevents him/herself from becoming an accomplice with the narrator—are the actions, all of which, paraphrasing Paulo Arantes, show rather frustrated dynamisms. They are deviated, stressed, postponed, interrupted, defective acts. On the other end of the spectrum, a small but decisive group of actions, completed and well succeeded, has the characteristic of intermediation. In other words, they are not operated by Bento (its flaunting author), but by what interposes between him and his goals. This is in great contrast to Shakespeare. Let us see these modalities of action.

As much as failed actions, its realm is a rupture of the link between action and work.¹ Beginning with the rebuilding of Gloria’s house—Gloria, the name of the neighborhood and the mother of the author—even though the rebuilding of the house was a copy of the former; the result will not coincide with the expected end:

O meu fim evidente era atar as duas pontas da vida, e restaurar na velhice a adolescência. Pois, senhor, não consegui recompor o que foi nem o que fui. Em tudo, se o rosto é igual, a fisionomia é diferente. Se só me faltassem os outros, vá; um homem consola-se mais ou menos das pessoas que perde; mais falto eu mesmo, e esta lacuna é tudo. (Machado 810)

It is clear that my purpose was to link together the two ends of my life, to re-create my adolescence in my old age. But it proved impossible to reconstruct what then was, or what I was myself. In everything, if the face is the same the appearance is different. If it were just that the others had gone, all well and good; a man soon recovers more or less from their loss. But it is I myself who am lacking, and that loss is fatal. (Scott-Buccluch 15)

There are many similar situations throughout the novel, where the work’s intentions have been lost, or where the action is frightened away when some resolution would be expected. Thus, Bento’s impulse of throwing out Escobar’s coffin once he is suspected of treason. Or his decision to commit suicide, and then substituted by the intention of poisoning his son—however, neither attempt is actually performed. At first glance, it seems possible to say that just this

incapacity to act would be responsible for keeping the ghost of death exorcized. After all, Bento did not kill his wife nor his son; nor had he committed a rehearsed theatrical suicide like Catão, Plutarco, and the body lying on the couch. Could it have ended that way? Maybe not.

In fact, death takes place as a natural event throughout the novel—time passes by, people age and die (the mother, José Dias, cousin Justina, uncle Cosme, Cabral), or natural forces swallow them—Escobar drowns, Ezequiel, the son, gets sick abroad, Manduca is slowly consumed by leprosy... Nevertheless, it will not be here that we must inquire about the connection between action and death since the bond between them is located in another place. It is not in the beginning, nor in the ending that we shall find it. However, it is just where we would not expect to find it: in the middle of life and its accomplishments. It is just when he discovered the traces of his best friend in his son that the figure of the deceased will obsess Bento incessantly. At that moment, death—entering through the door of the imaginary—will become his constant companion:

Escobar vinha assim surgindo da sepultura, do seminário e do Flamengo para se sentar comigo à mesa, receber-me na escada, beijar-me no gabinete de manhã, ou pedir-me à noite a benção do costume.. Tôdas essas ações eram repulsivas; eu tolerava-as e praticava-as, para me não descobrir a mim mesmo e ao mundo. Mas o que pudesse dissimular ao mundo, não podia fazê-lo a mim, que vivia mais perto de mim que ninguém. Quando nem mãe nem filho estavam comigo o meu desespero era grande, e eu jurava mata-los a ambos, ora a golpe, ora devagar, para dividir pelo tempo da morte todos os minutos da vida embaçada e agoniada. Quando, porém, tornava a casa e via do alto da escada a criaturinha que me queria e esperava, ficava desarmado e diferia o castigo de um dia para outro. (Machado 932)

In this way Escobar emerged from the grave, from the seminary, from Flamengo, to sit with me at the table, to greet me on the stairs, to kiss me in the morning in my study, or ask the customary blessing at night. All this was repulsive to me, but I bore with it so as not to reveal myself to myself and to the world. But what I could conceal from the world I could not conceal from myself, detached as I was from all else. When neither mother nor son was present my despair was unbearable and I swore to kill them both, either at a blow, or slowly, dragging out their death to compensate for all my hours of anguish and suffering. But when I arrived home and found that loving little creature waiting for me at the top of the stairs, my resolve weakened and I deferred his punishment until another day. (Scott-Buccluech 196)

We could certainly consider that the difference between both of their deaths is that Bento retains a certain Hamletean vocation, since Hamlet in fact hesitates. Hegel, however, would probably refuse such an approach. As Hegel says in a passage of *Aesthetics*, “Hamlet’s nature is weak in practice; his beautiful heart is indrawn; it is hard for him to decide to escape from the inner harmony; he is melancholy, meditative, hypochondriacal, and pensive, therefore with no inclination for a rash act” (231). This appreciation of the nature of Hamlet’s own action will better be explained when Hegel deals with the sense of the character and of his pathos for poetic action. Now we read that “Hamlet indeed is indecisive in himself, yet he was not doubtful about what he was to do, but only how” (231).

Contrary to Hamlet, Bento cannot carry out the action since his attempts are inscribed in the space of what he calls “meus impulsos que nunca chegavam à execução” (Machado 927).² In his case, it is precisely the indeterminateness about “o que deve fazer” that paralyzes all action. This emerges from a particular structure of acting, embodied exemplarily by Bento, for whom both openness and autonomy are forbidden.

In the first place, Bento always acts with dissimulation. The act of dissimulations are so many and varied that we apologize for not quoting them all. However, we can recall the most important. Remember that from the first page, we see him altering his opinion about bad verses. Further, in the first scene of his memoirs, we find him hidden behind the door, listening to what is said about him; in the passage we have just quoted, he tells us that he practices and tolerates repulsive actions so as not to reveal himself and the world.

We will find another characteristic of his action in intermediation. Thus, when leaving the seminary, he does so leaving in his place a “feitas com o intuito de simular isto mediator”; when he attends law school in São Paulo, he makes Escobar the third party between him and Capitu; when returning to Rio, Escobar is, again as his mediator, put on a respected board of law. Based on the promise made to his mother, he would have to function as an intermediary in the world. That is, as a priest, intermediary between human being and god.

Therefore, after Escobar’s death, Bento becomes incapable of action, as he has no one who could act as third party. This becomes evident in his attempt to promote imaginarily other mediators, as when he imagines Othello perpetrating Capitu’s absolute death. Without a real mediator, the only thing that remains is acting by dissimulation. Therefore, the son is taken to boarding school, and later he and Capitu go into exile in Europe. In a similar way, it is because of acting that Bento periodically visits them in Switzerland “feitas com o intuito de simular mesmo, e enganar a opinião” (Machado 939).

We know that, in the end, Bento does not kill Capitu or his son, but he sends them into exile far from the “public” eye. What results of all this is a mode of death, is a more cruel death than those spectacular deaths we see in

Shakespeare's drama. We say "a more cruel death" because its domain is to invade and impose on a still-alive life, martyring until cushioning its vitality. Therefore, it has no conclusion or end, but it establishes itself as a state that never dies. This kind of death never ends and therefore, does not function as principle—it does not learn differing desire from understanding the instantaneousness of consumption; it teaches even less about acting against impulses. Certainly, Bento's impulses oppose and deny each other, and the only rule he has is to hide them from the eyes of the world. The death related to these actions cannot be that related to the firm resolution that leads to the end. That will be a half-death, or what is the same, a half-life. However, this in-between state has always been two sorrowful beings—specters that wander without finding a resting place. Therefore, nothingness, as we analyzed above, is death as a continued agony. Death necessarily redoubles its perversity when abating in a higher degree on the only Shakespearean character in Machado's novel. Capitu, who possesses resolution, clarity, intelligence, and vitality, is above all a character whose experience—as represented in Machado's work—cannot be accepted by the rigidly hierarchical society in which he is trapped.

Note

¹ In fact, the disjunction between action and work cannot be divided into the disjunction between authorship and work. This is already announced in the first page of *Dom Casmurro* when Bento explains the adoption for the book's title as named by the poet of the train: "O meu poeta do trem ficará sabendo que não lhe guardo rancor. E com pequeno esforço, sendo o título seu, poderá cuidar que a obra é sua. Há livros que apenas terão isto dos seus autores; alguns nem tanto" (Machado 809) ["My poet on the train will know that I bear him no ill will. And with a little imagination, since the title is his, he may come to think the book is his too. There are books which owe no more to their authors; others even less" (Scott-Buccluch 14)].

² In the same way, as the troubles of action and authorship are broken in *Dom Casmurro*, the bond between decision and action cannot be verified.

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