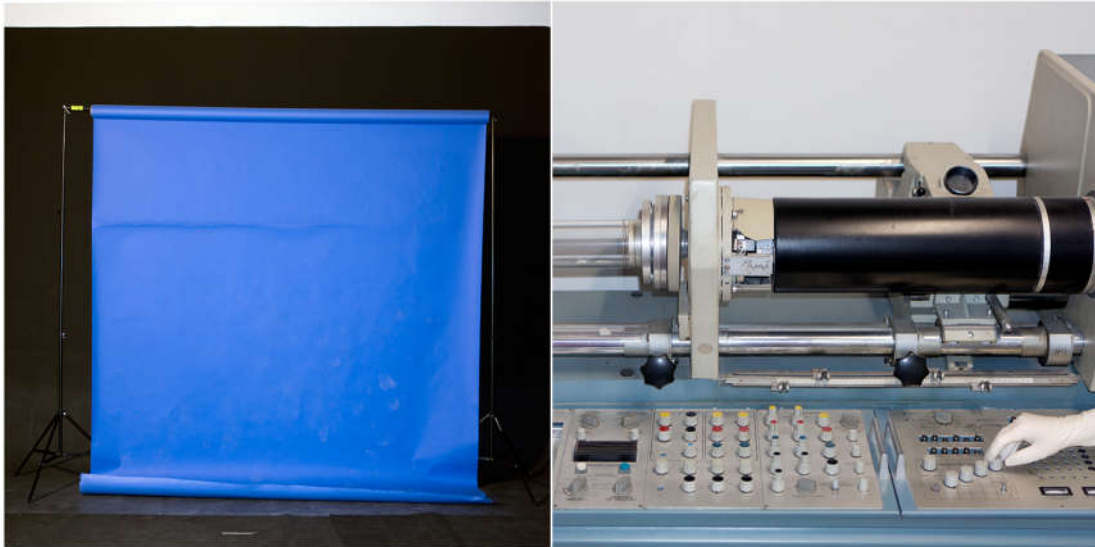


Messengers from the Stars: On Science Fiction and Fantasy

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The diabolical mirror: fantasy incidences in Jorge de Sena's *O Físico Prodigioso*.

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Abstract | In an essay published in 1966 – precisely the year of publication of *O Físico Prodigioso* –, Jorge de Sena claims that “any wish of realism is necessarily (...) an intentional distortion of reality.” The literary work, Sena believes, will fail its plan to communicate something true if it does not overcome the mere mimicry of the real. In this essay I try to understand the way fantasy, as an extreme refusal of a mimetic representation of reality is, concerning *O Físico Prodigioso*, an instrument that enhances the narrative’s scope, placing at the center of its meaning several issues which are transversal to human’s nature and condition. Sena rejects the idea that literature can limit itself to be the mirror that reflects a surface; but in *Físico*, he says, “most of what is deeper in human nature (...), most of what is part of the collective unconscious and common to several civilizations”, is projected. Sena’s allusion to “what is deeper in the human nature” refers to an object that is difficult to define, and to which maybe it is not possible to look directly at. In this short novel, fantasy is the deforming mirror (the diabolical mirror) that has the virtue of returning us an image which is also a synthesis of a blatant humanity.

Keywords | Fantasy; diabolic; ambiguity; eroticism; human condition.



Resumo | Num ensaio publicado em 1966 – precisamente o ano da publicação de *O Físico Prodigioso* –, Jorge de Sena afirma que “qualquer desejo de realismo é necessariamente (...) uma distorção intencional da realidade.” A obra literária, crê

Sena, falhará o seu programa de comunicar algo verdadeiro se não conseguir superar a mera mimetização do real. Neste artigo procuro compreender a forma como o fantástico, enquanto recusa extrema de uma representação mimética da realidade, é, em *O Físico Prodigioso*, um instrumento que potencia o alcance da narrativa, colocando no eixo do seu significado uma série de questões que são transversais à natureza e à condição humanas. Sena recusa a ideia de que a literatura se possa limitar a ser o espelho que reflete uma superfície; já no *Físico*, segundo ele, projeta-se “muito do mais profundo da natureza humana (...), muito do que é parte do inconsciente coletivo e comum a várias civilizações.” Esse “mais profundo da natureza humana” de que fala Jorge de Sena é um objeto esquivo, para o qual talvez não se possa olhar diretamente. Nesta obra, o fantástico é o espelho deformante (o espelho diabólico) que tem a virtude de nos devolver a imagem-síntese de uma flagrante humanidade.

Palavras-chave | Fantástico; diabólico; ambiguidade; erotismo; condição humana.



No reading of Jorge de Sena’s *O Físico Prodigioso* can avoid the manifestations of fantasy that we find through this short novel: a series of events that contradict the laws of the world as we know it – miraculous cures, invisible characters, others that are brought back to life, a very active devil, etc. – undoubtedly ensures the linking of this narrative to fantasy. Ernesto de Melo e Castro even considers *Físico* a “superlative model of the Portuguese fantasy short story” (451), and the prominent place that this work occupies in Portuguese literature is outlined by other authors, such as Jorge Fazenda Lourenço; to him, *O Físico Prodigioso* is “the most extraordinary creation of Jorge de Sena, and one of the few masterpieces of literature in Portuguese” (52). In the same text, but a few pages before, Jorge Fazenda Lourenço makes an observation which may contribute for our understanding of the reason why *Físico* captivates so powerfully a court of admirers. He writes that “in Jorge de Sena, even in the fantasy of *O Físico Prodigioso*, a ‘realist imagination’ predominates, as opposed to an ‘oneiric imagination’, though this one is not absent, but rather submitted, so to speak, to that one” (48).

The matter enunciated here is that the fantasy in this work is not dream, not evasion, not exercise, not denial of reality, not even the proposal of an other-reality that will maintain some flow with the one we know: the fantasy in this work is the faithfully imagined expression of reality. Sena refers to the inefficacy of what he calls the “big realistic machines” (*Novas Andanças* 12) to fasten the reality; the “absolute realism” he pursues consists, contrariwise, of “imagining the reality” (J. F. Lourenço

48). Literature will only be able to communicate some truth if it does not fall into the trap of trying to mimic it. “Any wish of realism is, necessarily, in life as in art, an intentional distortion of reality” (“O Romantismo” 89), writes Sena in a famous essay on Romanticism; language, and specifically the literary language, the literary work of art, is not a surface through which one can understand reality as if it was a neutral, crystalline glass (or mirror). The thickness of a literary work inevitably interposes between the reader and the world the text represents, and that thickness is, ultimately, the author’s one: a vision, a conscience, a language; all in all, a creation. Besides, this is what brings Eduardo Lourenço to write on the difficulty of reading Jorge de Sena, when he refers to the scarce enthusiasm revealed by the public concerning Jorge de Sena’s short stories’ volumes *Andanças do Demónio* and *Novas Andanças do Demónio* (we should not forget *O Físico Prodigioso* was firstly published in this last volume). Lourenço writes: “This ‘resistance’ to Jorge de Sena is, partly, deserved, and, things being what they are, in a certain way, fair. Jorge de Sena is not an easy author. He is an author, and an author is never easy” (E. Lourenço 49).

But although this is not an easy author, and even if this is not an easy work, it is not hard to understand that there is an image in it of something profoundly human, profoundly intimate and universal. In the 1977’s edition preface, Jorge de Sena writes the following: “I already once said that little have I ever written as autobiographic as this most fantastic of all my totally imagined creations” (*Físico* 11). Fernando Pessoa wrote, “a statement is all the more true the higher contradiction it involves,” since “the essence of the universe is the contradiction” (48)¹. Maybe in fact it is not possible to talk about *O Físico Prodigioso* without using the oxymoron. One of the most evident features of this short novel is the very strong sign of ambiguity which runs through it, shown in many different ways, as many authors have already pointed out – for example, Maria de Fátima Marinho mentions a “surprising coincidence of opposites” (142); similarly, Horácio Costa notes that “the idea presiding the *Físico*’s conception is the one of ambiguity or, if we prefer, of the *coincidentia oppositorum*” (176). Maria de Fátima Marinho and Horácio Costa, but also, for example, Maria Alzira Seixo, list a series of conceptual oppositions whose terms are reconciled in this work. These series are partially coincident and address aspects as the factual and non-factual

¹ “The supreme truth which can be said of a thing is that it is and it is not at the same time. That is why, therefore, the essence of the universe is the contradiction – the unrealisation of the Real, which is the same thing as the realization of the Unreal –, a statement is all the more true the higher contradiction it involves.” (“A nova poesia portuguesa no seu aspeto psicológico.” *Textos de Crítica e Intervenção*. Lisboa: Ática, 1993, p. 48).

dimensions of certain episodes; the oscillation between the hetero and the homosexuality of some characters; the ambivalence of the knight blood's properties, which heals and saves but is also capable of shrinking bodies; his virginity, of which he is divested by D. Urraca, but which on the other hand he preserves by virtue of his invisibility, etc. "In a few words," writes Horácio Costa, "unlike the usual novelistic characters, nostalgic of the lost unity, who dramatize the *mise-en-abîme* of the I, the physician assumes and enjoys his fragmentariness, which is, itself, his identity. An identity given by the coexistence of multiplier opposite pairs" (177).

It is worth emphasizing this observation made by Horácio Costa: the physician's identity is his fragmentary attribute. Those who remember Jorge de Sena's essay on Romanticism mentioned earlier will notice there are, in this fragmentary identity of *O Físico Prodigioso*, some echoes of that identity which Sena recognized in Romanticism as a result of the coexistence of absolutely contradictory impulses, themes, values, sensibilities... Now what this short novel does is precisely to propose itself as a representation of an essentially unstable reality, and that instability is staged in several aspects of its construction: from the discontinuities of the story's spatio-temporal flows to the deconstruction of the typographical uniformity of the text, and including the episodic impossibility of a linear reading, the violent breaks in syntax (of the sentence and of the narrative composition) or the aforementioned instability of the representation of reality pacts, that oscillate between realism and fantasy – and this enumeration could go on.

Let us dwell, however, on this particular focus of ambiguity that is the fantasy's inscription on the narrative – so to verify that same focus is not only an element of the construction of that ambiguity but is also invested with it. In the short novel's opening, the reader follows a man who is going down a hill horseback, towards a river. In this beginning, over the first two pages, we do not come across anything strange, neither in the narrative elements nor in the descriptive ones: on the contrary, the initial scene even evokes our history of past readings, through which we may recognize, in the very first lines, the description of a *locus amœnus*. So, we recognize the world and we recognize the literature: a model of familiar literary representation of a world which is familiar to us.

The first reference in this text to an object which is not of our world, to a magical object, goes unnoticed. When the knight leans over the rivers' waters to drink, he has to hold "his cap in the nick of time – one of its many narrow escapes. He

had had that cap as a boy and was apt to forget it, though he knew it must never fall into a running stream” (*Wondrous 4*)².

Only later will we know that this cap is magical, that it ensures invisibility to the one who wears it, and later, too, the knight himself will find out the powers coming out of it merge with the very omnipotence. The point is that this first magical element appears as doubly diluted: it goes unnoticed to us, as readers, not realizing its importance, and it goes unnoticed to the knight, who, knowing its importance, “always forgot it.” Therefore, the fantasy is, in this text, from the beginning, a presence that carries a strong trace of familiarity.

A few lines later, we find the first explicit manifestation of fantasy. When the knight is preparing to bathe in the river, the Devil appears, in the form of an invisible presence and a mocking laughter (his recurrent feature), and tries to consummate a carnal contact with the protagonist. That attempt is endured by the knight with resigned indifference. And this indifference comes from the habit: “The light, protracted caresses, pecking kisses down his back, persistent prodding hands between his thighs, were nothing new. Since he had grown up he couldn’t avoid them if he was naked and alone. They failed to excite him; failed, even, to disgust or horrify him” (*Wondrous 4*).³

We therefore now understand that the apparently stable, familiar, recognizable universe of the first pages is, in fact, a place usually inhabited by the Devil. And we understand that the knight who quietly goes down the hill has, after all, a pact with the Devil, in exchange for which he received tremendous powers, thus becoming a Faustian character. However, it immediately occurs to us there is a strong difference between the terms of this pact and those that our imagination traditionally established with regard to trade between man and the Devil.

Firstly, as noted already at this point and as we will confirm later, the Devil does not want the knight’s soul – he wants his body. Secondly, there seems to be an inversion in the power relationship between Man and Devil. The knight’s serenity, the resistance he reveals, refusing to give himself to the Devil as this one would like, shows we are not facing a tormented being or someone effectively controlled by the

² Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are taken from the *The Wondrous Physician* (translation by Mary Fitton published by Everyman Ltd., 1986); the original excerpt can always be read as a footnote: “E segurou, num gesto repentino, o gorro que ia cair na cristalina correnteza. Sempre isto lhe acontecia. Crescera com ele o gorro, não podia o gorro molhar-se, e sempre se esquecia dele” (*Físico 16*).

³ “era o costume, desde que primeiro se soubera homem e se despia todo, e se estivesse só. Sofria aquilo como um vexame inapelável que o não excitava, e nem sequer lhe dava horror ou repugnância” (*Físico 17*).

Devil, a being whose will the Devil can bend: on the contrary, what we know is the Devil, as soon as he saw the knight, “a boy with a man’s body”, “promptly and passionately embraced him” (*Wondrous* 5)⁴ – i.e., the Devil fell, in a sense, under the knight’s power. So the Devil, source of the physician’s powers, does not seem, in his turn, to have any power over the knight; on the contrary, he seems to be, as a devil who is in love (and being, as such, a poor devil), under his power.

A series of issues are raised around the physician’s figure, ranging from his status as a fictional character to the symbolical investment concentrated in him, of a human condition (or a human nature) inevitably elusive. Despite his tremendous powers, the protagonist of this short novel is, first of all, a man. Soon after performing D. Urraca’s wondrous healing, the physician has the following thought, at a moment when everybody celebrates the sick lady’s recovery, and when he understands he was forgotten: “What, in any case, was he? A man who ate and slept as other did, and earned his bread as people must who lacked castle or trade to live by” (*Wondrous* 24).⁵ But this man, “who ate and slept as other did”, is also “a man as there is none” (“I am a man as there is none,”⁶ he says when, a few pages later, he understands that, unlike all the other men who previously entered the castle, he survived the first night). The question, however, is the physician is not only a man like other men, but also a man as there is none. Between the beginning of this story and the moment he is arrested by the Holy Office (a few days, presumably) the experience of the world and the knowledge of himself and the other the physician acquires make him go through a spectrum of conditions whose ends could not be further apart. In his first appearance, the knight has a nearly animal tranquility. Not only there are no concerns to be seen in him, but also he is a being designed mostly in a sensory plan: “The young man rose, slid his hands from waist to hips, and dived into the water. This was his notion of heaven – to trash and splash and scrub his skin and douse his face and feel the water on him” (*Wondrous* 5).⁷ This tranquility and this animal happiness will fade as the

⁴ “ainda impúbere, mas já com corpo de homem, (...) logo se abraçara a ele apaixonado” (*Físico* 18).

⁵ “Afiml era um homem que comia e dormia, como toda a gente, e que ganhava a vida como toda a gente que não tinha castelo ou comércio” (*Físico* 40).

⁶ In the Portuguese edition, “Não, eu durei duas noites e um dia... Sou um homem como não há” (*Físico* 60). In the English translation used in this article, this final reflection disappears: «No. Two nights and a day I lasted. Marvelous!» (*Wondrous* 44).

⁷ “Levantou-se, então, sacudiu-se, passou as mãos pelo corpo, e atirou-se na água, espadanando-a, em que mergulhou. Era assim que se sentia perfeitamente feliz: pulando, saltando, deitando-se a sentir correr o líquido por si, e esfregando-se violentamente, e atirando água à sua volta” (*Físico* 18).

character discovers things: firstly, of love melancholy is born; later, a deep anguish overlaps the acquired conscience that his powers equate him to an omnipotent god.

Let us remember that, in the beginning of the short novel, it is said of the knight he has “tremendous powers” and that those tremendous powers are what makes him consider that it is worth enduring the erotic endeavors of the Devil. These powers essentially consist of healing sick people through his chaste blood and becoming invisible by wearing the magical cap in his head. But from this moment on the physician is forced to test increasingly extreme limits of those powers, instigated by D. Urraca and her damsels, going so far that he finds omnipotence in them – and that gain of power is combined with a growing feeling of unease.

There is also a parallel here between the fields of love and power, horizons which, for the physician, are torn to plenitude in a very short period of time. But with them comes an existential weight, which is, at bottom, the anguish of having no limits: “Another thing you told me – that I was a god. I am, I think. Or I behave as one. And it’s unbearable. (...) Like being on the brink of an abyss (...). And day by day I feel worse. Or better, maybe” (*Wondrous* 64-65)⁸. This is the most poignant moment of the protagonist’s existential crisis: a growing dissatisfaction and a nostalgia about an unrecoverable comfort, previous to the experience of love itself. The intensity of the experiences undergone by the physician opens a new world to him but deprives him of an old comfort: a comfort which came of his wandering condition, of existing with no past and no future – a being who is not in the world, and in whom the world is not in. It is precisely at this point that the physician, using his powers, tries to go back in time and return to the previous stage, before knowing love and anguish. But that only leads him to another discovery: we never find the moment from where we left. In other words: some inscriptions cannot be erased.

Now this question is strongly connected to another, which is the one concerning the libertarian condition of this character. The physician has an old bond connecting him to the Devil; then, he falls in love with D. Urraca – and it is precisely before these two entities the assertion of his freedom arises in a more critical way. For instance, when the physician is sexually involved with a group of damsels, all happening under the eyes of D. Urraca, she observes, “his has been the bravery, the boldness, of a

⁸ “Disseste-me também que eu era um deus. E eu sinto que sou. Ou sinto que estou sendo. E é uma coisa insuportável. (...) É como estar à beira de um abismo (...). E cada dia me sinto pior, ou me sinto melhor, não sei” (*Físico* 79).

perfectly free man” (*Wondrous* 57)⁹. But the ultimate assertion of the physician’s freedom is shown through his relationship with the Devil. The physician’s power emanates from the Devil; and, however, what he does is healing people. There is a parallel here already profusely discussed between the physical and Christ: both heal those who are ill, both save through shed blood, both raise the dead, both spread love. The most obvious difference, of course, is that Christ’s healings are always a symbol of spiritual salvation, whereas the physician stays within the limits of the body and ignores any fate of those he healed.¹⁰ On the other hand, the love Christ spreads also has a spiritual nature, whilst the physician’s one is erotic – and here it is important to remember that this short novel has in its origin two medieval allegories, and that Sena’s fiction, among other things, literalizes certain aspects of those allegories. But, if the physician heals through diabolical powers, that seems to suggest the following interpretation: after all, this devil is not that terrible entity who fills our imagination or enlivens our beliefs. This, however, is not true: as the Devil himself admits when conjured by one of the inquisitors, he is, in fact, the “Prince of the Darkness” and the “Lord of Evil” (*Wondrous* 89)¹¹.

The point explored here is that the physician’s freedom is never conditioned by his pact with the Devil. And, if this tells us something about the physician, it also tells us something about the Devil, whose love for the protagonist depends neither on his obedience nor on his subjection to an order of values, nor even on his erotic surrender to the Devil’s endeavors. The physician is a character beyond Good and Evil, beyond what is conceivable in the light of a moral order, with no God or Devil to guide him – though he is loved by the devil and inhabits a universe from where God is apparently absent. And this is another of the interesting aspects of this work: the silence of God towards the proliferation of other powers, as if his space had been invaded and only a vague resonance of his presence in the world subsisted, which is the invocation of his name and the multiple attacks against human dignity practiced in the name of that invocation.

⁹ “um gesto de verdadeiro homem livre” (*Físico* 73).

¹⁰ “Old men, young men, widows, wives, unmarried girls, children and adolescents, obtaining life and vigour by bathing in his blood... And how long, we wondered suddenly, did they live when he cured them? What sort of lives? It was his custom to leave within days, and that was the last he saw or heard of them” (*Wondrous* 24). (“Homens velhos e novos, mulheres casadas, solteiras e viúvas, crianças e adolescentes, haviam-se banhado, no fluido do seu sangue, para recuperarem a vida e a saúde. E, de súbito, perguntou-se: que seria deles: viveriam longamente, como viveriam? Porque ele partia pouco tempo depois, e nunca mais vira nem soubera de nenhuma” (*Físico* 41)).

¹¹ “Príncipe das Trevas”, “Senhor do Mal” (*Físico* 104).

This absence of God naturally contrasts with the presence of the Devil, but what is truly significant is that in this narrative we witness the destruction of an old order and its replacement by a new order, with that old order authentically becoming autophagic the moment the inquisitors, powerless towards the successive interferences of the Devil in their sphere of power, which is the sphere of judgement and punishment, mutually accuse themselves of heresy and order one another's arrest.

Finally, let us consider just a detail, almost ancillary, precisely around this episode – the physician's judgement –, which is relevant because it comprehends one lesson: the science of things is on men's side, and not on God's side. When Brother Anthony of Salzburg decides to conjure the Devil, he initially resorts to an erudite formula, in Latin, recited from a book, and to a ritual characterized by the inversion of Christian symbols (the crucifix upside down, the episcopal cross overturned, etc.). And nothing happens. The inquisitor violently closes the book and tries a new invocation, but in common language. The Devil then comes, in the form of a voice and a shadow, but not more than that. New attempt of Brother Anthony – but this time he uses a clearly popular formula¹² – and immediately the Devil materializes in front of him, as if the people knew more about the true nature of transcendent things than the Church and its inquisitors, who devote their life to study those things and whose knowledge about them is absolutely sterile.

For many years *O Físico Prodigioso* suggests and upholds readings that seek to grasp its elusive essence. Almost everything in this work, which is a wondrous example of narrative architecture, seems to be conceived so that, when we observe it from a certain perspective, it looks like it is organized around a given meaning, but underneath the image thus formed we understand there are elements disturbing the consistency of that meaning, and that this meaning will be transformed and redefined as our point of view moves. We have no other choice in this regard but to follow the example of the wisest character of this story, the Devil, who despite all his power and all his science admits there are things his understanding does not reach.



¹² "Satanás, Satanás, Satanás, assim como vens, assim aqui estás!" (*Físico* 103). In the English translation, this popular imprint gives place to a more markedly archaic form: "Satan, come thou before me! Come, Satan, come! Be as thou art wont to be!" (*Wondrous* 89).

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