

## *The Poetics of the Unexpected. A Review of Eduardo Mahon's Contos Estranhos. Weird Tales. Cuiabá: Carlini & Caniato Editorial, 2017.*

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Short stories and particularly *short* “short-stories” have it that they impose the most intolerable typographical restriction upon talented writers who seek to create an entire universe, invariably aiming to impress the reader. Moreover, contrary to short stories, tales – the generic label Eduardo Mahon rightfully opted for in his title – belong to an earlier stage in the genre’s evolution. They bathe in orality, embracing such sub-modes as the unrealistic, the imaginary and the uncanny, frequently following long standing traditions in fantastic literature, reviving famous mysterious “clichés” to be found in the works of the early masters (Chaucer and Boccaccio). Eduardo Mahon’s *Weird Tales*, differ from most other similar short fictions due to a specific manner of writing and the astounding capability to maintain the reader’s attention to the very last full stop.

Owing to the genre’s imitated orality, Mahon in his *Contos Estranhos*, *Weird Tales*, wrote unique stories, which exhibit the absurd, pretend to be real, while using a vast number of both literary and linguistic devices. In more learned terms, and relying on Canadian scholar Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*), Mahon’s *Contos Estranhos*, *Weird Tales* combine the “romance” and the “novel” modus, an extremely difficult combination, and yet one which Mahon turns into a complete (post-modern?) success! The exquisite use of a most varying array of storytelling strategies, engaging word choices, and exceptional plots make the tales by Mahon outstanding literary pieces worth a discussion and an analysis beyond the scope of the present review.

Each of the tales boast features, which help the reader to classify *Weird Tales* according to the manner, style, language, and other linguistic and stylistic peculiarities. Reading these tales, it is hard to deny that they were not purposely written in style even if on the face of it, some seem to merely follow the standard procedure of traditional tales or, at times, even of children’s stories. Lucinda Nogueira Persona summarizes it all perfectly well in her “afterword” to the English translation of Mahon’s stories when she writes that “The fictional field conceived by Eduardo Mahon comprises the lives of simple people gover-

ned by basic needs, e.g.: making both ends meet [...]” (Persona, 2017, p. 354). First of all, it is necessary to mention some peculiarities in the stories’ composition, which were made in a primitive and/or an apparent simplified way. They have a beginning, a middle and an end and each sentence apparently follows each other sentence, just like any human being not endowed with the gift of fiction writing would tell it, would write it down. On closer inspection, while reading the tales, the reader understands that the “simplicity” of the storytelling, which is created by means of short sentences and monosyllabic words imitating the spoken word, conceals intricate narration which only surfaces when the reader has finished and is left alone pondering over what he or she has read. In “Maternal Instinct” e.g. this process is very visible in the opening paragraph: “Thirty years raising Ducks. That is what Mr. And Mrs Torquato did all their lives. They lived in a small ranch near many small towns and they delivered the duck eggs to the duck lovers, who were very few in the beginning”(Mahon, 2017, p. 268). In “There’s Nothing to Complain About” it is possible to find sentences like “Cheng Wu was a happy person. He was forced to be happy, so to speak” (Mahon, 2017, p. 253). The word choice, which from the first view may seem to be directed to a “child-reader”, in reality, targets on adults, as the author widely used expletives and a complex problematic. For what does it mean, being “forced to be happy”. And, how very handily has Mahon downplayed his first statement by simply adding “so to speak”.

Despite the numerous syntactic variations (to be understood as the author’s stylistic peculiarities or preferences), other classical short stories by Poe or even Hemingway come to mind during the reading process. They differ from Mahon’s tales, both in message and in themes discussed, even though their theories would easily apply. For indeed, Poe’s dictum that the first sentence of a text piece should already irreversibly lead to the final effect, and Hemingway’s so-called *Iceberg Theory* could have been Mahon’s source of inspiration as to his craft. However, one can hardly imagine E.A. Poe writing as for example in the story “The Hernia” “Holy crap! Don’t piss me off!”(Mahon, 2017, p. 245). As to Hemingway... I wouldn’t know.

All these aspects made the stories of Mahon unique and engaging literary pieces. What happens when a hernia turns into a child? (“The Hernia”). What about a human fetus suddenly emerging from a goose egg? (“Maternal instinct”). And how does it feel if you are born Caucasian and a slow but irreversible bodily transformation changes your ethnic status? (“The Black sheep of the Family”) Or, when your right eye starts spinning around? (“Irene’s Right Eye”) Do you only then see reality? Something more than reality? A Surreal reality? Or, probably a magical reality? These are the questions which haunt the reader, who upon reaching the surprise ending of each story steadily realizes that none of the traditional labels apply. Is Miguel Cervantes in “Cervantes’ Tears), just anybody, coincidentally bearing the same name as the Spanish writer? Is he the re-incarnation of the Spanish Writer? Or just a modern hack happily using the well-known name? Maybe it is merely a post-modern bricolage of the writer himself?

The unexpected transition from ordinary to absurd, from concrete to suddenly abstract is most weird (weird stories, indeed!) in Mahon’s stories. They usually

begin average and then, following the initial “ordinary” manner of storytelling, the author describes unbelievable and bizarre things, which he presents without any hesitation and specific attitude. Mahon himself said in an interview:

The plain style is a typical feature of mine, from *Neuralgias* onwards. Even in poetry, I try to be as direct as possible. I believe that the more cleaned-up, the better a contemporary text is. Now, with a few changes, I am bringing single-paragraph tales that deal with a magical world, impossible situations, unusual existences. The novelty of the experiment lies with the ‘Man of the Country Which Does Not Exist’, where each paragraph is a chapter, a puzzle form at a very fast pace” (<http://www.olhardireto.com.br>) (my translation)

Reading Mahon, inevitably makes the informed reader think of other and similar weird short stories in western literature: Michael Chabon, Jorge Luis Borges, Ray Bradbury, Ben Okri, to name only a few. However, finding a common ground is not so easy. Excepting perhaps, Okri, Eduardo Mahon is much more a storyteller than a literary craftsman, blunt and direct; no labyrinths, or hidden mirrors, only stammering surprises at the end, but only after an unstoppable stream of (manicured beforehand?) stock phrases as can be seen at work in “The Bookstore”

The boy who left the tram was called Bob Parker. He was one block away from his friend’s house. He came to a dead end as he realized there were no houses there, he came across a second-hand bookstore. However, it was not precisely the store that called his attention. (Mahon, 2017, p. 253)

The poetics of the unexpected in the tales of Mahon is performed via the sequence of events, impossible to predict. In other words, the author builds his stories without any logical structure of event sequence, which would help a reader to predict the final of a story. At the beginning of a tale, the reader cannot even imagine how it would end. For example, “The Color Thief” (Mahon, 2017, p. 247) concludes with a fantastic and absolutely unexpected episode, and even with the help of another protagonist. On the other hand, the story “The Unrecognizable Ernesto Fuentes” (Mahon, 2017, p. 256) does not even have an appropriate closure or finale; as a reader is “suspended” in suspense, literally!

Another peculiarity, mentioned earlier, consists in the realistic appearance of the world. Thus, the author does not create some imaginative or a fantasy world for his stories; he does not even mention the affection of some mysterious or supreme forces on his characters. Mahon adds abnormal and strange things to the everyday realities, even without any accentuation on the weirdness thereof. The world in which his characters live seems to be normal, and the fantastic events are the part of its “normality.” Part of this normality comes from scientific and mathematical reference points. Mahon likes to mention doctors incapable of solving the mysteries, Mahon does not forget that mankind likes to measure, i.e. use a very consistent metric system like in “There’s Nothing to Complain About”. One single bed, one small wood table, three shirts, two pairs of jeans, etc. While we count (as Mahon seems to know all too well), we are being had, for we trust human expectations which always take place in the realm of the logical and the

causal. When the room closes in on Cheng, Mahon makes the main protagonist count and measure: “When he entered, he knew the walls were getting closer [...] he measured every corner of the room and he wrote down the figures on the palm of his other hand: one meter and half” Suddenly the reader has to ask himself/herself: “What is this all about” and shortly thereafter: “And what if?”. What if indeed rooms could grow smaller. And this “what if” in Portuguese “E se” is exactly Mahon’s motto (<https://www.carliniecaniato.com.br/eduardo>).

Finally one minor aspect needs to be mentioned. I made the tactical decision to discuss Mahon’s *Weird Tales* in the English translation which goes with the Brazilian Portuguese original set of stories. I did so, because I believe Mahon’s stories have a right to become world literature, i.e. to leave their Portuguese speaking homelands and to be translated not only in English but hopefully in a myriad of other languages! However, the old adage warns us: “traduire, c’est trahir un peu”. Unfortunately, this is also what happened with the translation of *Contos Estranhos*. The tales read better, much better, in the original Portuguese. It is not always a matter of linguistic incompetence on the part of the translator, but the *chronotope* of a genre called *tale* is too specific to the region and the imagination that goes with it, to be easily translated. Future translations better have a serious introduction commenting both on the translation and the genre.

## References

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