

The traces of the monstrous in the sacred

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In September 2023, the First Interdisciplinary Congress on Literature and Transcendence was held at the Faculty of History, Letters, Philosophy and Oriental Studies of the Universidad del Salvador (Buenos Aires), in collaboration with the Behemot Research Network. Under the title “The traces of the monstrous in the sacred”, researchers from Chile, Brazil and Argentina presented their work. This was the first face-to-face meeting of researchers who have been working on this topic since 2020, who had already published a dossier in this same journal in 2022 (Nogueira; Carbullanca Nuñez; Díaz Araujo, 2022). This dossier, in continuity and with the aim of further deepening this research, extends to the interdisciplinary field, bringing together works on texts from Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the contemporary period.

The intersection between the various groups involved in this research has focused on the margins of religious discourse, the sacred and transcendence as a theopoetic and cultural problem. In this way, the epistemic frontier in which the aesthetic manifestations of the monstrous, the grotesque, the hybrid and the apocryphal are found was approached. From a decentralized perspective that at the same time builds bridges towards the open, different views emerged on this epistemic frontier, which Rui Teixeira calls “literary theotopology”.

If a literary theotopology existed, and if some pragmatics assisted it, it would certainly serve to establish systems of multidimensional coordinates that, in the vast territories of literature, would allow us to situate the theoliterary, analisar a sua organicidade paradoxalmente eutópica e distópica, e documentar a diversidade topológica de teotopias, esses lugares que Deus (como interrogação) habita, mesmo quando parece habitar apenas o sentimento da sua ausência (Teixeira, 2019, p. 9, our translation)³.

If the paradoxical place implied by theotopology challenges us, it will be necessary to ask ourselves about this construction. Topology is a mathematical

³ Original: Se existisse uma teotopologia literária, e se alguma pragmática lhe assistisse, serviria certamente para estabelecer sistemas de coordenadas multidimensionais que, nos vastos territórios da literatura, permitissem situar a teoliterária, analisar a sua organicidade paradoxalmente eutópica e distópica, e documentar a diversidade topológica de teotopias, esses lugares que Deus (como interrogação) habita, mesmo quando parece habitar apenas o sentimento da sua ausência.

and geometrical discipline, whose logic expands into other domains, such as the architectural or discursive, making it possible to approach phenomena that are unapprehensible to consciousness, i.e. indeterminate, contradictory and complex (Romero Contreras, 2020). One of its difficulties is that it operates with surfaces and not with entities; in this way, it breaks the logic of the principles of identity, excluded third party and non-contradiction. This is how it manages to overcome the idea of excess and excessiveness as something out of the norm, opposed to other spaces and other aesthetic possibilities in a binary articulation. Indeed, topology presents the possibility of operating with language as a paradoxical spatiality where the border that usually marks the boundary between inside and outside, center and periphery, can be folded and deformed as a new third instance.

Perhaps the closest example is that of the Moebius strip, which has no right or wrong, no inside or outside, and which allows the opening of an epistemological field without borders, a new surface without the clear limits of ontological thought. Likewise, these multiple spatial relations that are projected and imbricate each other, folding into new possibilities that are called “morphisms”, incorporate the possibility of the hole, the deformed and the unspeakable as constructions of a “thought of transit between and transformations of spaces” (Romero Contreras, 2020).

It should be noted that Lacan’s theorization of the subject, the body and the unconscious, as well as his reading of Freud’s *The Sinister* (1919), is positioned in the paradigm of paraconsistent logic that overcomes the principles mentioned above (Eidelsztein, 2019), allows articulating these topological coordinates in several of its possible figures such as the aforementioned Moebius band, and also the figure of the bull locating the *unheimlich* as an inter and intra-territorial structure.

In this regard, Romero Contreras, paraphrasing the philosopher and mathematician Luciano Boi, mentions that “the surprising thing is that topological figures appear in nature, in linguistics, as in painting, as if they were advancing transversally through the most distant domains” (2020, online).

It is with this methodological possibility that we approach Teixeira’s aforementioned idea: the questioning of God and the feeling of his absence inhabit a spatiality that presents itself as eutopic and dystopic at the same time. What is the texture of the feeling of an absence? Is it possible for a feeling to have materiality to inhabit a space? Can a space be eutopic and dystopic at the same time? If the poetic includes the shadows, the wound, then do literature and transcendence fold and unfold between light and darkness?

In these multidimensional coordinates, we situate theo-poetics as theotopological. We have thought of the name of our theo-poetic research group “Literature and transcendence” as a theotopological possibility since it is not only an enumeration, but it expands semantically as a “transit” relation in which the blow that inscribes the letter opens to the wound that speaks in transcendence to strike again the emptying of the stone that becomes literature. In this sense, the conjunction “and” is no longer only copulative, but signals the eutopian and dystopian theotopological morphism with which we try to approach the unspeakable. It was with this point of view as a theoretical instrument that we opened ourselves to find, or rather to brush against, the traces of the monstrous in the sacred.

For its part, the Behemoth international network is named after the biblical monster that in its enigmatic immensity can contain the Jordan River (*Job* 40:16-23) and is commonly used to describe the incomprehensible and incommensurable. This group, composed of Latin American researchers, situates their work studying the margins of religious discourse, the sacred and the monstrous as a methodological operation that accounts for this phenomenon. Following Jeffrey Cohen (1996) they find that the study of the monstrous is a *challenge* for cultural studies. His

seven theses propose an enumeration of interrelated postulates about the relationship between monsters and cultural studies, and attempt a method for reading the monster and the monstrous as a marginal but founding – and therefore recurrent – operation of the social bond. For Cohen (1996), this operation is a disruptive “epistemological surface” of the object, which is located in a margin impossible to signify, generating a spatiality too close and strange at the same time. In this sense, it is close to the aforementioned proposal of psychoanalysis about the sinister. By breaking with the binary logic of the one or the other, it positions us in the ubiquitous and slippery terrain of the one and the other, in the impossible space between two ontologically unassimilable categories that, nevertheless, assimilate by folding their surface. This disquieting morphism, which requires an epistemological effort that puts on hold the ontological categories and the usual senses with which we read texts, distinguishes itself from the point of view that rejects what is apart from the norm, expelling from itself the heterogeneous that cannot be trapped, and that makes enemies of the perceptual assemblages that return from the margins as discordant fragments.

We know that *monstrum* is formed on the etyma of the verb *monere*, to warn, to show. In Latin, it was a voice that denoted prodigious and supernatural events, a divine warning that evidenced the hidden: to show what cannot be seen. For its part, *strum* alludes to what is heard, to the din. It breaks with the repetition of the same, twisting the intact and fragile surface of the world.

The semantic field of the sacred is problematic. When we evoke it and ask ourselves about its meaning, a vastness of meanings opens up, woven between the folds of the religious phenomenon, with its ominous and tremendous core, the absolute and the inaccessible, the deadly and the redemptive, but also between the social and the intimate. Roger Callois, in his book *Man and the Sacred* (1942, p. 15) understands that “religion is the administration of the sacred”. In this way, a bureaucratization comes into play that, through rituals and prescriptions, attempts to contain the risk that sacredness entails, while at the same time retaining it, expelling the profane from this sphere. In this regard, Bataille (1997, p. 127) introduces the idea that in the pagan world “the pure and the impure composed the whole of the sacred sphere”; on the other hand, the novelty of Christianity rejected impurity, defining the borders of the sacred world. From that moment on, “impurity, defilement, guilt were expelled outside these limits. From then on, the impure sacred was referred to the profane world”. But Bataille (1997) downplays the sacred-profane opposition, proposing the paradox that the profane is also a “use of the sacred,” which he calls the “principle of profanation”.

One side of the profane was allied with the hemisphere of the pure; the other with the impure hemisphere of the sacred. The evil in the profane world was united with the diabolic part of the sacred, and the good was united with the divine part. The good, whatever its sense of practical work, gathered the light of sanctity. The word sanctity, primitively, designated the sacred... In a paradoxical way Christian profanation, being as it was a contact with the impure, accessed the essential sacred, accessed the forbidden territory (p. 128, our translation)⁴.

For our part, we also move away from this opposition, understanding that the profane, as that which is located outside the temple, as the opposite of the sacred, can also be thought of in a topological relationship with that realm. If the rejected is part of the sacred, we could locate the act of profaning as the violent return of what has been expelled. If something has been expelled, it is because it comes from there; profanation is this return that highlights the fragmentary that has

⁴ Original: Un lado de lo profano se alió con el hemisferio de lo puro; el otro, con el hemisferio impuro de lo sagrado. El mal que hay en el mundo profano se unió con la parte diabólica de lo sagrado, y el bien se unió con la parte divina. El bien, fuese cual fuese su sentido de obra práctica, recogió la luz de la santidad. La palabra santidad, primitivamente, designaba lo sagrado... De una manera paradójica la profanación cristiana, siendo como era un contacto con lo impuro, accedía a lo sagrado esencial, accedía al territorio prohibido.

been hidden by exploding the border. It departs from the temple, but pierces it at the same time. It is a relationship of holes through which the inside and the outside are intertwined, cut, knotted.

Maria Caterina Jacobelly brings us a well-worked example that brings us closer to this possibility. In her book *Risus paschalis - El fundamento teológico del placer sexual*, she elaborates on the histrionic and obscene acts that some preachers of the sixteenth century carried out during the Easter Mass in various European countries, staging sexual and carnivalesque acts in the liturgy that generated laughter and uproar among the faithful (Jacobelly, 1991, p. 24). Although a first approach shows the need to attract the attention and permanence of the public in the temple, Jacobelly points out that “the custom of eating and dancing inside the church is very ancient. It is the custom of the social lunch that the confraternities used to organize during Holy Week” (Jacobelly, 1991, p. 58). But the common people also spent the night in the churches during the vigils, eating and dancing. In his criterion, we cannot restrict the interpretation to the fact that the temples sheltered the people.

A confirmation that the interpretation is different is given by the fact that these dances and obscene songs were also performed in the open air, but always in connection with the sacred; moreover, the custom of singing turpia carmine and committing inhonestas saltationes in the cemetery was widespread [...]. The documents examined provide a sufficiently broad panorama to be able to affirm that [...] above all the pleasure related to the sexual sphere, is a constant in the sphere of the sacred; almost always condemned, but which resists all prohibitions (Jacobelly, 1991, p. 58, our translation)⁵.

The dissonant, thunderous and abject traces of the monstrous require questioning the idea of the sacred as only the metaphysical, or the description of objects and practices that denote a form of spirituality, as well as the immediate and monolithic association of religion and its liturgy of purity.

The meeting in Buenos Aires allowed us to venture into the theotopological perspective exposed to locate a new and fragmentary perceptive field: the possibility of discovering the discordant figure and the sinister in literature, theology, images and discourses as that which presents itself unexpectedly, realizing that a different spatiality exists, the exterior as an abject fold of the interior, and which provokes hesitation and disquiet. It is a matter of finding the tension generated by the impure and the profane as components of the sacred realm, the strum of their deadly and vital relationship.

In this way we have opened this perceptive field of the sacred, in which it is possible to find traces, marks, stigmata of the monstrous and the monster in material spaces and concrete signs, such as the body, images, artifacts and amulets, aesthetic, literary and performance productions.

The literary theotopological perspective calls to encounter the shadows in the sacred, with its spatiality of holes, with the bite in the flesh that signifies the advent of the poetic, the blow that breaks the sense and places us in another scene, in strangeness. We can only approach and try to account for this operation that is always evanescent and impossible to apprehend and represent by consciousness. That is why it tends to be rejected in academic circles. For this reason, in the meeting of these two research groups there has been an invitation to look at the unbearable, even for a moment; an invitation that results in a creative space that allows us to delve into this methodological perspective that proposes topological forms to think the divine and the sacred, introducing the possibility of the deformed or formless as spatial folds or morphisms.

⁵ Original: Una confirmación de que la interpretación es otra, nos la da el hecho de que estas danzas y los cantos obscenos se hacían también al aire libre, pero siempre en relación con lo sagrado; es más, la costumbre de cantar turpia carmine y de cometer inhonestas saltationes en el cementerio estaba ampliamente difundida [...] Los documentos examinados suministran un panorama lo bastante amplio para poder afirmar que [...] sobre todo el placer relacionado con la esfera sexual, es una constante en la esfera de lo sagrado; casi siempre condenada, pero que resiste a todas las prohibiciones.

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