From Love’s Revenge to Love’s Reward: ‘Kama e o Génio’ as Antithesis of O físico prodigioso

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as antithesis of
O Físico Prodigioso

by
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Divindades não há nenhumas
Só o amor dirige o mundo

JORGE DE SENA
«Na partida nunca me digas»
(Visão Perpétua)

IN one of the last classes he taught at ucla, when asked by a group of graduate students what the basic intention behind the novella O Físico Prodigioso was, Jorge de Sena answered in part: «terei de dizer que é ilustrar, através do erotismo, mas através de mais alguma coisa também, o poder supremo do amor.» As this statement already suggests, love in O Físico Prodigioso is, purely and unabashedly, erotic love: love-desire, love-pleasure, love-enjoyment. It is the type of love that Sena so often treats in his poetical and fictional corpus, and which he defends against puritanism, for example, in the long poem «Sobre Esta Praia,» against sexless love-passion, as in the poem «A Morte de Isolda» of Arte de Música, and against mystical ecstasy, as in the short story «O Grande Segredo.» To Sena, erotic love is no less human and wholesome than other loves — brotherly love, compassionate love, intellectual or philosophical love, religious love or man’s love for God, divine love or God’s love for humankind — all of which Sena deals with in his works, and some of which he upholds. Erotic love, Sena might readily admit, may be more often than not acquisitive (although it has the potential for being reciprocal); it is sometimes used destructively (although it is for the most part a constructive force); and it may even assume a diabolically ugly face (although much good and beauty in human life stem directly or indirectly from it).
That Jorge de Sena may have, consciously or unconsciously, conceived *O Físico Prodigioso* and the short story «Kama e o Gênio» as complementary works — indeed, as works providing two entirely opposite outcomes warranted by two equally opposite attitudes toward erotic love — is suggested by the many inversions and parallels between the two texts in the elaboration of plot, themes and ideology, and characters. It may be important to note in this connection that these works were both written in 1964.

Reduced to its most skeletal outline, the plot of *O Físico Prodigioso* concerns a young and handsome medieval physician who, empowered by the Devil to whom he henceforth owes sexual favors but from whom he himself derives magical and sexual powers, is led to the castle of a love-sick young widow whom he cures. His miraculous and sexual powers, which he utilizes to the benefit of many of the castle’s residents, extend to the dead themselves, whom the wondrous physician resuscitates and restores to the joys of sexual love. But here ends the physician’s reign of wonders, for it soon collides with the forces of the established order, represented by the old inquisitorial figures. The physician is persecuted, tortured, and eventually left to die. Love triumphs in the end, but in the person of another physician who emerges to replace the first. As for those who would destroy erotic love, they are themselves destroyed by it.

In «Kama e o Gênio,» the basic plot of erotic love versus the established order and conventional morality is reenacted. To safeguard morality, the old Genie kills a young lover who is trying to win the sexual favors of his beloved. The boy, however, who is empowered by none other than Kama (and who is, in fact, Kama disguised in human form) later returns as a thief. When this thief is about to be impaled for his crimes against the established social and economic order, the Genie comes again face to face (indeed, face to bottom!) with the power of Kama, and has a change of heart. He helps save the boy’s life and is rewarded by the god, who promotes the Genie socially and allows him the opportunity of partaking, to a degree he would never have allowed himself to experience before, of the blessings of sensual pleasure.

Keeping in mind the fact that, in its rich thematic fabric and in its highly experimental design, *O Físico* is an infinitely more complex and polysemic work than the story presently under consideration, Sena’s characterization of the novella quoted earlier is wholly applicable to «Kama e o Gênio.» In this story, too, erotic love is viewed as a supreme, indestructible force with the power not only to survive but actually to win over those who, due to fear, self-interest, or in the name of conventional morality, would oppose or destroy it. Indeed, the love ideology that informs *O Físico Prodigioso* complements the one that shapes «Kama e o Gênio.» The joint ideology of the two works is that erotic love is a potentially constructive and potentially destructive force — but only destru-
ctive to those who hypocritically deny it, attempt to suppress, or repress it. It is a positive force in the lives of those who have the courage and honesty to accept it as an inherent part of human nature.

As far as characters are concerned, the most obvious parallels in the two works are, on the one hand, between the wondrous physician and Kama and, on the other, between the inquisitors and the Genie. As the Devil himself says to one of the inquisitors, the wondrous physician «e beleza indestrutível, a juventude indestrutível, o poder indestrutível de amar.» As stated earlier, part of that power derives from a pact with the Devil, although the Devil, here as elsewhere in Sena’s works, is nothing but a personification of powers residing in humans. The wondrous physician has no name. «E, na verdade, eu não tenho nome, porque o nome que me deram não é meu. Além de que eu mudo de nome por cada terra e por cada castelo onde passo» (p. 53). Indeed he does change names, for he is Eros in Greece, Cupid in Rome, Kama in India. Conservative, anti-life forces in Christianity prefer to call him, simply, the Devil. No wonder that, in O Físico, the Devil governs and empowers all: he empowers the physician; and there is a strong possibility that the physician’s beloved, Urraca, is really the Devil. The Devil even appears to one of the inquisitors who summons him in the very figure of the summoner, for the inquisitors, despite themselves, cannot entirely ward off the Devil’s erotic power of attraction. And, as often happens, for example in one of its favorite homes, Greece, Love is not always discriminating as to its sexual orientation. This, too, is obvious in O Físico. Although the physician decidedly favors the heterosexual orientation, the same cannot be said of the Devil. For in Sena’s conception, Love — whether it be called Eros, Cupid, Kama or the Devil — is simply the desire or impulse to experience joy through sexual union, irrespective of clear preference.

And sexual union is the denial, the antithesis, of transcendence or, in the Hindu system, Moksa — redemption, spiritual release. On this earth, love stands for redemption, however it be conceived. Both the physician and Kama are creatures of this world. In O Físico, after witnessing the indestructibility of Love personified in the wondrous physician, the crowd of people attempts to exhume his body. This action, as I tried to demonstrate elsewhere, parallels the removal of the body of Christ from the sepulchre and may be interpreted as an attempt, on the part of the masses, to deify the physician who, in many ways, was conceived by Sena as a Christ figure — an inverted Christ, to be more exact. But the physician’s body is retained by Mother Earth. Try as they might, the crowd is unable to retrieve the physician’s or Urraca’s bodies. We are invited to conclude that the reason why Mother Earth will not part with them is because they personify a strictly human, a strictly this-worldly, love, precisely in opposition to those who, supposedly upholding an other-worldly conception of
love, succeed in destroying the physician and his beloved’s bodies but not what they stand for. The physician does die a corporeal death. What resurrects, in the person of another physician, is the love that the first physician embodied. It is this new physician who will — who does — initiate another reign of love that can never end for as long as humans exist and have the courage and imagination to conceive of an Eros, a Cupid, a Devil, or a Kama.

As is well known, a distinction is made between Kama, the Hindu love-god, who is also known by several names and epithets, and the principle kama, meaning «love,» «desire,» «pleasure,» «enjoyment,» and which is the second aim, end or area of life in the Hindu system of classification of the four basic principles governing human reality, human nature, and conduct. The other three aims of life are Artha or material possessions, which are served broadly by economics and politics; Dharma or religious or moral duties; and Moksa, the ultimate aim of life in Hindu thought, which pertains to redemption or spiritual release. Sena’s story implicates, more or less directly, various attributes of the god Kama and the notions inherent in kama as the basic principle of the Hindu philosophy of pleasure. Some of the god’s attributes and manifestations have to be taken into account if we are to appreciate the parallels between O Físico and «Kama e o Gênio,» even though some of these attributes and manifestations of the Hindu god are only implicit in Sena’s text.

The wondrous physician’s power is largely manifested through magic, which in turn stems from his pact with the Devil. «Kama,» writes Heinrich Zimmer, «is of the essence of magic, magic of the essence of love; for, among nature’s own spells and charms, that of love and sex is pre-eminent. This is the witchcraft that compels life to progress from one generation to the next, the spell that binds all creatures to the cycle of existences, through deaths and births» (p. 148). This progress of love from generation to generation is patent in O Físico in the emergence of the new wondrous physician who inherits and carries on the magic powers of the first. In «Kama e o Gênio» it manifests itself through (Sena’s interpretation of) the Brahmanic transmigration of souls.

Two of the main legends told about Kama illustrate key aspects of his nature, aspects which Sena utilizes in the story and which bear a close parallel to O Físico. The first concerns Kama as Ananga, «bodiless.» It is a story of crime and punishment. The «crime» is Kama’s having taken aim with one of his arrows at none other than Shiva, the «archetypal ascetic-solitary,» as Zimmer calls him, of the Hindu trinity. Shiva’s punishment is to render Kama invisible, which is just as well for it enables him, much like the wondrous physician, to «hover above and between lovers intangibly, invisibly forcing them to each other’s embrace» (Zimmer, p. 141). It is this power that allows Kama to act in Sena’s story without
being detected by the Genie. The second story concerns Kama as demon, for he, too, much like the wondrous physician in relation to the Judeo-Christian Devil, is associated with the old Vedic devil, Namuci. (As we know, «Kama e o Génio» is the first in a collection of short stories entitled precisely Novas Andanças do Demónio [1966].) The reason for this association, so the legend goes, is that Kama, in the form of a youth carrying a lute, appeared to none other than the Buddha and tried to tempt him away from achieving timeless transcendence, showing that Kama, much like his counterpart the wondrous physician, is a free spirit of this world, not of any world beyond. So much so that Sena conceives of him as dallying with village girls; as severely reprimanding the Genie when the latter opposes, in the most brutal fashion, sexual consummation. Indeed, Sena conceives of the Hindu love-god as undermining, at considerable risk to himself, the established economic order by becoming a thief. Finally, Sena sees Kama as magnanimously rewarding the Genie when the latter intervenes on the side of Love.

Despite the humor — and, we might even say, the affection explicitly and implicitly displayed by the narrator in the characterization of the Genie, the latter plays essentially the same role in «Kama e o Génio» that the inquisitors do in O Físico. Except at the very end of the story, the Genie is on the side of Artha and Dharma, not kama. Sena's conception of the Genie, as the author himself suggests in the note to the story, is largely derived, albeit with some basic modifications, from Jeannine Auboyer's Daily Life in Ancient India, whose Portuguese translation by his wife, Mécia, Sena revised. 4 In the chapter entitled «The Importance of Religion in Daily Life,» Auboyer discusses celebrations — including the spring festival of the love-god Kama, to which Sena's story also alludes — and popular cults, magic and superstitions common in village life in the India of 200 B. C. to 700 A. D. «The theory of the transmigration of souls,» Auboyer writes, «so firmly anchored in the Indian mentality, inevitably lent authority to the popular belief that there existed a whole category of supernatural beings, whose malevolent or benevolent activities exercised a constant influence on the life of individuals.» 5 Among these numerous spirits, there were the nagas, who inhabited caves and subterranean streams, and the yakṣas or tree-dwelling spirits who lived in large trees in forests or in the vicinity of villages. Some yakṣas inhabited trees in cemeteries. «These contemplated the distressing scenes of burials and cremations, and witnessed the torturing of criminals, at the cost, sometimes, of seeing their finest branches lopped off to serve as stakes for impalement» (Auboyer, p. 154). Sena's Genie, as well as the devils in «Kama e o Génio,» partakes largely of the nature and duties of these yakṣas. For the yakṣas, one of the advantages of living in a sacred tree was that «it provided an ideal observatory from which they could participate in everyday activities, and enabled them to indulge their
fondness for admonishing and moralizing, and their penchant for making predictions» (Auboyer, p. 153). According to Auboyer, there were two things the yaksas hated: having the branches of their trees cut off, and living on banyan trees — because, due to their strong network of roots, the banyans killed nearby trees, thus depriving the yaksas of their much-loved shade. Perverse Jorge de Sena conceives of his Genie as living in a banyan, and as sacrificing a branch of his own tree — an act that, in the overall context of «Kama e o Gênio,» can almost be viewed as the symbolic equivalent of self-castration — when circumstances call him to the exercise of his duties as guardian of conventional morality.

Still, Sena’s Genie finds life relatively amenable in his banyan tree, and he discharges the duties of his office well: «era um gênio sóssegado, cumprierdor dos seus deveres (que não eram nenhum além da sua mesma existência), e muito respeitador da hierarquia» (p. 127). In conjunction with his respect for hierarchy, he is, above all, preoccupied with morality, as the two basic stories told about him in «Kama e o Gênio» clearly illustrate. The first story concerns an old village tightwad who once had threatened to chop down the Genie’s tree. Having died in a cart accident, he had reappeared as a rat who, tortured to death one day, had reemerged as a large lizard—a lizard who eventually dies, trouvère-like, of unrequited love for a she-lizard who wants absolutely nothing to do with him. He finally learns his lesson, however, and, in his next reincarnation, gains acceptance within the Genie’s moral scheme of things: «Era agora um gato ajuizadaissimo, que não caçava mesmo um mísere maina que lhe poussasse ao pé, e vivia em meditação contínua, deitado virtuosamente à porta de casa de um seu neto ... Era de esperar que recuperasse a forma humana» (p. 126; my italics).

Due to his «immoral» sexual behavior, on the other hand — his attempt to win the sexual love of his sweetheart right under the banyan tree—the shoemaker’s son does not fare so well with the Genie. The cautious Genie, however, hesitates before taking decisive action: «Que fazer? A tentação era grande de assistir a tudo. E o amor, mesmo o mais vil, rege o mundo e é uma das mais belas coisas do universo, ao que se diz. Mas a virtude e o sacramento do matrimônio e a virgindade são essenciais à ordem social. Ora um gênio de árvore pertence, afinal, muito mais à ordem social que à ordem erótica do Mundo» (p. 127). And so, to protect that social order and ensure his own place in it, the Genie strikes a blow against the erotic order of the world and kills the youth.

What saves the Genie in the end? Paradoxically, although not surprisingly, that same erotic order against which, obeying his philosophy of duty, the Genie had struck a blow. First and foremost, the Genie does kill the youth but not the indestructible power of love which he embodies — much the same way that, in O Físico Prodigioso, the inquisitors can destroy the
body of the physician but not prevent the emergence of another wondrous love-bearer. The Genie will confront Kama once again when the latter, in the person of a thief, is about to be impaled for theft. The reason why the Genie saves him, without really knowing he is Kama, is that the Genie, like any other living creature and malgré lui, is himself possessed to a much larger degree than he cares to admit by the spirit of Kama, something that, up to now, he has contrived to suppress and repress although not totally obliterate. At one point in the story, the narrator alludes to the fact that one of the Genie’s favorite food is a chicken wing. One time that he satisfies this innocent desire, his devil friends, who know the kind of moralist the Genie is, mock him by ironically telling him not to worry for the chicken wing had not come from the girl whom the shoemaker’s son attempted to seduce and who, subsequently, had been killed but had returned to life as a chicken. When Kama is about to be impaled on the stick in which the Genie is hiding, the latter feels as though the chicken wing becomes agitated inside of him — possibly suggesting one of three things, or all of them at the same time: that the Genie’s orientation was not homosexual (the victim is male and the stick of torture is the Genie’s own); or that the Genie’s fear of erotic love, to the extent that impaling has clear erotic implications, compels him to instinctively save the boy and thus avoid witnessing yet another manifestation of the power of Kama; or, finally, that the Genie decided to make amends for his earlier cruelty against the erotic order in the person of this same boy incarnated as the shoemaker’s son. Be it as it may, the Genie cannot bear to have the boy impaled on his own stick, and so decides to help him escape. Kama’s reward is to transfer the Genie to a tree within one of the god’s sanctuaries, and to give him as companions and servants a group of dryads, beings whom the yaksas traditionally married, as Auboyer informs us (p. 153). It is the dryads who, one day, bring the Genie his supreme treat: a chicken wing. And so the Genie, who had previously opposed it, joins the erotic order of the world: he is most comfortably installed in Kama’s own courtyard and attended by a host of dryads and tellingly munching on chick wings — a decidedly unusual place and situation for a staunch moralist to find himself in.

Joining the erotic order of the world is what the inquisitors refuse to do in O Fisco Prodigioso. When they all discover that they had acquired the physician’s own appearance — that they, too, had become possessed by the youthful and beautiful countenance of that erotic love they so desperately wanted to destroy — they cover their heads to disguise the fact, instead of accepting or reconciling themselves to it. And so their confrontation with Eros — unlike the Genie’s — ends in tragedy.

In and of itself, the genetic conceptualization of the two works on the part of Sena achieves, therefore, thematic expressiveness. O Fisco Prodi-
gioso is a tragic allegory of the human rejection of and brutal resistance to erotic love set within the framework of the history of Christianity. As we know, from the earliest moments of his career as a writer, and as the first short story of Genesis, "Paraíso Perdido," written at age seventeen, clearly demonstrates, Sena's conception of erotic love is very often viewed in relation to the anti-erotic, anti-life stance inherent in the Genesis story and in patristic doctrine, particularly that of St. Augustine, and upheld, to a greater or lesser degree and often with tragic results, by Christianity throughout the centuries. "Kama e o Gênio," on the other hand, and in harmony with the positive outcome of this story of erotic love, is an avowed divertissement (see Sena's Note to the story, p. 225) set against the backdrop of ancient Indian customs, the Brahmanic concept of the transmigration of souls and, more specifically and appropriately, of the Hindu philosophy of sensual and sexual pleasure as personified in the love-god Kama.

NOTAS

1 O Físico Prodigioso (novela), 2ª ed. (Lisboa: Edições 70, 1980), p. 112. Future references to this edition will be included in the text.
2 See Francisco Cota Fagundes, "O Artista com Um Malho: Uma Leitura de O Físico Prodigioso," Studies on Jorge de Sena, ed. by Harvey Sharrer and Frederick G. Williams (Santa Barbara, Jorge de Sena Center for Portuguese Studies, 1981), pp. 133-41.
3 Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India, ed. by Joseph Campbell (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 35-42. Future references will be included in the text.
4 See Jeannine Auboyer, A Vida Quotidiana na Índia Antiga desde o Séc. II A. C. até ao Séc. VII D. C., trad. de Mécia de Freitas Leça (Lisboa, Livros do Brasil, s. d.).