

## FROST-BITTEN FOOT: DIALOGUES WE LIVE BY

Carlos Augusto Ribeiro  
Ana Paula Guimarães\*

By comparing Portuguese and Brazilian versions of “The Ant and the Snow”<sup>1</sup> (Stith Thompson: Z.42: “Stronger and Strongest: frost-bitten foot”<sup>2</sup> / Aarne-Thompson: type 2031: “Stronger and Strongest”<sup>3</sup>) and by inserting in our steps towards the interpretation of this apparently simple children’s story (a special type of formula tale,<sup>4</sup> a cumulative tale<sup>5</sup>) a text from

\* Universidade Nova de Lisboa. Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas. Av. de Berna. 1050 Lisboa. Portugal.

We would like to thank João Barrento for sharing with us his invitation to the international congress of the Comparative Literature Association of India (“Popular Literature: Challenging the Canons”), Ines Köhler Zülch and Christine Shojaei-Kawan of the Enzyklopädie des Märchens for helping us find “Strong and Strongest” versions all over the world, Maria de Lurdes Faria e Silva and Allison Blanchard for kindly helping us translate our text. We would also like to thank Fundação Oriente for supporting part of the trip, Instituto Camões, Centro Cultural Português and Luís Moura Rodrigues for inviting us to stay in New Delhi.

<sup>1</sup> Adolfo Coelho (1847-1919), *Contos Populares Portugueses* (1879), Lisboa, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1985, pp. 85-6; “Contos Nacionais para Crianças” (1882), reprinted in *Cultura Popular e Educação*, Lisboa, Publ. Dom Quixote, 1993, pp. 34-5. Alda e Paulo Soromenho, *Contos Populares Portugueses*, I, Lisboa, Centro de Estudos Geográficos, 1984, n.ºs 19-21, pp. 26-29. Ana de Castro Osório (1872-1935), *Contos Tradicionais Portugueses*, 4.ª série, 2.ª ed., Setúbal, Liv. Para as Crianças, 1906. António Torrado, *A Formiga e a Neve*, Coleção Caracol, n.º 48, Lisboa, Plátano, 1982. Idelette Fonseca dos Santos and Maria de Fátima B. Mesquita Batista, *Cancioneiro da Paraíba*, João Pessoa, Grafset, 1993, pp. 256-8. Sílvio Romero, *Contos Populares do Brasil*, XXXIV in Luis da Camara Cascudo, *Literatura Oral no Brasil*, São Paulo, Editora Itatiaia, 1984, pp. 329-331.

<sup>2</sup> *Motif-Index of Folkliterature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux*, Indiana University Press, 1989 (The frost-bitten foot. Mouse perforates wall, wall resists wind, wind dissolves cloud, cloud covers sun, sun thaws frost, frost breaks foot).

<sup>3</sup> *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, FF Communications, n.º 184, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> According to Stith Thompson, in this kind of tales, formula tales, “the form is all important”: “The central situation is simple, but the formal handling of it assumes a certain complexity; and the actors are almost indifferently animals or persons.” And he adds: “Formula tales contain minimum of actual narrative. The simple central situation serves as a basis for the working out of a narrative pattern. But the pattern so developed is interesting, not on account of what happens in the story, but on account of the exact form in which the story is narrated.”

Although it is our aim to prove that there is more than formal interest in the pattern of this formula tale, we also will insist in the playful quality of this special kind of cumulative tale: “Sometimes this formalism consists in a sort of framework which encloses the story and sometimes in that peculiar piling up of words which makes the cumulative tale. In any case, the effect of a formulistic story is always essentially playful, and the proper narrating of one of these tales takes on all the aspects of a game.” [*The Folktale* (1946), University of California Press, 1977, p. 229].

<sup>5</sup> Insisting in its formal aspects, Stith Thompson writes: “A much more definite narrative core is found in the cumulative tale. Something of the nature of a game is also present here, since the accumulating repetitions must be recited exactly, but in the central situation many of these tales maintain their form unchanged over long periods of history and in diverse environments.[...] Most of the enjoyment, both in the telling and listening of such tales, is in the successful manipulation of the ever-growing rigmarole. The cumulative tale always gradually works up to one long final routine containing the entire sequence. The person examining cumulative tales, therefore, has only to look at this final formula to learn all that is to be learned about the whole tale. [...] The cumulative tale reaches its most interesting development [...]

*Panchatantra*<sup>6</sup> (“The Story of the Female Mouse”<sup>7</sup>), in this paper, we want to put forward some notes on two particular topics:

- one related to language (the fourth step of this paper);
- the other to environmental philosophy (the seventh step of this paper).

STEP ONE: FROST BITES THE ANT’S FOOT AND IT IS RESCUED BY ITS ELOQUENT BEHAVIOUR

(Ana de Castro Osório’s version for children<sup>8</sup>)

The foot of an hardworking, busy ant is caught by the snow. Strangely enough because the ant has taken great care avoiding needless risks choosing the best tracks and keeping itself from the dangerous cliffs. But there is no bridge and so the ant has to jump over the river. Its foot breaks the frost. Dying of fear, it cries out for mercy appealing to the snow first, then to the sun, the cloud, the wind, the wall, the mouse, the cat, the dog, the stick, the fire, the water, the man and eventually to death.

---

when there is not merely an addition with each episode, but when each episode is dependent upon the last.” *The Folktale*, p. 230, 232 — the tale we are about to analyse/interpret being one of those...

<sup>6</sup> Although Loiseleur Deslongchamps suggested in his *Essai sur les fables indiennes* (Paris, 1838) that the originals of the European folktales were probably to be found in India, it was Benfey who advanced it to a dogma in the introduction of his edition of *Panchatantra* in 1859. On one hand, animal fables were supposed to have their origins in the occident, in the Aesop fables, while the Hindus, “even before their acquaintance with the animal fables of Aesop which they received from the Greeks, had invented their own compositions of a similar kind [...]. The difference between their conceptions and those of the Aesop fables consisted in general in the fact that whereas the Aesopic writer had his animals act in accordance with their own characteristics, the Indic fable treated the animals without regard to their special nature, as if they were merely men masked in animal form. Furthermore, to these may be added, for one thing, the essentially —and in India exclusively— didactic nature of the animal fable, and for another the prevalent Hindu belief in the transmigration of the souls (we will confirm this when looking at *Panchatantra*’s version where the animal, accidentally a mouse, changes places with a woman).

Folktales on the other hand, and especially *Märchen* show that they were originally from India; and, what is still more important, it is with these tales that the Hindus —although in a large measure only at a later time— have, so to speak, paid back over and over again the debt incurred by the borrowing of the animal tales from the Occident (T. Benfey, *Panchatantra: Fünf Bücher indischer Fabeln, Märchen und Erzählungen*. Leipzig, 1859, in *The Folktale*, p. 376).

<sup>7</sup> Pandit Vishnu Sharma, *Panchatantra*, 9th ed., New Delhi, Rupa, 1998, pp.160-3. Also a story collected in an anthology of gypsy folktales: Diane Tong, *Contos Populares Ciganos*, Lisboa, Teorema, 1989, pp. 34-6. Referring to this chain known as Stronger and Strongest (Z41.2; Type 2031), Thompson writes: “It is found in Oriental tale collections and appears frequently in medieval literature. Though nowhere really popular [it is essentially literary], it has traveled to every continent. The chain may go in either one of two directions [in the *Panchatantra*’s story of the female mouse the chain forms a circle, starting in a mouse and ending in a mouse]. It may start with God and show how he was the ultimate cause of the frostbitten foot. Or it may likewise take the cause to the little mouse who gnawed a hole in a wall. In the first, and more extensive, version, the final formula is: ‘God how strong you are — God who sends Death, Death who kills blacksmith, blacksmith who makes knife, knife that kills steer, steer that drinks water, water that quenches fire, fire that burnes stick, stick that kills cat, cat that eats mouse, mouse that perforates wall, wall that resists wind, wind that dissolves cloud, cloud that covers sun, sun that thaws frost, frost that broke my foot.’” (*The Folktale*, p. 232).

<sup>8</sup> Ana de Castro Osório, *op. cit.*

Each of these elements is directly related to the others and each element points at its opponent. In this dialectical polarity, each element shows the ant the impossibility of taking any action.

Eventually, the ant is rescued on its own merit: it has high human moral qualities. The clouds, together with the sun, freed it by melting the snow.

It is thus expressed how cosmical justice turns up at the right time. This text understates that nobody in this world will be forgotten if he or she equals the good qualities of the ant and the human being: they have the same features, they are ontologically similar.

Justice works like the sun itself, melting the snow after the clouds having been swept off the sky. A scenery of luminous justice and salvation is set: the ant's claims were heard in the skies (Heaven?). The whole nature, moved, shows its solidarity with the ant and so death does not dare to say the last word.

By accident an ant's foot is bitten by frost but it is rescued because in a world of justice nothing happens out of pure chance.

STEP TWO: FROST BITES THE ANT'S FOOT AND IT IS RESCUED BY ITS ELOQUENT AND CHARMING *LENGALENGA* (RIGMAROLE)  
(adaptation by António Torrado, illustrations by Madalena Raimundo<sup>9</sup>)

Moved by the charming "lengalenga" sung by the ant, the snow decides to melt a little bit — enough to let the ant free ("um bocadinho. Foi o que bastou").

As if the powerful words had the magic to warm and melt the stiffness of ice cold beings...

This version focuses on the magic of a tale, of a song, of a charming lullaby — reminding the reader of the ancient use of poetry as an art "designed" to act and not just to adorn.

STEP THREE: FROST BITES THE ANT'S FOOT AND IT IS ABANDONED TO ITS OWN FATE (Adolfo Coelho's version for children<sup>10</sup> and the original text he collected and published in 1879<sup>11</sup>)

---

<sup>9</sup> Antonio Torrado, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Adolfo Coelho "Contos Nacionais para Crianças" cit., pp. 34-5. About the importance of Adolfo Coelho's practical and theoretical work on the relations of pedagogy and ethnography (the fundamental part played by traditional elements —stories, rhymes, proverbs, riddles, games— in the development of body and mind) cf. preface to *Contos Populares Portugueses* cit. and the investigations of Maria Gertrudes Veríssimo, *Actualidade Pedagógica de Adolfo Coelho* (Lisboa, F.C.S.H., 1993) and Ana Vitória Cláudio, *Francisco Adolfo Coelho — o Saber Institucional e as Tradições Populares* (Lisboa, F.C.S.H., 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Adolfo Coelho, *Contos Populares Portugueses* cit., pp. 85-6. This first collection of tales by an ethnographer in Portuguese language dates back to 1879. Early in his seventeen-eighteen (in 1864) he planned to enregister on paper all he could collect related to popular practices, customs, ceremonies and beliefs either found in books or directly observed.

On its way to the hilltop, an ant's foot gets caught in the snow. Asking for help she addresses the snow, the sun, the cloud, the wind, the wall, the mouse, the cat, the dog, the stick, the fire, the water, the goat, the knife (and the blunt knife). The ant and the reader/listener finds out that "From the top down to the bottom/ Nothing is strong in this world". Even the knife (death, in other versions<sup>12</sup>) loses its edge becoming a useless object. After the chain of elements having been asked, the ant has to live with its own destiny.

Adolfo Coelho concludes this version designed for children with a rhyme ("Desde o alto até ao fundo/ Nada é forte neste mundo") which suggests the idea of generalized relativity — as if the magical quality of the rhyme itself had the power to create partnership, a way of relating what apparently is not to be related: things living in far away worlds (top and bottom, far and near).

In the oral version collected by Adolfo Coelho, an ant is caught by the snow and urges for help by the supreme powers of the universe: the snow, the sun, the wall, the mouse, the cat, the dog, the stick, the fire, the water, the ox, the butcher and death.

The ant is going to die. Because each member of this dialogue has only a relative power, destiny depends on luck. The ant's petitions do not reach the sky. The ant faces its final moment: it cannot escape death, which is the unbearable side of our lack of power. Even Time, with its metamorphical power, turns out to be destruction: there comes a moment when the power allowed to each being is defeated by the unlimited power (in space and time) of Death (the dog kills the cat but it cannot kill death). Because each individual strength is determined by the resistance shown by the partner next to you, salvation is not determined by virtue. The sky (like Heaven?) does not wait: both justice and values are destroyed.

In both texts, each element (either from nature or from culture) has its own power of destruction but it does not compare to death which transcends them all. Death is impartial in setting its targets, which are selected at random: even the knife (of Adolfo Coelho's version for children, equivalent to the butcher in the traditional text) that is meant to kill does not escape from death. Death stands for expropriation and annihilation.

---

<sup>12</sup> This coming up of a "knife" in this version for children could signify the stripping away flesh and bone (the job of naturalists in the dissection room of the 17th century academy: "the need to excise myth by dissecting nature", "nature under constraint and vexed" according to Francis Bacon's proclamations), that is, "the cutting away myth and legend" (Matthew Senior, "When the beasts spoke", *Animal Acts*, New York, Routledge, 1997, pp. 71-2).

According to this point of view, this version for children is ironically the one that introduces the technological object, a knife, which will destroy the world of conviviality (a surface without judging instances) creating the world of anatomy (etimologically "separation", "analysis").

STEP FOUR: THE LANGUAGE ISSUE

An ant’s foot gets caught in the snow and we get to know that nature *speaks*. Because of an accident, we face this fabulous (from “fable”<sup>13</sup>) event: each time this text is performed, nature breaks its silence (short or long term silence?<sup>14</sup>) and starts answering the ant’s challenges.

Speech equals democracy: it is the instrument of mediation and claim to solidarity (complete union of interests and responsibility). Language belongs to nature, animals and humans.

When human beings steal language and thus expropriate nature, language is no longer a linking instrument and it becomes an instrument of power, of separation, of supremacy of man over nature (and language hides the solidarity amongst elements of nature). Furthermore: the personification in narratives is not a form of restitution of language to the earth inhabitants but just a lending process. When nature was silenced, human beings felt that they had to extract from mute nature its secrets through the means of language. Human invasion is now legitimate because nature presents itself as mute. Through language, Man becomes nature’s creditor and is able to play his fictional supremacy over universes that will always evade his understanding.

An ant’s foot gets caught in the snow. A hole in the snow or a full stop mark on a white sheet of paper bringing to an end the line of footprints. In a way, we are dealing with white writing, a series of sentences in a chain, the sense of which is going to be revealed. In the end, even if the ant’s foot is not released (in the oral tradition versions) it succeeds in pulling out the hidden chain of relations between all beings.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> The old sense of *fabula* was not a “fabulous” narrative but “a secret and potent force, akin, as its very etymology shows, to the power of *fatum*”, what has been said, what involves existence and destiny. There is a concern about the efficacy of myth which means the preservation of the world and of life, an aim of the ecological approach, too (Raffaele Pettazzoni, “The Truth of Myth”, *Sacred Narrative*, ed. by Alan Dundes, University of California Press, 1984, p.103). Unlike the old fables, we thereafter consider the *fable* as a textual space where language is restored to those who own(ed) it: sun and water, frogs and princes, stones and flowers, ants and snow.

<sup>14</sup> Historically, “language withdraws from the midst of beings and enters its age of transparency and neutrality” (Michel Foucault) with the 17th century scientific revolution. The book of nature started to be read in the language of mathematics because “nature takes no delight in poetry” (Galileo’s quotation in the end of his book). According to former “animistic” points of view (like the Greek myths of Orpheus and Hermes, the Egyptian myth of Thoth), animals and humans were linked together in the origin of language, which had been created by hybrid human-animal, human-god, and human-plant creatures: “Spoken and written language is alive; it is botanical and biological. Phonemes are living trees and graphemes are flocks of birds flying across the sky in Orpheus’s living language” — “the orphic names are metamorphic names which intertwine the names of people with the names of the species. [...] They designate something common to individual humans and whole species of animals and plants. They violate the modern boundary between humans and other life forms, and they confuse the distinction between the individual and the group” (Matthew Senior, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-9).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Ana Paula Guimarães, “A Mulher da Roda” (*Nós de Vozes—Acerca da Tradição Popular Portuguesa*, Lisboa, Colibri, in print) and the foot as a metaphor of drama in enclosed space: walking line and circle line around a center.

The ant's feet leave its footprints (printmarks) on the snow page. The ant will learn a lesson about how each being prints itself upon the others. By biting the ant's foot, frost shows both its power and the ant's weakness: the relativity of strength according to every situation. If snow itself has the power to cover the earth (and acts as a spatial category), the sun has the power to melt it (and acts as a temporal category). Every being prints itself over the others in a sort of codified writing.

An ant's foot gets caught in the snow. What is the ant going to do? It starts a dialogue calling by its name each being that answers its claims; each being appeals to a more powerful one that joins the dialogue then. From the ant's point of view, dialogue is the way to avoid tragic paralysation caused by the fatal, catastrophic accident. Dialogue relieves pain and drives away the threat of despair (caused by the lack of perspective). While negotiating its freedom, she dialogues for time (or is dialogue plain entertainment for the ant?)

Structurally, dialogue is another way to proceed with the disrupted walking. It represents the power of imagination against nature's indifferent power. By talking, the ant escapes imobility (*stasis*), delays death caused by hypothermia and avoids the freezing/*corpsing* of its body.

Apparently, the ant can do nothing. Yet its mouth is not stuck in the frost. The uttered words thus represent a deviation from the scene of individual tragedy, a deviation from private pain towards (involuntary) understanding of its place in the universe. In fact, the story of "The Ant and the Snow" is not a story of the ant's misfortune and its terrible death in a snow scenery. The story of "The Ant and the Snow" is the story of successive telescoping of the scenes of life in the cosmos. This story can be seen as the frame which destroys the crystallized frame, the prism refracting the diversity of invisible relations among beings.

This story does not show nature as a mere scenery or backstage of a determined action. In fact, we could speak of this nature as *non-landscape* because nature projects itself in the ant and not the other way round depending on the existence of a point of view. From an anthropomorphical point of view, nature is here *de-centered*.

Alone, one little ant is caught up by the snow. Divorced from her group or from the *moving-house* which the unity of a nation might represent, she exposes herself to danger, to the risk of death in snow (a landscape, like its opposite, the desert, where an experience of limits is to be lived). This story could thus act as an allegory or parable of contemporary science, which also confronts itself with the relativity of its power. Is the ant's mission voted to abortion? Or is it a fruitful mission which will place the ant (and the reader/listener) in a state of mind of deep understanding of the relations between all things and beings (and this dichotomy will no longer make sense).

Snow would then be the abstract plain space (hiding traps and perils) of rationalist, cartesian science spreading out along the whole earth—a vast mantle or veil which overlays nature keeping us away from her touch and from the visible world?

One (intelligent, hardworking or absent-minded?) ant gets stuck in the snow. She speaks. She turns away from fear. And fear is followed by wonder. She speaks and she hears. Nature answers her provocative dialogue. But her speech is not an instrument or a ransom coin; it is the imprint of conviviality, the checkmate to all individual pretensions/ claims/ merits.

An ant's foot is caught by the snow. The story's action is a succession of stage entrances: talking characters. Physical action is suspended and substituted by dialogue. There is an interrupted action through which the place of the others is to be found—*by means of* and *in* dialogue. This interrupted action (figuring death) shows the relations among all beings and the space allowed to each in the general living frame (not to be forgotten: things are also beings). This intermission, a pause, shows the need of appeal to more powerful instances—gradually presented in their relative force. The ant speaks and they speak to her. Delirium? Coma?

An ant's foot is caught by the snow. She is surprised and it is dangerous to be surprised. Surprise means to be absent (out of the present); it means you did not take good care or you have overvalued your own capacities and faculties. Speech among the beings relaxes the ant, leading her to oblivion of her individual tragedy in favouring a non hierarchical protagonism.

Coloquial nature. Democratical colloquiality in nature.

An ant's foot gets caught in the snow. There is a pause in its exploratory stroll.

An ant's foot gets caught in the snow. Through this dark point in a white page, the universe (or rather the *multiverse*<sup>16</sup>) is to be found: the *whole*, the constellation the ant belongs to. The ant is the hinge (a pivotal axis), a line (resulting) of intersection of planes or simply a point that congregates multiple and irradiant directions. The ant plays the role of a frame which paradoxically tends to go beyond its limits by including other points in space. The ant becomes a lost stitch in the infinite web of the universal network. The ant faces the other beings, has a perspective of the world *from itself*, discovers itself in an open situation related to the outer world (the world out of frame). Centered in its self-interest, the ant comes to the point *when and where* it finds itself to be a knot of unknown or

---

<sup>16</sup> "We must move away from the delusory 'certainty' of the Uni-verse to the freedom of the Multi-verse" (Vincent Kenny, "Life, the multiverse and everything: an introduction to the ideas of Humberto Maturana", paper presented at the Istituto di Psicologia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1985).

forgotten relations. It is as if the ant sees itself as a knot and the universe unravels in front of its eyes.

All this happens because of its accident. We could say that it is through its foot that we are informed about the virtual world of links—actually, this world of links comes to be visible through the audible, by listening to a folktale.

In fact, from the earliest years...

- human beings perceive and organize existence through narrative;
- narrative constitutes reality as much as it reflects it;
- changes in narrative paradigms may reshape not just plots, but modes of thought;
- narrative has the power to transcend the limits of fiction and reorganize her readers' modes of thought.<sup>17</sup>

An ant's foot gets caught in snow.

The scene, the winter landscape, is dis-membered by this constant operation of de-centering of successive frames. This operation points to our notion of non-landscape. The concept of landscape is usually related to a subject-center perspective (the cartesian space). Indeed, the individual is the centre from where the space is organized or framed. On the contrary, this story shows that the framed visual field is permanently shaken and altered by the inclusion of the remaining field, which is out of frame. We could ask: is the violence of the cutting similar to the arbitrariness of nature and fate?

We see death playing the role of the operator of equivalences when we are faced with what we could call the *any-centre* perspective: any being is vulnerable to death which is brought by other being and all beings in turn are vulnerable to death that happens to be a collector of debts and lives. The saint or the murderer are both united in death.

STEP FIVE: AN ANT'S FOOT GETS CAUGHT IN THE SNOW AND IT BECOMES A THIEF  
(Brazilian version collected by Sílvia Romero<sup>18</sup>)

---

<sup>17</sup> Jerome Bruner "The Narrative Construction of Reality", *Critical Inquiry*, n° 18, pp. 1-21, and Margaret Greer, "Who's Telling This Story Anyhow? Framing Tales East and West: Panchatantra to Boccaccio to Zayas", essay presented at the Mid-America Conference on Hispanic Literature, Lawrence, Kansas, September 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Sílvia Romero, *Contos Populares do Brasil*, XXXIV in Luís da Câmara Cascudo, *op. cit.*, pp. 329-331. In the version collected by Idelette Fonseca dos Santos e Maria de Fátima B. Mesquita Batista (*op. cit.*, pp. 256-8) the story (which ends with/in/by death like all the traditional portuguese versions) is not told but sung (by Maria de Fátima Batista, 36 anos, Campina Grande). There is also a brazilian version popularized by records for children in which God interferes sending spring to melt the snow.



An ant walks in the fields and gets stuck in a little patch of snow. It starts a dialogue with the snow, the cloud, the wind, the wall, the mouse, the cat, the dog, the leopard, man and... God (again, face to face, like in the beginning of Creation, or like in the final judgement — a vast white scenery, the snow?).

Unlike the other versions where there is only contemplation, this version presents an unexpected final: "God answered. – 'Ant, go and steal'. That is why the ant leads an active life stealing."

God answers (and the world is no longer plain because there is a transcendental point of view and point of speech) the ant's claim advising her to steal, that is, to follow its nature and its destiny. In fact, the ant builds its underworld fortresses by stealing food rests from humans. Its job is to steal. To steal and be clandestine. The biological reputation of ants confirm that they collect, assemble, keep, spare — one would say that they work the way men do.

Strange morality for a story? Maybe not. Work implies theft, expropriation either of nature or of humans. We steal because the object of our wishes was not given to us and that is why nobody can help us and that is why there is no other way out than steal. To steal or die. Clandestinely, escape from death.

One question: was the ant used to steal before getting stuck in the snow? If the answer is no, then it means that theft is now authorized by God. And was it sanctioned for all beings or just for ants (metonymically nature)? Like the snow, the ant has to be apparently inoffensive to be able to capture what she sees.

This version probably reveals the hidden theft perpetrated by humans, who may use personification as a device of simulated generosity towards nature.

STEP SIX: INSTEAD OF AN ANT... A MOUSE

(Indian version<sup>19</sup>)

An ant's foot gets caught in the snow... and what if it were the king's daughter or a fox and not an ant?<sup>20</sup> And what if it were a female mouse, like in the *Panchatantra* version of this tale?<sup>21</sup> The story of the female mouse *who* changes into a girl, an adoptive child and then a bride, finishing in a

---

<sup>19</sup> Pandit Vishnu Sharma, *op. cit.*, pp. 160-3. Diane Tong, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-6.

<sup>20</sup> Instead of an ant there are Portuguese versions where we have the king's daughter or a fox, a "zorrelha" or "zorrinha cagaitera, farta de migas a cavalhera" (Soromenho, *op. cit.*, I, nº 19-21, pp. 26-29).

<sup>21</sup> "Medieval Spain served as a bridge over which the frame-tale collection, along with so many other elements of Eastern culture, reached the West. The collection of tales known as the *Panchatantra*, much of which seems to have originated in India and the Near East, acquired in its eighth-century Arabic translation an open-ended frame in which a wise man tells stories to educate a king's sons who had previously refused instruction. Augmented and renamed with an arabic touch *Kalilah and Dimnah*, the collection came to Europe through the Arab conquest. When Alfonso X had it translated in the thirteenth century, it became, according to a recent editor Thomas Irving, the first extensive piece of prose literature in the popular language of Spain and a point of confluence in the streams of Arabic and Spanish civilization. That work "ranks above all works in bridging 'Eastern' and 'Western' narrative traditions and in funneling Arabic content and structure to European medieval vernacular writers" (Katherine Gittes, *Framing the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer and the Medieval Frame Narrative Tradition*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1991). The frame narrative tradition that developed thereafter, according to Gittes, bore the continuing tension between open and closed structures, between the attraction of symmetry and the suspense of the indefinite. Whereas, she says, the earliest Arabic frame narratives suggests that medieval Arabs perceived the natural world as a world where boundaries and structure, if they exist, are not especially desirable; the later European frame narratives, notably the *Decameron*, the *Confessio* and the *Canterbury Tales* suggest the reverse; that even though the natural world appears disorderly, the medieval Christian longed to see a spark... which would give the sensation that underneath the disorder lies a comforting divine harmony, perhaps ordered along Pythagorean lines. The harmony hinted at in these fourteenth-century frame narratives is a harmony which the reader will see and fully comprehend in the afterlife. What looks like disorder on earth is God's order misperceived. [...] With reiterated apologies for the imprecision of the terms 'Eastern' and 'Western', Gittes draws a fundamental contrast between East and West in the metaphysical conception of the world. The East, rooted in nomadic tribal life [figured by the ant walking along?], saw the world as open, and appreciated the infinite variety and limitless renewability of life [a sort of cumulative unending tale?]. Early Arabic literary forms, such as the pre-Islamic *qasida* or ode and the tenth and eleventh century Arabic *picaresque*, or *maqamat*, have a loose, open-ended and linear structure, organized not by a unifying theme or idea but by the perspective of the speaker or central character [the ant's perspective over the whole world?]. Hence a collection such as the *Thousand Nights and a Night*, the product of a culture which avoids rounding off numbers, but prefers 1001 as meaning a large, indefinite number. Gittes traces the Western view of a more closed universe back to Greek mathematical principles, to the preference of Pythagoras for geometry over algebra, and for what Gittes describes as a concept of organization, a notion of unity, in which the whole has greater importance than the parts. Pythagoras, voicing what had been implied in Greek thought before his time, stated that the universe is harmonious because all its parts are related to one another mathematically. He thought that mathematical order lay behind the apparently mysterious, arbitrary, and chaotic workings of nature. This insistence on harmony, unity, and the orderly subordination of the part to the whole underlies the literature, art and architecture, and world view passed on from Greece and Rome to medieval European philosophers" (Margaret Greer, "Who's Telling This Story Anyhow? Framing Tales East and West: Panchatantra to Boccaccio to Zayas", essay presented at the Mid-America Conference on Hispanic Literature, Lawrence, Kansas, September 1994). These Portuguese traditional versions of "The Ant and the Snow" would expose the world in the "eastern" way (without boundaries other than death and time), whereas the rewritten children stories worry about giving a sense or a clue to solve the knot of the matter, to free the listener or the hearer from the fear of sticking to nothing. God (in some versions), weather as Spring (in others) has to come to the visible to relax those who live in and out of the tale.

mouse again, proceeds as follows: when she reaches the age of getting married, the suitors show up — the sun, the cloud, the wind, the mountain, the mouse (that actually digs like the ant). She dismisses them all, insisting in getting married with "someone better". And each suitor summons a superior element. Let's listen to the Sun God, the first one to appear before father and daughter after it has been rejected as being "too fiery-tempered": "Megha [a cloud] is superior to me, for when he covers me, I am no longer visible."

She ends up by marrying the mouse, the one of her kind, asking her father to change her into a female mouse again. She becomes a mouse, for the second time in her life, and she gets married. From mouse to mouse: here lies the reversibility of magic. The nature of magic and science is to perform the change of places, the change of appearances — the art of change through which everything comes back to its place or its initial state.<sup>22</sup>

The relative power of human magic is thus expressed because magic cannot alter the intimate nature of beings. That is why "Turning down the offers of marriage Made by the Sun God, The Cloud, The Lord of the Wind, and the Mountain, a female mouse chose a husband of her own kind" and that is why one must hear the lesson: "therefore, even if this crow is reborn an owl, he would still be a crow at heart. So we must kill him."

#### STEP SEVEN: AN ECOLOGICAL PARABLE

One little solitary ant turns away from the relations with her community partners—one challenge to its biological condition.

In fact, ants are the dominant little-sized organisms of the planet. And by "little", Edward O. Wilson<sup>23</sup> means: "intermediate in size between bacteria and elephants (...) Ants alone weigh four times as much as the birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals combined."

Ants and termites ("the most highly social of all organisms"<sup>24</sup>), wasps and bees (their rivals in colonial organization) make up about 80 percent of

---

<sup>22</sup> See notes 4 and 5.

<sup>23</sup> Edward O. Wilson, "In the company of ants", "Ants and cooperation", *In Search of Nature*, Washington, Island Press, 1996, pp. 45-69.

<sup>24</sup> It is for biologists absolutely fascinating to study these insects' cooperative behaviour which made them survive and proliferate so successfully: "In my view, the sharing of food and water is a more important component of advanced social behaviour than dominance, leadership, or any other kind of interaction. When sharing is extended beyond offspring to include siblings and less close related individuals —in other words when it becomes truly altruistic— it tightens social bonds and leads to the evolution of some of the most complex forms of communication in the animal kingdom" (Ed. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 64).

A socially rich existence, a complex communication system, reciprocity and solidarity would belong to this behaviour trained to sharing in a process named by biologists as "social stomach": "what a worker holds in her crop at any given moment is approximately what the rest of the colony possesses. So when the colony as a whole is hungry, the same is true of each of the foraging workers to a closely similar

the biomass. This dominance is due to their *social organization* which gives them competitive superiority over *solitary insects*.

Wilson writes:

Wherever you go in the world, from rain forest to desert, social insects occupy the center—the stable, resource-rich parts of the environment. (...) They seized control of a large part of the terrestrial environment long before the first primates, let alone the first human beings, walked the earth. For most of 100 million years they've imposed a deep imprint [a foot's imprint?] on the remainder of terrestrial life [the snow?]. In terms of their success and longevity they have a great deal to teach us—not, by example, surely, but by illumination of the *interlocking* principles that join sociobiology to ecology and the study of evolution.

*The illumination of the interlocking principles*—the aim of this cumulative tale.

Long before John Muir, David Brower or Robinson Jeffers<sup>25</sup>, the oral tradition comes out as a declaration of principles of deep ecology, an eco- or biocentric approach to the uni/*multiverse* (multisided perspectives). Let's stop for a minute and hear some declarations and statements of philosophers and activists while thinking about the ant's story.

In the *Cathedral Forest Wilderness Declaration* (1984):

We believe that all things are connected, that whatever we do to the earth, we do to ourselves. If we destroy our remaining wild places, we will ultimately destroy our identity with the earth: wilderness has values for humankind which no scientist can synthesize, no economist can price, and no technological distraction can replace.<sup>26</sup>

Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (1949): “we are only fellow-voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution.”<sup>27</sup>

Robbinson Jeffers (1934):

I believe that the universe is one being, all its parts different expressions of the same energy, and they are all in communication with each other, therefore parts of the organic whole. (This is physics, I believe, as well as religion.) The parts change and pass, or die, people and races and rocks

---

degree. When the colony requires a particular nutrient, the foragers look for it — they have no need to be told” (p. 67).

As far as we know there is in these insects' social community a command centre. The colony's activity seems to be the sum of individual decisions—suggesting a lesson to be learned by humans?: “When everyone has roughly the same stomach content, individual decisions become similar, and a more harmonious form of mass action is possible” (p. 68).

<sup>25</sup> George Sessions, Bill Devall, *Deep Ecology*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1985, pp. 98-106.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 60, 85, 107.

and stars; none of them seems to me important in itself, but only the whole.<sup>28</sup>

John Muir (1875) inspired ecology movements by asking pertinent questions and rejecting human solipsism:

Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why ought man to value himself as more than an infinitely small composing unit of the one great unit of creation?... The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells between our conceitful eyes and knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Against the anthropocentric quality of the romantics (they "never saw nature. They were looking at their own minds"<sup>30</sup>), David Brower, the author of *This is the American Earth* (1961) grounds his philosophy in Jeffers's deep ecological insight that humans are only a small part of the biosphere, not lord and master of all.<sup>31</sup>

Would then folktale represent the art of living for a future generation<sup>32</sup>, the right to experience human absence<sup>33</sup>? Aldous Huxley claimed that young children began their science training with the study of life sciences and ecology instead of physics and chemistry. When asked whether this was too complicated for children, Huxley replied:

That's precisely the reason why we begin with it. Never give children a chance of imagining that anything exists in isolation. Make it plain from the very first that all living is relationship. Show them relationships in the woods, in the fields, in the ponds and streams, in the village and the country around it.<sup>34</sup>

Children are taught ecological truths in animal fables. They are shown examples of erosion and ecological damage in places where greedy people

---

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 101.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> Raoul Vaneigem's title.

<sup>33</sup> George Sessions, Bill Devall, *Deep Ecology*, p.107.

<sup>34</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 170.

take without giving and examples of deep links in texts (like the one we are dealing with) which obviously states the mutual implication of everything and the relative power of all the elements—as if this text expanded in a fictional narrative John Muir’s supreme summary: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”<sup>35</sup>

... or Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan’s identical formulation:

The inhabitants of Earth depend on one another. Life on Earth is a tapestry or a complex woven web. If we pull some threads here and there, we will not know if damage stops there or if all the tapestry will be unwoven.<sup>36</sup>

This cumulative tale would act as a pastime, the possible dialogue to guarantee life and postpone death (the more characters in the tale, the later it takes the last character to enter stage), a way of dealing with our finitude (a foot bitten by earth). It could also be seen as a grammatical aid to learning comparatives (stronger than...) and superlatives (the strongest). But it could also be regarded as a piece of advice: if you walk in snow... you get stuck and because of being caught, you realize that you are a stitch in a web of links. You may survive or die. This live tale unfolds all the possible relations among elements, the whole chain of relations becoming visible *around* and *after* a foot has been stuck—a kind of a *game/play*<sup>37</sup>, a sort of touch-and-go game (actually called stuck-in-the-mud!), in which you are supposed to join in and avoid the touch, death, the re-starting of the sequence<sup>38</sup>.

Let us summarize some aspects:

- The ant as a distant relative of our human species. Edward O. Wilson explains the ant’s genealogy:

The evolutionary line that gave rise to ants and other social insects separated more than 600 million years ago from the line that gave rise to human beings. Insect social systems are completely independent of our own and differ from it in many profound ways.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Carl Sagan, Ann Druyan, *Sombras de Antepassados Esquecidos*, 2<sup>a</sup> ed., Lisboa, Gradiva, 1997, p. 136.

<sup>37</sup> *Play* — there must be an aspect of play in the sequential process of this story. Opposed to ritual (the affirmation of relationship), play is defined as “the establishment and exploration of relationship”. Natural play gives way to selection which acts to settle things and fix behaviours, stopping the play in the closed form of the ritual but also allowing the beginning of new plays. Plays, not players, are selected for (Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature*, New York, Bentam Books, 1979, p. 151).

<sup>38</sup> “Formula tales, especially chains and cumulative stories, though they have about them many qualities which belong to games and are therefore amusing to children and to those who never grow up, have aesthetic value of their own. Their essential formal quality is repetition, usually repetition with continuing additions. This is what students of the popular ballad call ‘incremental repetition’, a stylistic feature which adds much to the appeal of many of our finest ballads” (Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, p. 234).

<sup>39</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

In this story, the ant is in the centre of the world, a place where the human being likes to be placed against the precepts of deep ecology which aims to deprive humans of this privileged position to create a biocentric and not anthropocentric perspective. Would the tale play the role of a vestige of the mythical time when humans and ants belonged to the same family (a language community), when animals spoke among themselves and men with them?<sup>40</sup>

- Ants seem to have the capacity of survival in different habitats: from rain forest to desert. How do they live in the snow? Hibernating? Would the story figure the ant's boldness walking alone on an adverse ground? Isn't it/she one of those solitary insects called by Edward O. Wilson "specialists of the fringes—the ephemeral part of the habitat"?

- The ants' community as a fascinating lesson for human beings who look at it as a model of chain non conflictual relations.

- In this story there are sharing and not dominance relationships. Although all powerful beings are named, not force but relativity comes out of it. Could it be a form of ritualization of sharing, a rite of passage to a new state of understanding of social bonds?

- In spite of emphasis in collective life, there is a notion of individual autonomy. This ant belongs to a scene of both the group chaining all beings and the personal experience.

- The ant is a symbol<sup>41</sup> of the little-sized living creature, its impotence and vulnerability. In the way of a Chinese painting, this picture leads the observer to watching and realizing the ignorance, challenging all elements, all status in nature. In a Leuvenhoekian revolution, world is no

---

<sup>40</sup> The title of a book about Konrad Lorenz: *He Talked to Mammals, Birds and Fishes?*

<sup>41</sup> We could get involved in a symbolic reading of these entities by which we are determined, in between the scope of the ant and the snow: being a symbol of industrious activity, of organized community life, the ant isolates itself from society in order to realize the relative power of each element. Symbolically, she has the power of anticipation and provision, characteristics stretched out by La Fontaine to the point of collision with egoism and stinginess.

"La Fourmi n'est pas preteuse;  
C'est la son moindre défaut.  
'Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?  
Dit-elle a cette emprunteuse.  
— Nuit et jour a tout venant  
Je chantais, ne vous deplaise.  
— Vous chantiez? j'en suis fort aise:  
Et bien! Dansez maintenant."

(*Fables de la Fontaine*, Ars Mundi, 1993, p. 6)

In Tibetan Buddhism, the ant and the ant-nest represent hardworking life and excessive attachment to the earthy goods: "le peu de prix des êtres vivants individuels, voués à la médiocrité et à la mort, s'ils ne tendent pas à Brahman, l'infini de la petitesse évoquant l'infini de la divinité" (Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrandt, *Dictionnaire de Symboles*). The passage is opened up: from the small, dark ant to the vast, white snow which symbolizes, in several cultures: a) when falling, the relation to the numinous, to the height and to light; b) when covering the ground (the case of this text), the sublimation of the ground or the earth itself. Connected with the sky (or heaven), snow forms a white-blue axe (upward direction) with mystical and hierogamic characteristics.

longer perceived by the human scale. According to David Quammen in "Small things considered"<sup>42</sup>, "we tend to regard as inconsequential the small forms of life" but these little-sized forms determine the bigger ones. The ecological approach to the oral tradition is actually based on this tribute to the little-sized<sup>43</sup>.

On the ecological discourse, we also get our foot or our both feet caught in the snow. In the 'ecological theatre' of co-evolution (a multitude of physical interactions), we are in the same situation as the ant<sup>44</sup>. Actually, we

---

<sup>42</sup> *The Sciences*, Nov-Dez. 77, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> See n. 45 and Ed. O. Wilson, "The little things that run the world", *In search of nature*, pp. 141-5: "In 1988 [...] I estimated that a total of 42,580 vertebrate species have been scientifically described [...]. In contrast, 990,000 species of invertebrates have been described, of which 290,000 alone are beetles — seven times the number of all the invertebrates together: they certainly are so diverse because of their small size." In fact, "each one is fascinating in its own right. If human beings were not so impressed by size alone, they would consider an ant more wonderful than a rhinoceros." And actually we need them more than they need us: "If human beings were to disappear tomorrow, the world would go on with little change. Gaia, the totality of life on Earth, would set about healing itself and return to the rich environmental states of 100,000 years ago. But if invertebrates were to disappear, it is unlikely that the human species could last more than a few months. Most of the fishes, amphibians, birds and mammals would crash to extinction about the same time. Next would go the bulk of the flowering plants and with them the physical structure of the majority of the forests and other terrestrial habitats of the world. The soil would rot. As dead vegetation piled up and dried out, narrowing and closing the channels of the nutrient cycles, other complex forms of vegetation would die off, and with them the last remnants of the invertebrates. The remaining fungi, after enjoying a population explosion of stupendous proportions, would also perish. Within a few decades the world would return to the state of a billion years ago, composed primarily of bacteria, algae and a few other very simple multicellular plants" (Ed. Wilson, *op. cit.*, p.144).

<sup>44</sup> "Herberto Maturana used to use the phrase 'biological stickiness' to describe how any two systems, upon encountering one another [the ant and the snow?; the ant and the human being it may represent?], stayed or 'stuck' together. They fit together [like a foot adjusted to the frost?; like a human adjusted to an ant?] and remain together and continuously interact recurrently with each other." Later on, he described this happening of living as "love", without which there would be no social phenomena. Although one cannot say that the ant and the snow actually fall in love with each other [we could propose a phallic reading of this encounter with the ant's foot perforating the white, terrestrial, virgin surface], we could speak of this "encounter" as a co-ontogeny (each becomes part of the domain of existence of the other and form a system within which and because of which continuous recurrence of interactions are formed). "Every system is where it is, in a present, in congruence with its medium, and cannot be anywhere else" — this statement by Maturana underlies the coherence and congruence of each system in its domain of existence. A (human) system has to "accept" or to "respect" his ontogenic drift, a result of structural interactions and changes [become stuck to or rooted in the ground]. And Maturana adds that unilateral steering is an illusion [by itself, the ant can do nothing], the path of drift is contingent upon the interactions. It is without any choices. It is a path of conservation of a) the organisation of the living system and b) of congruence with the medium — this being the paradigm of survival. Linguistic behaviour arises with consensual coordination of behaviour, as a result of two systems living together [language would be born out of the conviviality or fusion between the ant and the snow or because of our need to tell the occurrence]. Mutually implicated behaviours arise because of their co-ontogeny, of living together [ant speaks and snow freezes/melts interchanging heat and coldness].

Languaging is not trivial because it is a manner of living in a co-drift: "all that takes place in human life is languaging, and all that takes place in languaging is conversations." Language is a way of being together in a collective [the ant, the snow, the sun, the wall, the mouse... ], it is a way of co-ontogenically drifting. As observers, we describe these interactions in semantic terms: we fit together a concave and convex lens, well adjusted like a foot in the frost.

For Maturana, there is no objectively existing reality and whatever we experience it is one of our own creation. It is up to the observer to make distinctions, operations of separation of an entity from a



ask for the very first cause of our misfortune and we are astonished with the very old lesson concerning the interdependence of all beings—meaning the beings and the time before the invention of known dichotomies: culture/nature; man/animal; organic/inorganic; order/disorder, and so on.

From the ant's inquiry comes out a chain of cause and effect. She brings out all the causes which, by their turn, seem to be the effect of previous causes up to the origin (abduction). That origin situated neither in the past nor in the future is in the present moment of her foot caught in the snow.

Unlike the other characters in the narrative, the ant does not possess an exclusive opponent. It seems that the the opponents in conjunction are her opponents as a whole. This fact contributes to the impression of ant's fragility and vulnerability. Indeed, she is the figure of cosmical fragility of all beings. Is she a knot where the apocalypse has a 'chance' to be revealed?

This story is not only about individual fate and misfortune. We could say that there is a latent level telling about the danger of a natural apocalypse. In the universe there is a power of annihilation, negation and destruction (death, knife, slother) shared by all beings: since the beginning of the cosmos, each one possesses a relative power to kill the other. But this power is subsumed/subordinated to an absolute power of Creation that transcends all entities and destroys the sum of all individual powers. To this complex picture we must add the fact that, in a given moment, anyone—as it happens to the ant – may, since its Creation, have more than one single opponent assigned to. In fact, there is a frightening possibility of unbalancing these natural dissuasions: dialectical polarities that assign to an entity a certain neutralizing power.

Since death is pictured as the absolute power of the universe, we may suspect that the power of creation is overwhelmed by the power of destruction. Death is on top of everything and may be the origin of everything. We sense a dilemma without solution. Like the ant, we risk our foot in the snow formed by our abductions. When this happens, we also know that it is useless to ask *why* it happens? The reply is never complete. However, we have the chance to know *how* this happened. We have the chance to know *how* we got our feet bitten in snow. If we are lucky we may escape the fatal moment of death.

We saw that the ant did not ask directly for the cause of its fate. It did not ask for a scapegoat. It only asked for help.

This story challenges the expectations of dramatic actions. We can imagine the ant's facial expressions according to the possible final end of each version: smiling, in despair or in joy. Certainly, this is a superfluous

---

background (Vincent Kenny, "Life, the Multiverse and Everything: An Introduction to the Ideas of Humberto Maturana", paper presented at the Istituto di Psicologia, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1985).

matter. What really matters is our possibility of wandering around without coercion. What really matters is the miracle (or illusion?) of freedom. What really matters is that the possibility of disaster occurring never exceeds the possibility of our recovering our freedom of movement. Considering another point of view, we could say that every moment something is dying and something is being born. And this metamorphosis is the ambivalent face of death. And this metamorphosis is not possessed by anyone in particular—probably because all beings are concerned first with their self-preservation. Maybe, the spontaneous imperative of self-survival plays against the cosmical imperative of change.

Some important consequences concerning this parable follow:

- When language is no longer the privilege of human beings, the opposition nature/culture weakens;
- Each being speaks by itself without mediators (a political consequence). Speech is democracy (critics of a biased and one-sided communication) and through it each being exposes its relative power in the transhuman community, an *utopia* where the principle of solidarity dominates all beings, men and beasts, stones and plants.
- This community is established by language, by direct access to dialogue, in which all destinies find themselves mutually related. We are facing here a truly ecological conception (Haeckel) of the complex relations nature/culture.

Through this children's (childish?) cumulative tale, popular literature thus challenges:

- The anthropocentric canon by suggesting a radical change of perspective: in a de-centered universe, the word comes out from any place in any direction,<sup>45</sup>
- The metaphorical canon, which is established by the *metaphors we live by*.<sup>46</sup> Even the concept of environment (etimologically 'around') is

---

<sup>45</sup> Unlike La Fontaine's fables where all creation is seen in a constant state of strife and the animal world is presented in a "rapacious predatory order, an inexorable food chain with man at top" (even "human culture is part of a self-regulating, predatory chain of creation, and the poet himself a predator", correcting and punishing human excesses, a wolf devouring his prey), texts like these trace back a non mechanical universe, with no size scaring features (another ant in another folktale is stronger than a dog or bull, a cricket can be a king...) and where the biotic community is actually linked by speech (Matthew Senior, *op. cit.*, p. 78).

<sup>46</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, University of Chicago, 1980. The "metaphors we live by" could well also be those configured by the biochemical level where semiotic processes are prevalent. After the breakthrough in our understanding of the semiotic character of life with the establishment in 1953 of the Watson-Crick double-helix model of DNA and the subsequent deciphering of the genetic code (the understanding of nature was no longer concerned mainly with communicative processes between organisms — 1976 Sebeok's exosemiotics), in 1973 Roman Jakobson pointed out that the genetic code shared several properties with human language and that both were based on a double-articulation principle (Jakobson, 1973; Emmeche-Hoffmeyer, 1991). Jesper Hoffmeyer,

generated by a one-sided and centralized SPACE conception (the snow) which can only be *melted* by TIME (the sun) which is supposed to *melt* the oppositions based on a single point of view.

As a strategy of resistance to these canons, popular literature thus may produce *non-scenarios* and *non-landscapes*, ways of *being nature* (more than being *in* it or thinking *about* it).

ABSTRACT

By comparing Portuguese and Brazilian versions of "The ant and the snow"<sup>47</sup> (Thompson motif Z.42: "Stronger and Strongest"<sup>48</sup>: frost-bitten foot" / type AaTh 2031: "Stronger and Strongest"<sup>49</sup>) and by inserting in our steps towards the interpretation of this apparently simple children's story (a special type of formula tale<sup>50</sup>, a cumulative tale<sup>51</sup>) a text from

---

"Biosemiotics: Towards a New Synthesis in Biology", *European Journal for Semiotic Studies*, vol. 9, nº 2 (1997), pp. 355-376.

\* We would like to thank Professor João Barrento for sharing with us his invitation to the international congress of the Comparative Literature Association of India ("Popular Literature: Challenging the Canons"), Professora Isabel Cardigos for helping us finding "Strong and Strongest" versions all over the world, Dras. Maria de Lurdes Faria e Silva and Allison Blanchard for kindly helping us translate our text. We would also like to thank Fundação Oriente for supporting part of the trip, Instituto Camões, Centro Cultural Portugues and Dr. Luís Moura Rodrigues for inviting us to stay in New Delhi.

<sup>47</sup> Adolfo Coelho (1847-1919), *Contos Populares Portugueses* (1879). Lisboa, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1985, pp.85-6; "Contos Nacionais para Crianças" (1882), *Cultura Popular e Educação*. Lisboa, Publ. Dom Quixote, 1993, pp.34-5.

Alda, Paulo Soromenho, *Contos Populares Portugueses, I*. Lisboa, Centro de Estudos Geográficos, 1984, nºs 19-21, p.26-29.

Ana de Castro Osório (1872-1935), *Contos Tradicionais Portugueses*, 4ª serie, 2ª ed.. Setúbal, Liv. Para as Crianças, 1906.

Antonio Torrado, *A Formiga e a Neve*. Lisboa, Platano, Coleção Caracol, nº48, 1982.

Idelette Fonseca dos Santos and Maria de Fatima B. Mesquita Batista, *Cancioneiro da Paraíba*. João Pessoa, Grafset, 1993, pp.256-8.

Sílvio Romero, *Contos Populares do Brasil*, XXXIV in Luis da Camara Cascudo, *Literatura Oral no Brasil*. São Paulo, Editora Itatiaia, 1984, pp.329-331.

<sup>48</sup> *Motif-Index of Folkliterature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux*. Indiana University Press, 1989 (The frost-bitten foot. Mouse perforates wall, wall resists wind, wind dissolves cloud, cloud covers sun, sun thaws frost, frost breaks foot).

<sup>49</sup> *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*. Ff Communications, nº184, 1995.

<sup>50</sup> According to Stith Thompson, in this kind of tales, formula tales, "the form is all important": "The central situation is simple, but the formal handling of it assumes a certain complexity; and the actors are almost indifferently animals or persons." And he adds: "Formula tales contain minimum of actual narrative. The simple central situation serves as a basis for the working out of a narrative pattern. But the pattern so developed is interesting, not on account of what happens in the story, but on account of the exact form in which the story is narrated."

Although it is our aim to prove that there is more than formal interest in the pattern of this formula tale, we also will insist in the playful quality of this special kind of cumulative tale: "Sometimes this formalism consists in a sort of framework which encloses the story and sometimes in that peculiar piling up of words which makes the cumulative tale. In any case, the effect of a formulistic story is always essentially

*Panchatantra*<sup>52</sup> (“The story of the female mouse”<sup>53</sup>), in this paper, we want to put forward some notes on two particular topics: one related to language (the fourth step of this paper); the other to environmental philosophy (the seventh step of this paper).

#### RESUMO

Ao comparar versões portuguesas e brasileiras de “A Formiguinha e a Neve” (Thompson motivo Z.42: “Stronger and Strongest”: frost-bitten foot” / tipo AaTh 2031, *Stronger and Strongest*) e inserindo nos nossos passos um texto do *Panchatantra* (“A história da ratinha”), rumo à interpretação desta

---

playful, and the proper narrating of one of these tales takes on all the aspects of a game.” *The Folktale* (1946). University of California Press, 1977, p.229.

<sup>51</sup> Insisting in its formal aspects, Stith Thompson writes: “A much more definite narrative core is found in the cumulative tale. Something of the nature of a game is also present here, since the accumulating repetitions must be recited exactly, but in the central situation many of these tales maintain their form unchanged over long periods of history and in diverse environments.[...] Most of the enjoyment, both in the telling and listening of such tales, is in the successful manipulation of the ever-growing rigmarole. The cumulative tale always gradually works up to one long final routine containing the entire sequence. The person examining cumulative tales, therefore, has only to look at this final formula to learn all that is to be learned about the whole tale. [...] The cumulative tale reaches its most interesting development [...] when there is not merely an addition with each episode, but when each episode is dependent upon the last.” *The Folktale*, p.230, 232—the tale we are about to analyse/interpret being one of those..

<sup>52</sup> Although Loiseleur Deslongchamps suggested in his *Essai sur les fables indiennes* (Paris, 1838) that the originals of the European folktales were probably to be found in India, it was Benfey who advanced it to a dogma in the introduction of his edition of *Panchatantra* in 1859. On one hand, animal fables were supposed to have their origins in the occident, in the Aesop fables, while the Hindus, “even before their acquaintance with the animal fables of Aesop which they received from the Greeks, had invented their own compositions of a similar kind [...]. The difference between their conceptions and those of the Aesop fables consisted in general in the fact that whereas the Aesopic writer had his animals act in accordance with their own characteristics, the Indic fable treated the animals without regard to their special nature, as if they were merely men masked in animal form. Furthermore, to these may be added, for one thing, the essentially—and in India exclusively—didactic nature of the animal fable, and for another the prevalent Hindu belief in the transmigration of the souls.[we will confirm this when looking at *Panchatantra*’s version where the animal, accidentally a mouse, changes places with a woman]. Folktales on the other hand, and especially *Märchen* show that they were originally from India; and, what is still more important, it is with these tales that the Hindus—although in a large measure only at a later time—have, so to speak, paid back over and over again the debt incurred by the borrowing of the animal tales from the Occident. (T. Benfey, *Panchatantra: Fünf Bücher indischer Fabeln, Märchen und Erzählungen*. Leipzig, 1859, in *The Folktale*, p.376).

<sup>53</sup> Pandit Vishnu Sharma, *Panchatantra*, 9th ed.. New Delhi, Rupa, 1998, p.160-3. Also a story collected in an anthology of gypsy folktales: Diane Tong, *Contos Populares Ciganos*. Lisboa, Teorema, 1989, pp.34-6. Referring to this chain known as Stronger and Strongest (Z41.2; Type 2031), Thompson writes: “It is found in Oriental tale collections and appears frequently in medieval literature. Though nowhere really popular [it is essentially literary], it has traveled to every continent. The chain may go in either one of two directions [in the *Panchatantra*’s story of the female mouse the chain forms a circle, starting in a mouse and ending in a mouse]. It may start with God and show how he was the ultimate cause of the frostbitten foot. Or it may likewise take the cause to the little mouse who gnawed a hole in a wall. In the first, and more extensive, version, the final formula is: “God how strong you are—God who sends Death, Death who kills blacksmith, blacksmith who makes knife, knife that kills steer, steer that drinks water, water that quenches fire, fire that burnes stick, stick that kills cat, cat that eats mouse, mouse that perforates wall, wall that resists wind, wind that dissolves cloud, cloud that covers sun, sun that thaws frost, frost that broke my foot.” *The Folktale*, p.232.

*Carlos A. Ribeiro & Ana Paula Guimarães, "Frost-Bitten Foot"*

---

história aparentemente simples e infantil, propusémo-nos avançar algumas notas sobre dois tópicos particulares: um relacionado com a linguagem (o quarto passo do nosso artigo); e outro com a filosofia do ambiente (o sétimo passo do nosso artigo).