

PRECISION, CONCENTRICITY AND WAVE-FORM
IN *UMA AVENTURA INQUIETANTE*: NOTES ON ITS TEMPORAL
AND LOCATIONAL REFERENTS¹

John Austin Kerr, Jr.

That questions of chronological or calendar time and geographical place are important in the prose fiction of José Rodrigues Miguéis is hardly debatable on a subjective level, yet there is a general lack of specific detail with regard to particular works. Therefore, it is proposed that *Uma Aventura Inquietante*² be examined with a view to furnishing concrete data in these two respects. It is hoped, furthermore, that these data will yield other insights into Miguéis' techniques beyond those elicited by a study of the temporal and locational referents of this work as discrete entities in themselves. First, the matter of time.

In contrast to most of Miguéis' earlier works (for example, *Páscoa Feliz*,³ *Onde a Noite se Acaba*⁴ and *Léah e Outras Histórias*⁵, the span of time over which the main action of *Uma Aventura Inquietante* takes place is clearly indicated, at least insofar as the day and the month are concerned. Much in the fashion of a diary, each of twenty chapters contains at least one notation as to the day and the month in which the events portrayed in that particular chapter are meant to have taken place.⁶ Sometimes, as in the second chapter of Part I, the second and sixth chapters of Part II, and the last chapter of Part III, there are several notations as to date. In this manner, the author indicates that the main span of time with which the novel is concerned is a two-month period beginning on a February 20th and ending on a 20th of April (pp. 17 and 263).

Nevertheless, this temporal aspect is actually more complicated than the steadily-recurring indications of date lead the reader to believe throughout most of the story. First, it should be noted that, while the main action begins on the 20th of February and is largely ended by the last definite indication of date (the 20th of April), the last three paragraphs on the last page of the novel take place at an indefinite time after April 20th: the passage is labelled "sem data" (p. 264). The point in time closest to the present is therefore not definitely indicated. Thus Miguéis has set his temporal referents in such a manner as to allow for a great deal of elasticity with regard to chronological or calendar time at the point in the story which is closest in time to the reader's "present time," while at the same time increasing the tension of the novel's plot by the mention of a long succession of definite dates — dates which are given in a visually stressed position at the head of each chapter, one might also point out.

Then, there is the question of the year in which Zacarias has his misadventure with the law. Here the reader, although certain that the epoch is twentieth-century, must make deductions from textual indications salted here and there in the story. There are, for example, numerous references to World War I and the immediate postwar era (pp. 29, 38, 50, 51, 55, 60, 186, 199-202, 207, 220 and 221). There are references to the Polish politician, Pilsudski, who died in 1935 after having become a prominent figure in the years immediately following World War I (pp. 44 and 137). There is even a reference to the Soviets (p. 167), which places the action in the years following the Revolution of 1917.

Besides these, there are indications of other sorts which tend to fix still more clearly in historical time the period which Miguéis is portraying. For example, there are numerous references to a great economic depression which afflicts Belgium, its financial structure and its trade with other countries (pp. 33, 46, 103, 108, 254 and 264). Given the magnitude of its effects, there is no reason to suppose that it is not the Great Depression of the 1930's. In addition, there is a catastrophic future event which is foreseen in *Uma Aventura Inquietante*: on the far horizon, some of the processes leading to World War II can be seen at work (pp. 193 and 263). At the same time, the Belgians criticize a current wave of gangsterism in Chicago (p. 208) while their politicians belabor the question of Disarmament (p. 263).

All of this leads to the conclusion that the story takes place at some time during the decade of the 1930's, after the onset of the Great Depression but before that of the Second World War. Indeed, bearing in mind the dates of publication of *Uma Aventura Inquietante* in its original form (1934-1936), the range of possible dates is even narrower: 1929-1930 to 1934-1936. Such a range is already a fairly precise one, but Miguéis has given one further indication which removes all doubt as to the year in which the action occurs: the fact that Chapters V and VI of Part II are dated "February 29" (pp. 135 and 149, respectively). We are dealing, therefore, with a leap year: that is to say, within the framework of the possibilities mentioned above, either 1932 or 1936. Furthermore, the latter date must be eliminated, due to the fact that the original publication, let alone the writing, of the novel was complete by July of 1936. For this reason, it is obvious that the period of time in which the main action of *Uma Aventura Inquietante* takes place begins on February 20th, 1932 and proceeds to April 20, 1932, before being finally terminated at an indefinite, but presumably fairly immediate, time afterwards.

Of interest with regard to the author's precision in locating the main action of the novel is the contrasting aura of temporal imprecision surrounding the protagonist's past. It is only in the penultimate chapter that Zacarias' age at the time of the main action is given: he is forty-eight (p. 247). Earlier, there is mention of his having gone to Africa ". . .com pouco mais de trinta anos. . ." (p. 99), or at some time after the year 1914, if one turns back in time for a maximum of eighteen year from 1932. Nevertheless, there is no mention of African involvement in World War I, so one would presume that Zacarias was at least thirty-three or thirty-four years old when he journeyed to that continent. Other than that there are only such references as ". . .alguns anos no Congo. . ." (p. 101) ". . .durante um ano. . ." (p. 103) and ". . .um ano, ou pouco mais. . ." (p. 103) to guide the reader, until he notes that at one point Zacarias is forty-five years old (p. 105), and that a year and a half later the Tampico Fuel Oil Company goes out of business (p. 107).

The cumulative effect of these indications, however, is imprecise: thus, they simply serve to give the reader an impression of motion backwards or forwards in time, while at the same time heightening the aura of mystery that surrounds Zacarias' past, particularly his African adventures.

Zacarias' age is useful in another respect, as well, for it gives us the earliest possible limit of his personal experiences. Given that he is forty-eight years old in 1932, his hypothetical date of birth would have lain approximately in the year 1884. Therefore, unlike the main characters in such stories as "O morgado de Pedra-Má,"⁷ who might have belonged to Miguéis' grandparents' generation or those in "Saudades para a Dona Genciana,"⁸ whose life might have coincided roughly with his parents' lifetime, or the protagonist of *Páscoa Feliz*,⁹ who was a fictional contemporary of Miguéis', Zacarias d'Almeida occupies an intermediate position in this respect: he is older than the author but younger than Miguéis' parents. Thus, while almost all of the events to which allusions are made fall within the author's lifetime (and an extremely important portion of it, at that¹⁰) and therefore conceivably within his personal experience, the very earliest events, such as the protagonist's attending the "Colégio Nacional da Rua das Pedras Negras" (p. 139) would seem to antedate the year of the author's birth. In sum, *Uma Aventura Inquietante* is to some extent a transitional work with respect to chronological or historical time vis-à-vis Miguéis' own lifetime, is somewhat different from its fictional predecessors with regard to the author's presentation of temporal referents, yet is highly indicative of Miguéis' control of this aspect if one notes the varying degree of precision with which it is handled.

As is the case with time, *Uma Aventura Inquietante* is clearly set in terms of the geographical location — place — of the main action. Zacarias' involvement with the law occurs in Belgium, principally in Brussels and environs, although the scene does shift to Antwerp and other places from time to time. Nevertheless, the total impression of the geographic scope of the story is much vaster than this, for the author has employed, as it were, a system of concentric circles in his use of toponyms and other indications of place, as if they were ripples generated by a pebble thrown into a pond. First, there are those place names which relate to the main action as it unfolds. Next, there is a series of toponyms to which reference is made in connection with the protagonist's life. Last, there are those places which are mentioned in connection with collateral aspects of the story. There are many overlappings among these three categories of locational referents, but when they are taken together, they cover no fewer than five continents.

To begin with, among the places one "actually sees," there are many which are easily identifiable in a standard atlas:¹¹ Woluwee, with its park (pp. 19 and 55); Brussels (pp. 25, 39, 46, 54, 65, 193 and 249); Antwerp (pp. 30, 39, 43, 44, 46, 65-67 and 225-232), and its principal river, the Schelde (pp. 225-226); the province of Brabant, which contains the city of Brussels (p. 40); other places such as Uccle (p. 43), Ixelles (p. 43), Mons (p. 47), Auderghem (pp. 209, 214-216) and Malines (pp. 218-223). Finally, there is the country of Belgium itself (pp. 28, 29, 39, 54, 62 and 71).

Still within this first category of place-markers, that is, those having to do with the main action of the story, there are at least two sub-categories: those which indicate certain characteristics of the Belgian nation, and those real or invented names which serve

to amplify the effect of Zacarias' being in a foreign environment, primarily a French-speaking one. Thus, in the first sub-category one finds allusions to a night watchman who speaks a mixture of French and Flemish (p. 20), to the Flemish people (pp. 30 and 83), to Flemish separatists (p. 40), and even to the "...pátria flamenga..." (p. 40). Similarly, in the second sub-category one encounters references to the "...Comissariado Central, Rua du Chêne..." on the second page of text (p. 18), the "...Avenida de Tervueren..." (pp. 19 and 55), a house at "...45 Rue d'Angleterre, à Gare du Midi..." in Brussels (p. 47), "Cinquantenaire" (p. 43), the "...Praça de Saint-Josse..." (p. 57), a "...Parque Leopoldo..." (p. 57), a "cervejaria Au Bon Coin..." (p. 57), Zacarias' room on the "...Avenida Michel-Ange, 103..." (pp. 79-81, 103, 233-242 and 257-261), a "...Bulevar des Arts..." (p. 245) and the "...Porta de Hal..." (p. 245). All of these last refer to Brussels: as far as Antwerp is concerned, one finds mention of an "...Avenida de Keyser..." (p. 228) and the "...Cercle Anversois..." (pp. 229-232).

Turning to indications of place having to do with the protagonist's past life, in other words from times antedating his being charged with the murder of Madame Piorkowska, we find references to his native country and city: Portugal (p. 128) and Lisbon (pp. 97, 102, 128 and 139). As Zacarias roams the world, we hear of his life in Africa (pp. 99-100), in the Belgian Congo (pp. 100-101, 128 and 167) and in Europe (pp. 102-103). Here the notations become much more precise, for the European continent is obviously of central importance to the story. After touching base at Lisbon (p. 102), Zacarias travels to Antwerp, Brussels (p. 102) and Hamburg before crossing the Dardanelles to Istanbul (p. 103). He then visits Versailles, the Tyrol, strolls along Berlin's Unter den Linden, is seen in Scandinavian fjords, dips the tips of his fingers into a canal in Venice and enjoys Bayreuth and Budapest (p. 103). He has a fine time in both Salonica and Piraeus before learning of his financial ruin in Verona (p. 103).

Zacarias thereupon returns to Brussels and, in keeping with his impoverished status, does not stray far. Thus, there immediately follows a series of references to the Belgian capital and nearby cities, which are made in such a way as to constitute a sub-type of the present category of places having to do with Zacarias' life: the "...Avenida de Tervueren..." (p. 105), the Bois (p. 105), the Bois (p. 105), Madame Heymans' house on the "...Avenida Michel-Ange..." (p. 106) and so forth. When his financial position improves temporarily, we hear of his taking modest sojourns in Bruges and in the Ardennes (p. 106). Basically, however, he must live in Brussels, and so one encounters references to the "...Porte de Namur..." (pp. 107 and 123), to a "...Restaurante Slave..." on the "...Champ-de-Mars," to a street-car stop at the "...Rond-point de Rue de la Loi..." (pp. 113, 119, 123), to the "Bulevar des Arts" (pp. 113, 123), to the police post at "...Cinquantenaire..." (pp. 116-117), to the "...Cercle Polyglotte..." (p. 123), to a "...Café Industrie-Bourse..." (p. 123), and finally to the "Bulevar de Waterloo..." the "...Porte Louise..." and a "...Café Horloge..." (pp. 123-124).

Now overlapping the first two concentrically-arranged indications of the story's locational orientation, now spreading far beyond their boundaries, one notes a third category of place references: those which are mentioned in connection with ancillary aspects of the work. There is an enormous number of them, beginning with those places having something to do with the murder: Woluwee (pp. 18, 35, 43, 50, 58, 90, 91, 124,

179, 185 and 249): Antwerp (pp. 34, 65, 143, 201, 212, 223, and 250); the "...Avenida de Keyser. . ." in Antwerp (pp. 34, 182, and 202); the area around Brussels' "...Gare du Midi. . ." (p. 36); its Morgue (p. 36 and Mons (pp. 37, 38 and 182). Among those references relating to people caught up by the crime there are: Scotland (pp. 39, 182, 203, 211, 214, 230 and 253); Auderghem (p. 50); Woluwee-St. Lambert (p. 52) and Brussels' "...Avenida de Tervueren. . ." (pp. 53, 239, 260). The Belgian capital itself is mentioned very many times (pp. 53, 66, 138, 176, 180, 185, 200, 201, 202, 207, 212, 215, 216, 220, 222, 223, 232 and 260) as people come and go about their business. During the police investigation, we also find mention of Soignies (p. 55), Waterloo and Louvain (p. 55). In and around Brussels, the activities of the police are concentrated on the "...Avenida Michel-Ange. . ." (pp. 73, 74 and 103), "...Cinquantenaire. . ." (pp. 73, 75 and 90) and of course the "...Comissariado. . ." (p. 80). In addition, there are also references to the "...Cercle Polyglotte. . ." (pp. 86 and 145) and to the "...Restaurante Slave. . ." (pp. 86, 145 and 250).

All of these mentions of place have centered mainly on the Belgian heartland. In contrast, during the episode in which Zacarias translates letters for the **Instituto Psicoterápico Dr. Wise**, we find the spurious blessings of this organization spread from the Upper Amazon (p. 110) to the Argentine and thence to Timbuktoo, Anchorage and Sydney via the Honduranian capital of Tegucigalpa (p. 110). The "Cinto Radiomagnético" is thus an object of international renown, if not efficaciousness.

We have reached the outer confines of the place-names mentioned in *Uma Aventura Inquietante* but, as one widening ripple on the water's surface is followed by another, so it is with this category of toponyms and other indications of place. Returning to the center of the disturbance, Belgium, we encounter the "...Rua de la Loi. . ." (p. 144) and the "...Rua d'Angleterre. . ." (p. 181). There is mention of Belgium once more (pp. 144, 201). Then, as the spreading waves send their impulses outwards, so with place references: a ripple touches first London (pp. 180, 192 and 252) and then New York (p. 180), another smaller one washes over Vienna (pp. 186, 193, 199, 200, 202, 215 and 230), Paris (p. 192), Berlin, Copenhagen and then Europe in its entirety (p. 192). Segments and fractions of arc touch upon Western Europe and Central Europe (p. 199), before fracturing further into wavelets striking Krakow (pp. 220, 231), Polish Galicia (p. 200), Prague (pp. 200, 201), Salonica (p. 201) and the Carpathians (p. 201). Then, as if their rhythmic energy were spent, one finds only choppy waters: references to the United States (p. 201), to Belgians (p. 206), France (p. 206), Ypres (p. 207), the English Channel, (p. 207), Ostend (pp. 208, 209 and 213), England (pp. 208, 215), Chicago (p. 208), Nice (p. 212) and Monte Carlo (p. 212).

At this point, one would suppose that the "kinetic" energy of this aspect of the story would be exhausted. However, just as choppy waters must still subside after the end of a storm, so it is with locational referents in *Uma Aventura Inquietante*: one finds allusions to the "...Restaurant Au Cerf Volante. . ." in Malines (pp. 213, 217, 249), Bruges (p. 220), Holland (pp. 226 and 254) and the North Sea (p. 226), Hamburg (p. 226), the Ukraine (p. 232), St. Gilles Prison in Brussels (p. 234), the "...Rotisserie Ardennaise. . ." in Brussels (p. 234), the Belgian capital's "...Bois de la Cambre. . ." (pp. 239 and 242) and its "...Chaussée d'Ixelles. . ." (p. 240) before spreading out to Italy,

Spain and Beira Baixa (p. 259). Finally, like roiled waters under a calm sky, the locational picture clears, returning to an increasingly faithful reflection of the current situation: as the novel comes to a close, one notes references to Coq-sur-Mer (p. 259), to Uccle (p. 260), Vilvoorde (p. 260) and, at the very end, Boitsfort (p. 262), where the author met the nameless Portuguese expatriate whose adventures were to form, perhaps unbeknownst to him, the framework for this detective novel (pp. 9-13).

To recapitulate, when one examines the temporal referents Miguéis has given his readers in *Uma Aventura Inquietante*, one finds that the author has been extremely precise about the setting of the main action with regard to calendar or chronological time. Furthermore, these referents are given a relatively large number of times in comparison with those existing in other works of Miguéis', and their importance is stressed by their most frequently-observed position at the head of each chapter. Such precision and repetition, it is argued, heightens the dramatic tension of the "present-time" plane of the work just as a corresponding **imprecision** with regard to Zacarias' past adventures adds to the aura of mystery which surrounds his African affairs. Secondly, the author allows for a great deal of elasticity regarding the reader's perception of his own "present time" vis-à-vis the novel's last segment of "story-time." Finally, with respect to Miguéis' own lifetime, the main action of *Uma Aventura Inquietante* is found to be set in a very important portion of it, even though the earliest events depicted may antedate it, thus causing the novel to occupy a somewhat transitional position among Miguéis' works insofar as their extreme temporal limits are concerned.

Similarly, the locational referents of the main action of *Uma Aventura Inquietante* are precise:¹² most of the action takes place in Brussels and environs. However, it is also found that Miguéis uses a technique which can be likened to wave-forms on the surface of a liquid. First, the author's mention of a vast number of toponyms and other place-markers proceeds along what appear to be a series of concentric circles, with the protagonist's current location as their center. These wash outward until they touch upon no less than five continents, expanding and contracting the reader's view in the process. At times, this concentricity shatters into reflected arcs and bits of circles and, in the end, subsides like choppy water after a storm, finally returning the reader to a calm and happy "present-time" at the central locus of the story.

These are merely a few notes on temporal and locational aspects of just one of Miguéis' many works¹³ — although it is indeed one of his longer ones — but it is hoped that they illustrate in some small way the strict control the author has over the written word and the way in which he gives a cosmopolitan perspective to what in another writer's hands could have been a most provincial novel and undistinguished "entertainment."

NOTES

¹ This paper was adapted from a portion of my Ph. D. dissertation, *Aspects of Time, Place and Thematic Content in the Prose Fiction of José Rodrigues Miguéis as Indications of the Artist's Weltansicht*, The University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A., 1970. It was written under the direction of Professor Jorge de Sena, to whom I am greatly indebted for his kind advice and stimulation over a number of years. Any faults, of course, are entirely my own.

² José Rodrigues Miguéis published the 31 original instalments of "Uma Aventura Inquietante: Novela Policial" in the Lisbon weekly, *O Diabo*. Most of them were published under the pseudonym of Ch. Vander Bosch. They are as follows: Instalment No. 1, September 16, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 2, September 23, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 3, September 30, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 4, October 7, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 5, October 14, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 6, October 28, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 7, November 11, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 8, November 18, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 9, November 25, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 10, December 2, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 11, December 9, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 12, December 16, 1934, p. 2; Instalment No. 12 [sic], December 23, 1934, 2; Instalment No. 13, January 6, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 14, January 13, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 14 [sic], January 27, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 17, February 10, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 18, February 24, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 19, March 3, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 20, March 10, 1935, p. 6; Instalment No. 21, March 31, 1935, p. 5; Instalment No. 22, April 14, 1935, p. 3; Instalment No. 23, April 28, 1935, p. 3; Instalment No. 23 [sic], May 5, 1935, p. 6; Instalment No. 24, May 12, 1935, p. 6; Instalment No. 25, June 16, 1935, p. 2; Instalment No. 26, June 23, 1935, p. 2. The last four instalments were published under the author's own name, as follows: Instalment No. 28, June 7, 1936, p. 7; Instalment No. 29, June 14, 1936, p. 2; Instalment No. 30, June 21, 1936, p. 2; Instalment No. 31, July 12, 1936, p. 2. Small portions of the work also appeared as: "Inocente Entre os Doutores," *Ver e Crer*, No. 18, October 1946, pp. 3-17; and "Cristal Rádio-Magnético (um Inédito de José Rodrigues Miguéis)," *Diário de Lisboa, Vida Literária e Artística*, January 8, 1959, p. 4. The edition to which reference is made here, however, is *Uma Aventura Inquietante*, 2nd ed. (Lisbon, Estúdios Cor, 1963).

³ José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Páscoa Feliz* (Lisbon: Edições Alfa, 1932).

⁴ José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Onde a Noite se Acaba* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Dois Mundos, 1946).

⁵ José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Léah e Outras Histórias* (Lisbon: Estúdios Cor, 1958).

⁶ José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Uma Aventura Inquietante*, 2nd ed. (Lisbon: Estúdios Cor, 1963), pp. 17, 27, 41, 49, 57, 69, 79, 95, 113, 127, 135, 149, 153, 157, 175, 191, 205, 217, 225, 233, 245, 257, 262 and 263. Inasmuch as the textual references will all be to this edition of the work, page numbers will be given in the main text between parentheses.

⁷ José Rodrigues Miguéis, "O Morgado de Pedra-Má," in *Léah e Outras Histórias*, 4th ed. (Lisbon: Estúdios Cor, 1968), pp. 229-269.

⁸ José Rodrigues Miguéis, "Saudades para a Dona Genciana," in *Léah e Outras Histórias*, 4th ed. (Lisbon: Estúdios Cor, 1968), pp. 197-227.

⁹ José Rodrigues Miguéis, *Páscoa Feliz*, (Lisbon: Edições Alfa, 1932).

¹⁰ For a brief biobibliographical résumé, see my paper, "A Thumbnail Sketch of the Life and Works of José Rodrigues Miguéis," *Proceedings of the Pacific Northwest Council on Foreign Languages*, XXV (1) Literature and Linguistics 1974, pp. 35-39.

¹¹ *The International Atlas*, eds. Rand McNally (New York: Rand McNally and Company, 1969), p. 46.

¹² By way of contrast in Miguéis' handling of locational referents, see my article, "Thematic Consistency in a New Manner in José Rodrigues Miguéis' 'Lodo,'" *Luso-Brazilian Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 1974, pp. 231-236.

¹³ For more general information on temporal and locational referents in Miguéis' fiction over a 45-year period, see my article, "An Overview of Miguéis' Prose Fiction, 1923 - 1968: Questions of Time, Place, Selected Thematic Content and the Author's View of the World," *Estudos Ibero-Americanos*, Vol. II, No. 1, July, 1976, pp. 47-83.