

THE TRAVEL LITERATURE OF ERICO VERISSIMO

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Erico Verissimo (1905-1975), one of the most prominent Brazilian authors of the twentieth century, is noted for literature of diverse orientation: novels, short stories, didactic literature, children's stories, and literature of travel. The latter, his travel literature, has brought him some of his greatest popularity. Verissimo's works of travel are: *Gato preto em campo de neve* (1941), *A volta do gato preto* (1945), *México* (1957), and *Israel em abril* (1967). The present study investigates the literary and documentary value of Verissimo's travel works.

In reference to Verissimo's and all travel literature in general, the question arises as to what constitutes literature of this classification. Warner G. Rice, in the introduction to the book *Literature as a mode of travel*, informs us that: "Whether or not travel literature constitutes a genre is a question of real, though perhaps only minor, importance. The guide book, factual, objective, impersonal, scarcely qualifies as typical... True travel books are of course largely autobiographical, and are enriched with opinions and reflections".¹

A second question arises concerning the status of Verissimo's travel books in relationship to his other literary production. In most respects, Verissimo's literature of travel orientation has been largely overlooked by critics. Much has been said about his novels and short stories but practically nothing about his travel works. The same situation generally seems to be true concerning most travel literature of the world. There is a scarcity of critical material covering it.

In an essay entitled "Reflections on the literature of travel", Henri Peyre describes the contemporary status of travel literature

as follows: "Of all the provinces of non-fictional literature in prose, none is so venerable, so varied, so rich and perhaps so entertaining as the literature of travel. None has been so neglected in our country by scholars... The letters of nobility of the literature of travel are impressive".²

Perhaps following in the tradition of Portuguese writers such as Camões and Mendes Pinto in their description of expeditions of overseas discovery and exploration, and certainly in an established world tradition, Erico Verissimo wrote four works of travel, all of which are reasonably well known in Brazil. Two have been translated to other languages: *México* into English and Spanish, and *Gato preto em campo de neve* into Spanish.

At least one critic, Afrânio Coutinho,³ would also include as a travel book Verissimo's *Viagem à aurora do mundo* (1939). This affirmation is in error, however, since this work is more on the order of science fiction, describing (supposedly through mechanical time devices) a fantastic voyage back to the era of dinosaurs and prehistoric monsters. The use of the word *viagem* (trip) in the title of this work is deceptive. "Return" would probably be a more accurate description of *viagem* in this instance.

Verissimo's first travel work, *Gato preto em campo de neve*, appeared in 1941. This book describes the author's initial visit to the United States, a three month stay in 1941, at the invitation of the State Department. With Malazarte as his imaginary alter ego and travelling companion, Verissimo journeyed extensively through this country and wrote down, often in very poetic form, his impressions and experiences. During this first trip, the author, travelling primarily by train, visited the major urban and cultural centers of the United States — New York, Washington, Boston, New Orleans, San Francisco. In an introductory note, Verissimo describes this work in the following fashion:

Gato preto em campo de neve não passa, pois, do relato simples e objetivo de um passeio que foi, antes de mais nada, o feriado dum contador de histórias. Viajei como um ser humano interessado principalmente em seres humanos, mas convencido também de que todas as coisas merecem ser vistas — o sublime e o sórdido, o trivial e o raro — porque tudo é expressão de vida e um romancista não deve voltar as costas à vida.⁴

Erico Verissimo returned to the United States in the period 1943-1945, taught courses at the University of California, Berkeley and at Mills College, and wrote up his experiences in his second travel book, *A volta do gato preto* (1945). Though more limited in his travels on this occasion, Verissimo visited and wrote about his impressions of California, Oklahoma, Arizona, Indiana, and Texas. In this work the author also makes numerous general observations concerning life in the United States.

In 1955 Verissimo visited Mexico and wrote down his experiences and impressions in a book entitled *México* (1957). He travelled the length of the country from Ciudad Juárez south to Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Yucatan. The author makes many observations of interest in this book regarding the history and cultural development of the Mexicans and also records in-depth interviews with José Vasconcelos and other Mexican intellectuals.

In 1966, at the invitation of the Israeli government, Erico Verissimo made a trip to Israel and afterwards compiled his notes in book form in *Israel em abril* (1967). The author visited Israel just prior to the 1967 Middle East War. Showing much sympathy towards the Jewish people, Verissimo travelled extensively through the country, visited major cities such as Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, kibbutzes, and interviewed prominent statesmen such as David Ben Gurion and Golda Meier.

Verissimo's memoirs, *Solo de clarineta* (1973), also contain statements about his travels, particularly to Spain and Portugal in 1959. His memoirs likewise include commentaries concerning his works of travel, how he viewed them in retrospect, how they were inspired. Verissimo's commentaries about *Gato preto em campo de neve*, his first and best known travel work, are particularly noteworthy. In Verissimo's estimation: "Essa primeira excursão através dos Estados Unidos está minuciosamente narrada em *Gato preto em campo de neve* (1941), livro animado por uma alegria descompromissada e ligeira de turista, coisa que o torna anedótico, informativo, fácil de ler, mas superficial e, em alguns trechos, até um tanto ingênuo".⁵

Continuing, Verissimo describes his own self criticism much the same as a person who views in retrospect the object of his former love:

Quantas namoradas tive na adolescência que me pareciam as criaturas mais belas e adoráveis do mundo? No entanto, passado o tempo

e o amor, com olho neutro pude ver nelas defeitos que não percebia antes, o que não impediu que elas continuassem a viver suas vidas individuais com todo o direito de serem admiradas e até amadas por outros homens. O mesmo é válido no que diz respeito aos livros que escrevi com cálido entusiasmo e que hoje critico com a cabeça fria.⁶

Looking back as an older man, Verissimo could see *Gato preto* as a work with certain faults, such as a certain measure of superficiality (it was based on only a three month stay in the United States), but could also see the work as having value in the context of the time of composition and in terms of the literary formation of the author himself.

I should add a personal note here, to the effect that, when I spoke with Erico Verissimo in his home in Porto Alegre in 1971, the author informed me that he was aware that much of what he said in the two *Gato preto* books about life in the United States was no longer true. The United States had become a very different country by 1971, profoundly changed since the World War II period and still in the throes of the Viet Nam war era.

Having noted the author's own criticism and commentaries about his travel works and experiences, let us consider what else might be said concerning the literary and documentary value of Verissimo's literature of travel.

To perceive such literature as purely documentary would be to close our eyes to some of the most poetic and imaginative language of all of Verissimo's literary creation. In addition to description of what he observed, the author depicted his impressions thereof, often in graphic, poetic form, with the use of various literary devices. A good example of such portrayal can be found in *Gato preto em campo de neve* when the author tells of an unexpected stop early one evening in Newton, Kansas. Verissimo enters a restaurant near the depot, has supper, and talks at length to a waitress about Brazil. As the author leaves Newton, he reflects about this occurrence and writes:

Quando saio, a menina fica sorrindo atrás do balcão, apertando na mão a moeda de 50 centavos que lhe dei. Essa criatura já existia antes de eu chegar aqui. Depois que eu me for continuará a existir, a vender cachorros quentes e café, a sonhar com terras longínquas e com aventuras em Hollywood. Outros pássaros virão pousar no campanário da igreja, e mais uma vez o moleque virá com a sua espingardinha e os seus ares de Buffalo Bill. Sim, senhores, é preciso não esquecer daqui por diante que existe uma cidade chamada Newton.

Volto melancolicamente para a estação. Anoitece. Um homem caminha ao longo da linha férrea com uma lanterna na mão. Por um instante tenho a impressão de que a estrela vespertina desceu para a terra e veio brincar entre os dedos do guarda-freios. O trem apita. Adeus, Newton!⁷

Erico Verissimo goes beyond pure factual representation here and adds his own impressions and reflections. His world of the imagination leads into literary description. The use of imagery, as in the portrayal of the brakeman, his lantern, and the light appearing as if the Evening Star had dropped to earth — this beautifully graphic image — moves us into the realm of the literary.

Another striking example of the use of literary device is noted in Verissimo's description of an olive tree in *Israel em abril*. While travelling through the Israeli countryside, the author comes across an old, gnarled olive tree. The use of simile and the personification of the tree add substance and vigor to Verissimo's depiction, as the olive tree takes form before our eyes:

Mas a árvore de minha particular afeição é a oliveira. Ali está uma... Deve ter mais de um século, a julgar pelo aspecto vetusto do tronco retorcido e cheio de nódulos. É uma planta de aspecto sofrido. Se em inglês a palavra árvore é substantivo neutro, em português ela é, mais acertadamente, do sexo feminino. Com sua face e suas mãos enrugadas, a sua serena dignidade, a sua coragem e a sua capacidade de durar, de sobreviver à intempérie e às guerras sem cessar de produzir flores e frutos...⁸

The term *sofrido* (patient, resigned) signals that the author is viewing the old olive tree in human terms. Since *árvore* (tree) is assigned feminine gender in Portuguese, Verissimo chooses to present the gnarled, twisted olive tree as if it were an elderly, stately lady who has withstood the rigors of life and time. Much like a matriarch with wrinkled face and hands (*com a sua face e mãos enrugadas*), the olive tree has the strength to endure the ravages of weather and war, and to continue flourishing (*sem cessar de produzir flores e frutos*).

Additional literary elements, the creation of images and the use of symbols, are observed in Verissimo's representation of the black cat (*o gato preto*) that inspired the title of the book *Gato preto em campo de neve*. Travelling through Colorado by train during his first visit to the United States, the author looks out and sees a snowscene:

... olho os campos tapetados de neve. O céu é dum cinzento esbranquiçado e glacial. Vejo o desfile das casas, das cercas, das árvores mortas... E, de súbito, um gato preto atravessa correndo um tabuleiro de neve dum branco imaculado. Fico olhando o quadro fugidio numa fascinação. Sinto que este momento de fria e silenciosa beleza não é gratuito. Um misterioso alguém está procurando dizer-me alguma coisa por meio dessas imagens em negro e branco. Mas quem? Quê?⁹

Verissimo later denied the use of the symbol of the black cat as representing the writer himself as a swarthy Brazilian in the United States. This idea had been suggested by several critics in Brazil and seems almost a natural assumption to make. Anticipating such conjecture, Verissimo felt the need to add a postscript to the "Introductory Note":

Quanto ao título, não quebre a cabeça. Não tem nenhum sentido secreto ou simbólico. Refere-se apenas a um gato preto e anônimo que atravessou um campo de neve no Colorado, quando eu passava de trem.¹⁰

My personal opinion is that Verissimo is saying the above tongue in cheek and suspects very much that something was at work in his mind which caused him to grasp unconsciously, perhaps, the significance of the black cat on the field of snow — a mysterious someone or something. The use of literary device is evident in the appeal to the imagination and the psyche.

The importance of the psychological is likewise noted in the inclusion, from time to time, of fantasy, daydream, and dream. The psychological element is observed, for example, in the very first chapter of *A volta do gato preto*, when we meet the author returning to the United States by airplane and preparing to land in Miami, Florida. Verissimo begins this work by describing the crash of the plane in which he is travelling!:

Medonho desastre! Perdido na procela, o avião precipitou-se no mar, a pouca distância da costa da Flórida. Era noite fechada quando as lanchas do serviço de salvamento da marinha norte-americana chegaram ao local do sinistro. E ali sob a chuva, na negra noite, começaram a pescar os cadáveres de passageiros e tripulantes...¹¹

Verissimo goes on to admit that this is merely a description of his worst fears and imaginings. The scene described above is unreal, but, in the words of the author: "Imaginação é coisa do

diabo. De mil modos já fantasiei o desastre. Já li em cem jornais e de cem maneiras diferentes a notícia do sinistro".^{1,2}

The addition of the workings of the imagination and fantasy here goes beyond purely descriptive literature and moves into the plane of creative writing. The interplay of dream, fantasy, and reality also appears in *México and Israel em abril*. A notable example from *México* is found in the section of the book entitled "O trem fantasma", where Verissimo describes a restless night on the train in anticipation of arrival in Mexico City:

É uma noite sem lua, fresca e estrelada. O trem atravessa uma misteriosa planície onde piscam, aqui e ali, algumas luzes. Onde estamos? Pergunto ao chefe de trem, que sem se deter dá de ombros e murmura: *Pues, quién sabe!*

... E há momentos em que não sei dizer ao certo se estou dormindo, modorrando ou acordado.

Agora, quando tento recordar essa viagem, lembro-me vagamente de misteriosas paradas em que, num torpor, eu ouvia vozes. *Café negro... quién toma café?* No meu espírito esse café negro tornava a noite mais negra e indecifrável... Duas da madrugada. O trem movia-se lentamente...

Penho-me de pé, passo água no rosto, saio a caminhar como um sonâmbulo pelo corredor. Pergunto ao cabineiro: *Que estação é esta?*

E o homem, que está descascando metódicamente uma laranja, responde sem me olhar: *Pues, quién sabe!* Sinto-me como uma personagem de Kafka num trem fantasma que erra sem rota fora do tempo e do espaço. E — curioso — essa idéia de certo modo me diverte, consola e acalma.¹³

The dark night and the moving train create an air of mystery for Verissimo, as the train becomes almost phantasmagoric. Psychological elements become prominent in the interaction between fantasy, imagination, and the external world, as Verissimo delineates his inner reaction to the situation where he finds himself. The author goes on to make literary allusion and compares himself with a character from *kafka*-travelling on a phantom train, wandering about lost in space and time. The reader can sense Verissimo's uneasiness, his feeling of being totally astray that night on the train, and can identify with his need to react to and reconcile such unsettling circumstances.

Another clear literary element is Verissimo's use of *Malazarte* as his own created *alter ego*, another part of himself that stands away from things, asks questions and helps move the author from one point to another. Speaking of *Malazarte* in *Israel em abril* and

pondering about his own travels through Israel, Verissimo describes his imaginary travelling companion:

Fico onde estou, não propriamente sozinho porque uma entidade imaginária, que costuma acompanhar-me nas viagens, sob os mais variados disfarces, aqui está a meu lado. Descobri-a em 1941, quando da minha primeira excursão ao estrangeiro. Dei-lhe o nome de Malazarte em homenagem a um herói fictício da minha infância.¹⁴

Malazarte crops up time and time again to converse with Verissimo, particularly in *Gato preto em campo de neve*, but also later reappears in *Israel em abril*. His presence adds an imaginary, though essential, unifying element to these works. Tobias, a similar created character in *A volta do gato preto*, functions in much the same manner as Malazarte. Tobias resurfaces later in the final chapters of *México*.

Concerning the documentary value of Erico Verissimo's travel works, it can be said in general that the author obviously spent a great deal of time studying the history and culture of the countries that he visited. Much space is taken up in all of his travel literature telling his countrymen about cultural material, facts concerning the United States, Mexico, and Israel. The author also comments on controversial topics, such as race relations and regional differences in the United States, class division in Mexico, the long plight of the Jews and the struggle between Arabs and Jews as recorded in *Israel em abril*.

In the "Diálogo sobre os Estados Unidos", a sort of postscript added to a 1947 edited version (University of Wisconsin Press) of *Gato preto em campo de neve*, Verissimo makes a number of very pertinent commentaries with respect to differences and similarities between the United States and Brazil. It would be beyond the scope of this general study to comment on these remarks in great depth. It might be said that Verissimo thought of the United States basically as a hard working, good natured, practical nation, but also as a country possessing certain minor cultural faults, such as the rapid pace of life in its major cities and the extreme standardization and regimentation of many aspects of the everyday lives of its citizens.

México and *Israel em abril* also include final "dialogue" sections of sorts, where Verissimo makes cultural comparisons. Curiously, much of what the author has to say in *México*, in a

cross-cultural sense, is between the culture of Mexico and that of that of the United States. There is only scarce mention of similarities and differences between Mexican and Brazilian society. It should be pointed out that, by the time of his visit to Mexico (1955), Verissimo had already spent considerable time in the United States and even had worked as Cultural Attache for the Pan American Union in Washington from 1952 to 1955. It was natural for him to relate to the many cultural ties and conflicts between Mexico and the United States.

Elements of Mexican culture pointed out by Verissimo in *México* are: a certain stoicism in the Mexican spirit, a sense of resignation to the many occurrences of life, and the perception of culture and historical events in a circular, almost timeless fashion. The author goes on to describe the American, the *grindo*, as a necessary element of opposition for Mexican culture. The United States represents a convenient scapegoat, a common adversary, to help unite the Mexican nation. Nevertheless, Verissimo appears optimistic about the prospects for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between the two countries.

In *Israel em abril*, Erico Verissimo speaks of many opinions and ideas that he had about that country and its inhabitants. Commentaries of note concern: the ability of the Jews to maintain their cultural integrity through the centuries, in spite of, or, perhaps because of the presence of hostile, surrounding elements; a certain "racial" tension existing in Israel between white Jews (Ashkenazim) and black Jews (Sephardim); and the growing secularization of Jewish society in modern Israel. Focusing on Israel as a unique, composite country and making relatively few comparisons between Israel and other countries, Verissimo calls upon the nations of the world to accept and support Israel's territorial integrity and right to exist.

Obviously, one of the great benefits for Americans of reading what Verissimo has to say about the United States is the possibility of seeing ourselves in better perspective. As an educated, sophisticated foreigner, Verissimo had many insights into our American culture that we do not and ordinarily might not have. He could stand back, so to speak, and see many things to which we are oblivious in the midst of our own culture. The same circumstance would be true for an Israeli or Mexican with respect to what Verissimo has to say about the culture of their countries.

Accordingly, it is demonstrated that Verissimo's travel works evidence a deep interest in international culture and events in general. These elements are very notable in the scope, focus, and locale of his many novels as well. In spite of his own regional origins (the interior of Rio Grande do Sul), Erico Verissimo endeavored to go beyond his region and put himself in tune with cosmopolitan and universal elements. Such international focus is borne out in the interest shown by Verissimo in telling his countrymen about distant places that he had visited.

This interest in the world beyond, the international, the cosmopolitan evidences a clear development throughout Verissimo's travel works. As already noted in Verissimo's memoirs, his first travel book, *Gato preto em campo de neve*, constitutes a rather spontaneous, exuberant description of the author's first visit to the United States in 1941. In this work, Verissimo appears as the excited tourist who wants to share his experiences with his countrymen back home.

A volta do gato preto, written four years later, represents a more serious reaction to cultural realities that Verissimo encountered during his second visit to the United States. More familiarity with this country and growing maturity, perhaps, began to make Verissimo's approach more analytical and less spontaneous. It should be remembered that the postscript ("Diálogo sobre os Estados Unidos") to the original *Gato preto em campo de neve* (1941) was added in 1947. This postscript also shows a deeper understanding than before of the United States and of cultural differences between this country and Brazil.

México, written in 1956, is the most analytical of all of Verissimo's works of travel. It reads almost as a textbook, describing, in great detail, the cultural and historical development of Mexico from colonial days to the present. Verissimo's visit to Mexico was rather brief and he did not have a great deal of time to develop first-hand familiarity with the country or its people. For that reason, the author relied very much on secondary sources for background material. This circumstance creates a much heavier, more serious, but less spontaneous work.

Although his visit to Israel was also brief, Verissimo became more openly expressive of his own reactions and experiences in composing *Israel em abril*. Different from *México*, *Israel em abril* does not constitute an attempt to say everything about the country

and its culture. Rather, in this work Verissimo focuses on his visit at that particular time (April, 1966) and, throughout the book, adds interesting background information. In addition, perhaps even greater maturity helped the author loosen up and become more spontaneous in reacting and making commentaries more in the tradition of *Gato preto em campo de neve*.

This situation is further affirmed by the fact that Verissimo resurrected Malazarte as his travelling companion in the last chapters of *Israel em abril*. Malazarte's return demonstrates the potential for development and change in Verissimo's manner of description: specifically, to become more analytical and, later, less so in his depiction of various foreign cultures and countries. Malazarte again serves to unify Verissimo's travel works and embodies the changes that are in evidence from *Gato preto em campo de neve* through *Israel em abril*.

In summary, commentaries are made in the present study concerning the essential components of the four travel works of Erico Verissimo: *Gato preto em campo de neve*, *A volta do gato preto*, *México*, and *Israel em abril*. Verissimo's literature of this orientation is demonstrated to have evident documentary value, depicting, in cultural and historical context, countries visited by the author in particular, the United States, Mexico, and Israel. What is more, Verissimo's travel literature also has notable literary value. The fact that he was a highly creative writer evidences itself in his works of travel as well. Perhaps the greatest contribution that Verissimo has made to literature of travel is his poetic, imaginative manner of depiction. Describing himself as a "frustrated painter who had turned writer",¹⁵ Erico Verissimo, in his travel literature, presents a picture of life in several countries of the world, as told and as interpreted by a very capable and accomplished writer.

NOTAS

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5. ——. *Solo de clarineta*. Memórias. Porto Alegre, Globo, 1978. p.277. v.1.
6. *Id. ibid.*, p. 277-8.
7. *Op. cit.* nota n.4, p.250-1.
8. VERISSIMO, Erico. *Israel em abril*. Porto Alegre, Globo, 1970. p.109.
9. *Op. cit.* nota n.4, p.259.
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11. VERISSIMO, Erico. *A volta do gato preto*. Porto Alegre, Globo, 1961. p.1.
12. *Id. ibid.*, p.1.
13. VERISSIMO, Erico. *México*. Porto Alegre, Globo, 1964. p.23-4.
14. *Op. cit.* nota n.8, p.310.
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