

Ginzburg, Jaime. *Literatura, violência e melancolia*. Campinas: Editora Autores Associados, 2013.

Literatura, violência e melancolia inquires whether literature can be effective in combating violence—defined as a material and historical human construct (8). The short, though not simple, answer is “yes.” Ginzburg’s most recent book thus proposes an activist vision of literature and, in more general terms, culture. In this sense, *Literatura, violência e melancolia* can be inserted into a tradition that recognizes the ethical and political potential of culture and of critical theory, as for example is the case with many of Walter Benjamin’s writings (whose work Ginzburg discusses in Chapter 2: “Literatura e violência”). In a context where, according to Ginzburg, pacifism has gone out of fashion, the book nevertheless proposes literature as a tool to counteract violence in hopes of promoting a pacifist discourse amidst the din of narratives of violence. Ginzburg contends that literature has this power because it can disrupt a normalized perception of violence. Additionally, literature offers us hermeneutic parameters that are applicable beyond the textual realm. Ginzburg maintains that how we react to literary depictions of violence can also inform our responses to material violence (25).

The activist impetus of *Literatura, violência e melancolia* also transpires from the book’s structure, which, beyond proposing literature as a tool to fight violence, also intends to reach a varied audience: both academics and high school teachers (“professores da rede escolar” 1). In order to straddle these two educational contexts and their respective publics, Ginzburg strikes a balance between an approachable and yet not simplistic language, no small feat when one considers the complexity of the book’s guiding question. Written in a terse prose, with short chapters that are subdivided by theme, the book is at the same time challenging and accessible. Beyond offering readings of specific literary texts that deal with violence, Ginzburg’s study also contains sections that can be used as pedagogical tools to teach about literary representations of violence. Examples are the book’s categorization of types of authorial voices (vis-à-vis the portrayal of violence 30-33) and the discussion of the importance of contextualization of a literary work. These brief considerations give the potential educator a hands-on model of how to deal with literary depictions of violence in the classroom.

As its title suggests, *Literatura, violência e melancolia* approximates violence through a cultural—primarily literary lens, though the book also references other media, such as television, Internet and printed news media. The author discusses a wide array of fictional works, from Raduan Nassar's *Lavoura arcaica* (1989) to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, passing through texts from various Brazilian and non-Brazilian authors such as Sérgio Sant'Anna ("O monstro"), Jorge Luis Borges, and Franz Kafka, among others. Ginzburg examines how these texts employ violence as a discursive device. At the same time, *Literatura, violência e melancolia* carefully contextualizes literary violence, positing it within a specific context/s, as for example in the discussion of Graciliano Ramos' novel *São Bernardo* (1934) (Chapter 2). Ginzburg demonstrates how Ramos' book proposes two different perceptions of physical violence (a beating) that provoke in the reader a reflection about the ideology of violence in the context of the authoritarian politics of the 1930s in Brazil and worldwide.

One of the book's focal points is the link between violence and melancholy. Ginzburg highlights how melancholy is the result of loss, and violence often provokes loss. By "loss" the author is referring not only to the symbolic damage occasioned by violent acts, but also to the physical experience of death, of wounded and maimed bodies. For Ginzburg, violence, in conjunction with melancholy constitute an "esthetic field centered on the notion of loss, of dissociation and, frequently, of death" (28). Unlike the idealist conception of art, this esthetic configuration operates according to a negative principle in which violence becomes not a mediator for a positive referential, but is rather the referential itself. In this context, melancholia is a consequence not only of a physical and/or emotional loss, but also derives from the loss of positive references and the pervasiveness of violence instead. Ginzburg illustrates the connection between melancholia and violence in his analysis of three canonical Brazilian novels: Nassar's *Lavoura arcaica*, Ramos' *São Bernardo* and Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão, veredas* (1956). He points out that all three texts revolve around the death of a female character, which enables the narration. Violence against women and the sacrifice of women are, according to Ginzburg, metonymic of the violence and deaths that constitute the nation (62). Ginzburg's reoccurring discussion of the three novels offers the reader a paradigm of sorts of how

to read other literary texts as symbolic of socio-historical processes, without, however falling into a facile sociological analysis of fictional texts.

The idea of sacrificial victims and historical trauma reoccurs throughout *Literatura, violência e melancolia*, assuming different permutations. Thus for example in the chapter “Tempos sombrios,” Ginzburg examines different real-life instances of filicide. These crimes are read as a sign of patriarchal violence, and stand in direct contradiction to the dominant notion of the benevolent and protective father figure that prevails in hegemonic social, political and cultural discourse. The violent father figures that Ginzburg references are but part of a larger social phenomenon in which violence has become both ubiquitous and trivial (one being attendant on the other). In such a context, Ginzburg makes the case that we do not interpret violence as part of a Manichean structure, but rather examine its heterogeneous meanings and, more importantly, its multifarious implications. Taking as examples the aforementioned novel by Rosa and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Ginzburg rightly points out that violence and its accompanying destructive consequences “atuam de modos variados e mesmo imprevisíveis, podendo voltar-se contra um objeto de amor ou contra o próprio sujeito agressor” (act in varied and often unpredictable manners, at times turning against the object of affection or even the aggressor him/herself 103). *Literatura, violência e melancolia* proposes literature as an antidote against this destructive potential, and against the repetition of past brutalities that haunt Brazil’s and other countries’ past.

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