

A Not-So-Short Study of “A Very Short Story” by Jorge de Sena

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Jorge de Sena's "Conto Brevíssimo," first published in 1961 and subsequently included in *Novas Andanças do Demónio* (Lisbon: Portugália Editora, 1966), is a very short tour de force. A story disguised as an essay, this delightfully ambiguous narrative is filled with the intellectual complexity and verbal density which characterize the author's critical writings and many of his creative works as well. It also contains echoes of the Jorge de Sena that many of us were privileged to have as a teacher. I have chosen to analyze several aspects of this story because it is, in all these ways, a mirror of the man.

Compared to the other narratives in *Novas Andanças*, ours is a very short story indeed. A mere three pages (nine paragraphs) in length, "Conto Brevíssimo" bears the following lemma in English: "A tale must be brief." These words are attributed to "Vários autores"—no doubt an attempt on the part of the author to suggest the general validity of their content. The obvious humor of this apocryphal quote in a foreign language serves as a warning to the reader to be on his guard, for there's possible irony ahead. . . .

The plot is hardly a plot at all: a writer, writing in the first person, is in the process of writing a very short story. "Este é um conto breve. É mesmo brevíssimo," he begins, and from there, in what appears to be a rather meandering train of thought, he proceeds to consider the condition of brevity and the way to go about writing a *conto brevíssimo* in which, he says, the author's intrusion in the action, any preparation for an artistic effect and even the very narrative itself must all be extremely limited. In the midst of these ruminations, with one thought leading to another, he recalls an episode in the past—a fleeting encounter on a London street with an old woman looking for a post office. This insignificant, brief "accident," as he calls it, in which nothing really happens, actually contains the germ of a possible "incident": we are given

to understand that had he chosen to use his creative imagination to develop it into a narrative, he could have written a story. He did not, however, and the possible "incident" remains an "accident"; after relating its brevity to the literary precepts presented earlier and vaguely fixing this recollection in his own past, he ends back where he began, concluding, somewhat circuitously, that "... este conto é brevíssimo."

From this description of the content of "Conto Brevíssimo" it is evident that we are not dealing with a "plot" in the traditional sense of the word. Instead, the narrator seems to be writing a kind of *essay* on how to write a very short story. Two important observations must be made at this point. First, Jorge de Sena has created the impression of a work *in statu nascendi*: as we are reading, "Conto Brevíssimo" is in the process of being written. Second, the work is characterized by an unsettling sensation that the narrator has just started writing without knowing where he's going or how he's going to get there—a technique reminiscent of Miguel de Unamuno. His frequent repetitions, vacillations, and digressions, which require close attention on the part of the reader, create a deceiving sense of logic while, in reality, his "essay" is like a little Piper Cub plane that never manages to get off the ground. Not even the single narrative episode—his encounter with the old lady in London—is developed.

What, specifically, is the narrator referring to when, at the end, he says that "este conto é brevíssimo"? Is he talking about the creatively undeveloped London "accident"—the germ of a possible "incident" or story—or does he mean the pseudo-essay, "Conto Brevíssimo"? To see if we can decipher this fundamental ambiguity, let us take a closer look at the narrative voice and the structure of the work.

We must begin by drawing a clear distinction between the author, Jorge de Sena, and the first-person narrator. Such a distinction is not as simple as it may at first seem, for the narrator as a character has much in common with his creator. Like Sena, the narrator is a writer. His interest in narrative technique suggests that he, too, might be a critic. His tone demonstrates an awareness of his reader or audience—a trait reminiscent of Sena the critic and public speaker—and the actuality of this experience is reinforced by the sensation of a work *in statu nascendi*, of the creative process in progress. His frequent digressions and the intromission, as if in passing, of a recollection from the past recall Jorge de Sena in the classroom or in the lecture hall. The fact that the episode took place in London reminds us of Sena's great fondness for that country and its literature—something further stressed by the story's lemma in English, "A tale must be brief." And then there is the narrator's complex thought

process, his ability to play with concepts and words, his mixture of humor and seriousness, his sense of self—all characteristics of the real author. The similarities are so marked that it is easy for even the most sophisticated reader to be caught off guard and to think that this first-person narrator is also Jorge de Sena the man. If that were so, “Conto Brevíssimo” would be an essay, instead of a work of fiction. Indeed, Jorge de Sena the author has so adroitly fictionalized himself into his almost identical narrator-writer that he has created the artistic illusion of an “essay” about the process of writing a very short story. This self-fictionalization brings to mind the first stanza of one of Sena’s favorite poems, “Autopsicografia” by Fernando Pessoa:

O poeta é um fingidor.
Finge tão completamente
Que chega a fingir que é dor
A dor que deveras sente.

The author of “Conto Brevíssimo” has so successfully transformed his real being into that of his fictional narrator that his true personality and preoccupations have also become fictionalized.

Once we have separated the author and narrator, it is possible to see in “Conto Brevíssimo” an excellent illustration of Jorge de Sena’s profound critical interest in the creative process—an elusive and difficult aspect of literature which he, by virtue of his own experience as a writer of fiction and as a poet, was particularly well-qualified to study. As we have seen, the narrator’s meandering thought-process in “Conto Brevíssimo” must not be mistaken for what was literally going through Sena’s mind as he sat down one day to write a very short story. Sena the author has willfully created this artistic illusion. The frequent digressions of the narrator—a fictional character—lead him to unwittingly break many of his own literary precepts: he narrates despite himself, he prepares us for an artistic effect, he projects his “self” into his writing. But while the *narrator* may not be aware of what he’s doing as he’s “writing,” the *author* is. This author has consciously written a very short story about a writer who could not. For there are actually two stories in question: Sena’s “Conto Brevíssimo”—the story of a confused, creatively hesitant writer (the structural framework)—and the writer’s “conto brevíssimo”—the “accident” which he never develops into an “incident.” We are given sufficient information so as to be able to imagine how this germ of a story could have been made into a work of fiction: the narrator, in passing, vaguely connects the old lady in London with the picture of an old woman murdered in a London post office which he saw

in a newspaper the following day. But to write that as a traditional story, the narrator would have had to break his literary precepts and forfeit brevity.

To which of these two stories is the narrator referring at the end when he says that “este conto é brevíssimo”—to his potential story-within-a-story or to the author’s story *in statu nascendi* about a writer in the process of writing a story who ultimately does not? Perhaps, inadvertently, to both. This dual possibility is suggested by the following words of Jorge de Sena the critic in his essay “‘O poeta é um fingidor’ (Nietzsche, Pessoa e outras coisas mais)”:

Só o poeta que se domine conscientemente e voluntariamente, durante a gestação do poema cujo significado desconhece ainda (e cuja complexidade significativa lhe escapará em parte), só ele será *capaz* de atingir, tão mais de perto quanto possível, uma *verdade* não perturbada pelas circunstâncias factuais da criação. . . .¹

If we apply these remarks to the author of “Conto Brevíssimo” (the “poet”), we note that he (Jorge de Sena) has been able to attain a “truth” (the artistic illusion) through conscious and willful domination of himself as a writer. Naturally Jorge de Sena was unaware of the full meaning of this work as he was writing it, but it is plausible to assume that this complexity did not escape the subsequent examination of Jorge de Sena as a critic of his own work. The result of the author’s self-domination is a carefully constructed story, “Conto Brevíssimo.” The protagonist of this story, on the other hand—the narrator who is a fictional writer—is unable to dominate himself as he writes: while he deludes himself into thinking that he knows what he is doing, the way he treats the London episode shows that he is not conscious of what he is really “writing.” The true complexity of the way things turn out escapes him because he is only a character in another author’s story. Thus it may be said that the narrator’s final words, “este é um conto brevíssimo,” can refer either to the undeveloped germ of a story or to the nine paragraphs he has just redacted. In the latter case he could be referring to his pseudo-essay, which seems like a non-story, or else he could inadvertently be referring to Sena’s “Conto Brevíssimo,” the story whose complexity he ignores.

“A tale must be brief” reads the lemma at the start. Does that mean that a story must be *very* brief (*brevíssimo*)? Can this be translated into a viable literary precept and endowed with rules? Is it possible to write according to rules? These are some of the many serious questions suggested by Jorge de Sena’s witty little story. In this not-so-short study of “A Very Short Story” by Jorge de Sena I have attempted to shed some

light upon a deceptively simple and ingeniously provocative piece of fiction whose final interpretation is up to the reader. Let's go back to the start. The story begins: "Este é um conto breve. É mesmo brevíssimo. . . ."

Now it's *your* turn to figure it out!

NOTE

1. "O Poeta é um Fingidor" (Lisbon: Edições Ática, 1961), p. 23.