

The Eloquence of Images: Destruction and Disfigurement in Pictorial Vocabulary

Daniel Soares Mano

Daniel Soares Mano

is a PhD candidate in Political Science at the Fluminense Federal University. Participes as a resercher in the Laboratory for the Hum(e)an Studies, from Fluminense Federal University.

E-mail:dan_soci@yahoo.com.br

Abstract

The emergence of the pictorial vocabulary, as opposed to essentialist modes of thought, requires the reinterpretation of a number of philosophical problems, such as personal identity and external objects. The article analyzes the problem of change and loss of these identities, in two opposing perspectives: the disfigurement and destruction, associating the first to idealist empiricism and the second to the philosophy of David Hume belief.

Keywords

identity, belief, empiricism, Hume, transfiguration

The possibility of true knowledge of the world and its objects, is an issue that dates back to the emergence of philosophical thought in antiquity, found in the theme of 'essences' or 'substances' inaccessible to the senses of its most recurrent philosophical answers. From this perspective, that we can call 'essentialist', they – the essences – would support the sensible world, which gives meaning it and intelligibility. This perspective met many nuances (Mora, 2000: 2778), but its general traits remained under the care of the scholastic philosophy. In the seventeenth century, René Descartes opposed the essentialist arguments with a well-known skeptical battery of questions, in the *Meditations on Metaphysics*, whose result can be summarized as follows: (i) the discovery of *res cogitans*, as the most clear and obvious knowable substance (ii) the affirmation of the divine substance as guaranty of its existence – and all other substances (iii) the reaffirmation of the sensible world and the existence of material things.

Through the clarity of his exposition in favor of substances, and, mostly of all, through the thorough investigation of the *mode of its apprehension*, the Cartesian arguments found in the *Meditations* can serve as a synthesis of the great philosophical tradition to which David Hume opposes, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, a work that establishes another pattern of reflection on knowledge, whose cornerstone is the pair experience/imagination. Cesar Kiraly (Kiraly, 2013) named it "pictorial vocabulary", a perspective that works through images of thought, without content, non substantial.

In the essentialist key, rather than the full description of essences, it matters to consider its mode of apprehension, or *gnosiological problem*, as Ferrater Mora defined it:

not only it was a task, in the modern era, to elucidate the nature of the substance, but also to investigate the substance of knowledge (...). It can be said that during the Middle Ages, the conception was primarily "logical-metaphysical" and that in the modern era was mostly "metaphysical-epistemological". (Mora, 2000: 2783).¹

Descartes dedicated himself to investigate the terms of apprehension in the *Rules for the Direction of the Spirit*, linking it to the concept of rational intuition:

Intuitively I understand, not the floating conviction provided by the senses or the deceptive judgment of inappropriate compositions of an imagination, but the concept of pure and attentive so easy and distinct in mind that no doubt is about what we understand; or, what is the same thing, the concept of pure and attentive mind, without any possible doubt, that comes only of the light of reason (Descartes, 1985: 4).²

Reason (or understanding), according to Descartes, is the source of knowledge of the material world; the rational intuition would be the only operation of thought able to establish identities amid the shifting and ephemeral images apprehended by the senses or represented by imagination. Therefore, there is certain *muteness of the images*.

Descartes conceives the imagination as a domain material figurations directed at

understanding. Sartre said that “Descartes is limited (...) to describe what happens in the body when the soul thinks” (Sartre, 2008: 14), although not necessarily in the waking state, because, as stated by Descartes, “the things we are represented with in sleep are like pictures and paintings” (Descartes, 2005: 33). It happens that the philosopher considers that faculty unable to go through the infinity of possible changes in the present concept of a material object, that is, unable to conceive its mutability. Without the aid of understanding, it is possible to imagine that there would only be an atomized succession, detached and non-identitarian of images. The idea of a material object could not be confined to the narrow limits of the imagination, as the endless changes to which they are exposed are conceivable (the ground), but not representable (the imagination). The example of quiliógono is eloquent in this regard: it is a geometric figure of a thousand sides, which, although designed for understanding, is not fully representable because it demands a degree of attention and containment of mind beyond the imagination possibilities. In another example, the piece of wax, Descartes says that understanding is able to invest an *ad infinitum* spiral of changes, both in its form and in its dimensions, and therefore, the imagination must be dismissed as source his conception.

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At the root of these Cartesian considerations, is the belief in the adequacy of the mathematical concept of infinity to that of the extent, refuted by Hume in Book I of the Treatise. If, according to Descartes, the idea of an extensive body (such as wax) can be infinitely reduced or increased, it follows that the very extensive body should be itself, infinite in its present form, since there is a logical contradiction from: (i) the idea of a large object, and thus finite and (ii) its separability in infinite parts. According to Hume, the reduction in the imagination of any extensive body bumps necessarily in a sensible minimum, which leads him to conclude that “the idea of an infinite number of parts and the idea of an infinite extension are numerically identical” (Hume, 2000: 55).³

This Humean objection, however, would not be possible without a prior objection to the Cartesian opposition between conceive and imagine. Descartes saw, like Hume, the limits of the imagination, but considered the possibility to overcome them through the power of understanding; the foundation of Hume break is the consideration that “the mind is unable to form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of their degrees” (Ibid.: 42), corresponding to the Cartesian assertion of the inseparability of rational intuition, referred to above, and the acts of imaginative figuration. The deletion in the mind of the degrees of quantity and quality of an object also suppress, Hume tells us, the object itself, as these properties show up in their design, necessarily being combined to it. Hume proposes the “line experiment” to test his argument: if we conceive a line, as simple and however great the effort of abstraction of its sensitivity, you can not conceive it separated from its length; and even if its length is tiny or of very large proportions, the figuration is present and allows the understanding of operations, through abstract ideas, without which understanding would run out in consideration of complex ideas. Hume therefore sets limits to understanding, to attach it to the imagination, and calls into question the accuracy of rational conceptions. Returning to the example of “a thousand sides”, Hume says:

when we mention any large number, such as a thousand, the mind in general does not have an adequate idea of it, but only the power to produce it by its proper ideas of the decimal form (Ibid.: 47).⁴

Particular ideas, in this key, represent other related to it, fulfilling the function of abstract ideas, and avoid the paralysis of understanding, due to the complexity of its operations. The Humean assumption is that the conceptions of the understanding are not perfect and missing from images, but imperfect and representable, so that obscure notions such as the “thousand sides” become, through the competition of abstract ideas, appropriate “to reflection and dialogue purposes”(Ibid .: 42).⁵

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The emergence of the pictorial vocabulary not only brings an alternative standard of understanding of internal and external realities, historical and social processes, but also an alternative standard of workmanship, construction and destruction of worlds. This shift of thought – both philosophical and ordinary –, identified with Hume’s philosophy and, later, with the artistic avant-garde of the early twentieth century, certainly does not carry necessarily a sharpening of moral sensibility - what Hume called *delicacy of taste*, but makes it possible to create the conditions for this sharpening, very unlikely rests in a world guided by the spirit or the essence. “The delicate taste of man” – notes Kiraly – is “easily provoked with the pains that allows them to reach you, but do not waste time exasperating with ordinary events” (Kiraly, 2010: 173)⁶. The grandiloquence of events, in a spiritual world, seems mitigated because it previously entered into a cognitive schema that takes its intensity from the artifice of purpose. There’s astonishment, exceptionality or trauma in the changes - if anything, the lament, as we hear in Burke and De Maistre. By taking into account the particularities of a spiritual world, it is understandable the enthusiasm with which the idea of progress, rather than for the philosophical concept, was spilled over as a social force in the nineteenth century.

In a pictorialized world, other forms of denumbing, more cruding than the previous ones, become possible because images do not impose themselves on vision when they are only images. The sociological understanding of insensitivity in modern life is, above all, in the reflections of Georg Simmel on the metropolis. This moral stretchiness of double effect can be interpreted from two basic premises: (i) The ruin of the spirit prevents the conception of permanence of the devastated, of the transformed⁷. (ii) the ruin of essences makes meaningless and delirious the conservative agency as finality. Conserve and transform, consecrated dyad of philosophy, and of political philosophy in particular, is posed, through the pictorial inflection, before his own voidness, its literalness, and before the effects of immorality that it might entail.

In the pictorial *paideia*, the appropriate concept for the dealing with change is that of transfiguration, that is, the overlap of associated images, not transformation, for its reference to form, logical complement of an imperceptible and unalterable content. The knowledge (internal and external) is, in the pictorial vocabulary, the perception of images, associated in identity beliefs, and subject to countless meanings, through the increase and decrease of attributes and qualities. (A transfiguration circuit, it should be noted, is not by definition gradualist, as at first glance it may appear. There are ways of fairly abrupt transfiguration, which will be discussed below).

The most visible effect of adherence to the pictorial vocabulary, therefore, is to take the images at face value, and this is the first problem to be examined in this essay: how is it possible that in the absence of the pictorial content, something is identical to himself, without a consequent relapse into essentialism? How can one avoided the jail of tautologies? How can you escape the *muteness of the images* warned by Descartes? If

there are only images without content, scattered and discontinuous, it is necessary to investigate the principles from which comes from its *sameness*. The answer to this question can avoid the risk attributed to the pictorial narrative some rather equivocal inhibitions, among which the radical skepticism, through which the pictorial is seen as “one who denies everything”, unable to establish and sustain articulated and consistent world views.

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This inhibition was refuted by Hume in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, as it investigated the formation of beliefs, and two in particular: the personal identity and continued existence of external objects. Hume’s challenge was to clarify how its minimalist system of *impressions - ideas - imagination - memory* would bear the complexity of beliefs such as these, when the most credible would be to think the formation of beliefs so dispersed, atomised and discontinuous as are impressions and ideas. The circumscription of the beliefs in this case would be limited to the most strict particularity. Barry Stroud noted the possibility of interpreting ambiguous impressions and ideas as new modes of essence in the Humean work: “a substance is defined as ‘something which may exist by itself’, but this traditional definition does not serve to distinguish substances from those fleeting and variable perceptions which are present to the mind.” (Stroud, 1977: 120)⁸. To substantialize perceptions would lead the Humean thought to a kind of immediate and unreflective empiricism, incompatible with its own grounds.

Identity and Imagination

The principle of individuation, as Hume observes, requires more than the opposition between the unity of a perception (image) and its plurality. Both would be unable, by themselves, to form an idea of identity. This would only be possible with the fictional description of a temporal succession on an invariable object, through which it acquires double valence: one and multiple, depending on perspective. Through this operation of the fantasy, the sentence “the object is itself” becomes invested with meaning, leaving the realm of pure tautology. But what would animate the fantasy to proceed in such a way? The answer is to be found in Hume’s *sui generis* conception of pleasure, as an active force in the imagination of the structure, of constructive sense — away from the concept of surface, both individual and hedonistic, of pleasure:

As there is here an opposition between the notion of identity of similar perceptions and interruptions in their appearance, the mind should feel uncomfortable in this situation, and naturally seek relief from the discomfort (...) relief should be sought in sacrifice of a principle for the benefit of another. (Hume, 2000: 239)⁹

The smooth transition between similar perceptions provides, therefore, the precipitation of temporal fiction about invariant objects and about the cover-up of the discontinuity of their perception.

In the case of variable objects, identity is formed by the insensitivity of the variations in the objects. Since every object is composed of related parties (by similarity, contiguity or causality), the perception of the changes occurred is mitigated by the storage of such relations between the parts of an object over time. At this point, Hume departs definitely from the essentialist arguments presented earlier in this article, for he offers an alternative response to the “key problem of the essence”: how is it possible to give permanence to what shows itself as variable? The answer, as seen, is based on imagination and its idea association movements.

Consistency in the variations of objects makes it unnecessary to observe them all,

or most of them, for the consideration of their identity, as defined in Henry Price's "inertia principle" (Price, 1940: 54)¹⁰. According to Price, the observation of a pattern of successive perceptions and variables (the *coherence* of variable perceptions, in the Humean lexicon), makes it unnecessary to experience each of the perceptions for the inference of the other related to it. The imagination in this case fills any gaps present, the standard-experiment being the reference, so that *expectations* and *experience* are reconciled. The action of this principle, which Hume suggests to be one of the foundations of the belief in the existence of external and independent objects, seems to extend also to the preservation of their identities amid the perceptual variations.

Hume emphasized yet the need of gradualism in the variations of objects:

The changing of a considerable part of a body destroys its identity; but it should be noted that when the change takes place in a gradually and imperceptible way, our tendency to attribute to it the same effect is smaller. (Hume, 2000: 289)¹¹

Hume then poses himself an important objection: even if gradual and insensible, changes in an object may become of such importance with the passage of time that can make the passage of the previous idea to the present impression harder, questioning its identity. In this case, the conservation can be understood by considering an end or common purpose assigned to the object in its various configurations as well as a sympathy between its parts.

Despite the strength of these arguments, Hume realizes that there is preservation of identity even in case of abrupt changes of an object, and offers the example of the river, admitting that in an object of changing nature like this, there are considerable and sudden changes without any identity loss. The trick at this point is to anchor the identity in the habit of perceiving the inconstancy of an object, that is, Hume seems to point to the relative character on what is said "sudden". Sudden is what moves from a consistent pattern of changes previously established by custom. The slightest image shift, in some cases, can be very impressive, or the absence of change where they are expected – as in Dorian Gray. It is seen, therefore, that the gradualism mentioned by the philosopher has a more complex meaning than an objectivist gradualism; it is, in the first case, a perceptive sense of "gradual" established by custom, made belief.

The commentaries of Hume in the *Treatise* offer a unique and constructivist focus on the problem of identity, making any association between a imagistic vocabulary and the radical skepticism necessarily false. Another related problem, however, received few lines in *Treatise*. To advance in its clarification can be of great value to understand some contemporary developments of the pictorial vocabulary; it is the process by which an identity is undone in the imagination. Hume considers it difficult to establish an exact criterion, indicating the circumstances of the loss, and looks back on the *sortes* of identity loss:

As the relations and the ease of the transition may decrease gradually and insensibly, we have no exact criterion to resolve any dispute about the time when they lose the right to the identity name.¹²

The examining of formation, however, can serve to the establishment of criteria of desformation of identities, with the same rigor. If there is an intrinsic quality of the abruptness in changes, which determines the loss, that is, the "abrupt" not being an apparent quality immediately found at an event; if this is not the case, this idea must

come from – in the same way that the ideas of effectiveness and need – of an *impression of reflection*.

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An identity can only be undone when one of the changes undergone by the object derails an established circuit of transfiguration, when its character is absolutely extraordinary, unprecedented and therefore able to provoke impression of reflection – the passion – of identity loss. When we observe an object stick to the limits of a circuit, we hope, by habit, his future repetition. When this happens, it opens the possibility of loss of identity. Perhaps Hume had in mind, in the section mentioned above, the we have not been given to know in advance the extraordinary nature of an event, by *relations of ideas*, which seems correct, after all, an apparently unheard change can only lead to the enlargement of the circuit, that is, it may be admitted in it, as chance, as an unlikely result, however possible, of an event. “Chance in itself”, defines Hume (2000: 58) “is only the denial of a cause. Being contrary to causality, it denies, for a moment, the action of a determined cause, but does not destroy it. And just as it does not destroy a causal belief, chance does not destroy an identity belief, but it is interpreted as the unlikely direction, however admissible, of a succession of changes in the same object.

The common people, according to Hume, is custom interpret chance as derivation of the cause itself, a momentary failure in its operation. Reflection on an unlikely event can cause certain sense of impossibility, but as they witness the event, the usual acts, backed the principle that “similar objects in similar circumstances, will always produce like effects” (Hume, 2000: 135). This reasoning, we can conclude that there is considerable vagueness as to what could be considered unprecedented, as is common confusion between what is conceived as impossible and what is conceived as unlikely.

At the same time, a change in an object, never before perceived, say, the appearance of wings in a land animal, offers a favorable circumstance for the loss of identity, though not determining it. This change may well be integrated into the transfiguration circuit, so that the animal starts to have more possibilities of change in its identity due to the above-mentioned principle, which transfers a past experience with similar objects in similar circumstances. The reflections on the human condition often denounce the immoral routes trailed in the circuit of identity - man.¹⁴

It is clear the unpredictability surrounding the identity loss, in the terms posed by Hume, which don't not prevent the establishment of an *exact criteria* for such event. This criterion, I reiterate, is the output of a possible transfiguration circuit.

The Framework of Identity

O *propósito ou fim comum mencionado* por Hume mais parece um limiar da identidade, algo que lhe dá contornos, um princípio que regula suas alterações, fazendo-se sempre presente, em espectro. Aside from the pictorial aspects, an identity relates, as seen, to a common end or purpose, but both, images and purpose, can not be designed separately. This can be easily observed in the experimente “Rembrandt painting” that Nelson Goodman proposes the (Goodman, 1978: 69)¹⁵. It would be easy to imagine it, a frame of the Dutch, in a deviant function of those assigned to a work of art – such as replacing a broken window, for example. This scene would cause some discomfort, some estrangement to the observer, suggesting a misuse of its original function. The reflections of Arthur Danto (2005) seem to revolve, also, around apparent changes in the purpose of the objects, without, however, significant changes in their identities,

which makes his definition of transfiguration sound somewhat narrow. The purpose or common purpose mentioned by Hume looks more like an identity threshold, something that gives it contours, a principle that governs its changes, becoming ever-present in the spectrum. Deslocated from its function, the Rembrandt *is precisely* deslocated, put in quotes, metaphoric. The same would happen if the painting was completely disfigured, but was left in the midst of its remains, an index of its purpose. Image and purpose can be moved by certain recreational devices, but there is a purpose charge that accompanies the images and vice versa; in short, a belief purpose. To undo an identity requires extraordinary change in an image circuit and purpose related to it. It is easier, of course, the identity loss of an object without any purpose of belief related to it.

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The purpose seems to be the element that maintains the identity of disfigured objects. The destroyed painting loses its image as impression; the purpose recovers it, as an abstract idea. Therefore, it is possible to speak of purpose as a border of identity. One might think that an object was extinguished, but as long as the presence of an image-end, it will remain. This phenomenon can be illustrated by reference to the works of artist Lucio Fontana, in which the use of cuts and incisions provides a sort of aesthetic disfigurement. Below I reproduce the *Spatial Concept 'Waiting'* work, of 1960:



Although virtually devoid of its figurative function, the work retains its identity framework supported by its outline, its frame. We can then imagine that belief in the purpose of objects acts, by analogy, as a frame, as what limits and shapes the identity, the quality of sign.

The formation and dissolution of beliefs follow quite unpredictable and involuntary ways, but on the objective plane v practices, rules, institutions – can observe the opposite. To replace an institution founded in stratification by another, for example, may be a moral imperative in a given society, under the condition to do it without any trace continuity with the previous institution. It is felt that certain changes need to be destructive, and the pictorial vocabulary should be able to deal with these changes in order to not be confused with some form of gradualism, that is, so that it does not fall into a new atomized essentialism. The concept of transfiguration, as Danto defined it seems to apply in this failure: this is the way a domain – artistic – resignifies objects without any affront to their identity core. The same reasoning could explain how other areas – religious, scientific, bureaucratic – transfigure following this same logic.

To some domain, however, a more properly destructive exercise of transfiguration should be due, without the prior need to keep a minimum identity. Kiraly said in this regard that:

The construction, or the pictorial destruction of worlds, does not have an essential value. The necessary sympathy to constructivism should not obscure the creativity of destruction (...) we

must resist to merely associate construction with pleasure and with the support of the worlds, as well as the association between pain and destruction with the lack of sustainability of worlds. (Kiraly, 2013: 293)¹⁶

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The destructive act, besides associable to pleasure, has double valency, that is, it opens itself to the construction of worlds. More than this: to destroy, in some cases, is the only legitimate option if you do not want the deepening of a pain. Even pleasurable objects can, by unbridled and excessive accumulation, become painful, and the regulative principle of ambivalence rooted in this kind of Faustian accumulation is destructive.

The destruction differs itself from the disfigurement, because the objects of the first are beliefs, while the latter acts on objects. The first is linked to the different, the unheard; the last adheres to a predictable circuit of changes that *confirms* the disfigures object. Ironically, the creation (the new, the unknown) is fundamental to destruction, and the domain capable of destructive transfiguration is the political, despite the gradual colonization that, from time to time, it suffers.

The Principle of Disfigurement

The point exposed here seeks to emphasize the importance of destruction to contemporary politics, immersed in the inhibitions of the pictorial, because, as stated above, the latter literalize destruction. Destroyed itself by destroying, which implies accountability – Machiavelli, one imagist, recommended the prince to justify himself when condemned to death one of his subjects, remember Kiraly (2013: 107).¹⁷

A contemporary unfolding of the pictorial vocabulary resides in the identification of the destruction with desfiguration of objects, which, as noted earlier, annuls the possibility of identity change. In disfigurement, the spectrum of purpose is always present; solidifies itself in such a way that the destruction of an object becomes unthinkable. Extraordinary changes are relegated to the status of anomalies, random errors, incompatible with the object structure. The corollary of the disfigurement of principle, therefore, is what Oswaldo Porchat (1993)¹⁸ called idealist empiricism, a lowering of sensitive knowledge, of the most immediate perceptions, of common experience, the idealized fiction of a world ordered and coherent. In the domain of the political, the disfigurement can reduce an immoral institution to ashes; the following institution shall maintain, however, the same previous immoral purpose, even if its image is radically different. The new institution can even be more efficient than the previous one in achieving its immoral purpose.

The way out from this apparent disfiguring circle can be approached by clarifying two orders of changes from the Humean *framework*: (i) of beliefs (ii) of objects. By distinguishing beliefs from objects, Hume makes his empiricism able to account for destruction, dissociating the disfigurement from it, in which objects move to preserve themselves. The change in the level of belief is by no means trivial, and involves the reconfiguration of the ways of feeling and understanding reality. Some interpreters do not reach this nuance of Hume's empiricism, taking him for a kind of vulgar empiricist. This is the case, for example, of Sartre, for whom the concept of Hume's imagination is based on a collection of objects apprehended sensibly. For Sartre, "it was with reason that Laporte compared Hume to neo-realists. To him, as to these, there are only objects" (Sartre, 2008: 104).¹⁹ The consideration of the theme of belief, however, weakens the framing of Hume among realistic or vulgar empiricists.

In contemporary political science, the idealist empiricism founded understanding of the

phenomena also guided by purpose. In what is conventionally called neo-institutionalism, it is often argued that an end, once established, should be maintained, because changing an institutional course would render obsolete the accumulated knowledge – notice the emphasis on constructive accumulation in this case without its destruction regulator. This defense of the instituted became known as the argument of *path dependence*.

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Other expressions of contemporary political science maintain a relationship even less pragmatic and more ontological with the purposes - sticking to them unthinkingly, as if they were before the “real” – or always very close to it. They are the behaviorism derivations, which, in the terms of Kiraly, “reduce the beliefs to their regular aspects”. We could also cite, incrementalism, the Popperian gradualism, the Hayekian one, and others. But the most important is to note that a common feature of all these intellectual movements is the belief that their slow and gradual changes become so great and manufacturing, in the long run, that can overcome barriers by the continuous and relentless action, as Joshua facing the walls of Jericho. They do not realize, however, the narrow limits of their actions.

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2. DESCARTES, René. *Regras para a Direção do Espírito*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1985, p. 4
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4. *Ibid.*p.47
5. *Ibid.*p.42
6. KIRALY, Cesar. *Os Limites da Representação*. São Paulo, Giz Editorial, 2010, p. 173
7. The satyre of Machado de Assis – the humanitism – is eloquent in the perception of this ruin, by stressing its anachronism. “Never seen the water boil? You must recall that the bubbles are made and unmade continuously, and everything stays in the same water. The individuals are the transitory bubbles.” ASSIS, Machado de. *Quincas Borba*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Globo, 1997, p. 9

8. STROUD, Barry. *Hume*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977, p.120 117
9. HUME, op. cit. p. 239
10. PRICE, Henry. *Hume's Theory of the External World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940, p. 54
11. HUME, op. cit. p. 289
12. HUME ,op.cit., p. 295
13. We used the image of the circuit due to its overture to sinuosity. The shortcuts e dents of a circuit suggest a larger flexibility than the image of the circle, for example. The circuit opposes itself also to the infinitude of the cartesian spiral referred to in the beginning of this text.
14. It could not be left unmentioned Manuel Bandeira's poem O Bicho.
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17. Ibid. p.107
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