

The leather-covered copybook

Lashing, burning at stake and deportation were the felon's usual fare under King Phillip Ordinations. The town was named Desterro, which the Portuguese for deportation, and not without cause.

José's father was once a baker on Vila Nova de Gaia, the Douro River village just over the crossing to the great and old City of Oporto. Some wheat came up river on barges, never enough, never reliable. Bakery was a chance business. So was the law that sent to exile in Brazil those bakers caught selling the round, hard bread liked by Oporto dwellers at a weight less than the regulations told.

Desterro was just the place where José was born in February 1750. The baker's first child after the penal transportation to the beautiful island of Santa Catarina in south Brazil did not sense his free going life as any punishment. Endless white beaches, silvery Badejo and Robalo fishes visible through the clear sea, the deep green of the banana trees, Desterro did not mean servitude for anyone but the exiled father's vanishing remembrance.

To Jose's ears, Desterro sounded as the clash of waves against the sand. The initial "d" sliding over the passing vowel, the "s" said as "sh" in the insular accent, the "rr" tough, from the deep of the throat. So he told many times to his grandson, after returning to the town by the early 1800's. During the long years of his own self-imposed exile in lands far to the north, speaking "Desterro" aloud when alone was his way of missing his birthplace

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José's father was a God fearing man, perhaps of the more philistine type. The bearded Catholic God of the island should be appeased by human sacrifices; lacking daughters to be offered as brides to Christ in nearest nunnery, the younger son was to be sent to seminary.

The former baker went prosperous in his forced new land. Fortune brought envy. The baker and his family refrained from pork and gathered for praying a rosary every Friday's dusk. Zealous competitors had already hinted the Vicar that the exiled family should be remitted back to Portugal to ex-

plain to the Inquisition why to praise secretly the older prophet was not, in their case, a crime of the burning stake kind.

José was told of his vocation for priesthood just after the occasion where, in 1766, a fellow merchant of Desterro, visiting Lisbon, was arrested performing like forbidden rites. The lad was aghast. The Friday praying time was already insufferable; he yearned to be a layman to every religion on Earth. Years and years after, José told his grandson that he just found his soul reading in Boston the most candent Voltaire agnosticism.

The grandson's handwriting here shows how horrified he went with the mention of the French philosopher. Nowhere all over the thick leather-covered copybook can be found such graphic disarray as in this report. Then comes a full page exhorting us, his descendents, to keep fearing God - even, if you cannot help otherwise - through Moses, but never read Voltaire. It is good to note that by the time the grandson was writing, the Portuguese Inquisition was quiet as dead.

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José and his father fought weeks on vocation and sanctity. Then a British merchantman sailing round Cape Horn came to the clear strait between the island and the near continent, and anchored some three hundred yards from José's door. Early next morning José swam over, was taken as a much needed hand and went to wherever. It happened to be Boston.

Coming back to Desterro in 1806, José was omissive on the forty years spent in the British Colonies. Fact is, his elder brothers were uninterested on a sibling who had fled from the rigors of life. The little inkling we have to those years comes to us only through his grandson's copybook.

José had the possible education for a Portuguese colony of a time where printers were chased as though they were Jews: the bare reading and writing needed to a trader's son, some piggish Latin learned from helping the Mass when doubling for Christian. His lust for hunting and wandering on subtropical beaches found no gainful opportunity in New England.

He certainly made it, however. By 1775 he was established in trade and married to a young and probably pretty Portuguese wife, daughter of a cod-salting fisherman scuttled to Newfoundland. There is a tiny cameo of a rounded face with all varieties of pink and golden curled hair about it, which is said to be her, but no name is known.

José has taken also some liking to his ambiance: his story of a shooting of British soldiers in which he was involved

sounds rather like Bunker Hill. After that, he moved out to Philadelphia, reasons unknown.

What happened then is foggy. Perhaps José enjoyed the experience and stayed with the Pennsylvanian militia, or trading growth led him frequently out of town. Fact is that one day he comes back to find a deserted home: the Portuguese wife was gone. José learned that a British officer had assiduously visited the place during his absence; some few days before the man came gallantly to help with luggage when the lady and her Negro maid departed in a coach.

Compared to Desterro, Philadelphia was a large city, but not so large that would prevent José from tracking the eloper. He was a certain John André, a man of his age, Captain of a British horse regiment. He even could see the man, when his unit was riding out of town: from a distance, but near enough to have a glimpse of his eyes.

José's wife was nowhere to be found.

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Vengeance does not run in our blood, as can be said to precision looking down to over two hundred and more years. No tale of revenge after political treason, or retaliation after spousal backstabbing. We are rather meek as a family.

José, however, was the only one of us ever called to an empty barracks to find a wife dead, ravaged and burnt as a conquered town. So was the maid, younger than her mistress, but that small Jamaican was not his charge. It was made public as more an act of British violence to hate, such general outcry being nonetheless shameful to the husband. The wife went down a bad path, and a fatal one, but seduction and not force has brought her to demise.

For almost two years John André was out of José's scope. Then by September 1780, someone told, or José read that the officer, now made Adjutant-General, was with General Clinton's army nears West Point. José rode south as fast as he could. Probably some friends, servants or patriots were brought along, as common sense would advise. But the leather-covered copybook is silent about that.

What seems to be clear is that José found the whereabouts of André's exact quarters. He stalked the seducer and followed him around. A complex set of circumstances must be present to bring André to José's full satisfaction. The officer could not be among his troops, which would overpower José and his eventual avenging band. Nor could he be alone, as some witnessing to his private justice was essential.

On one of those days, André rode very early from his camp towards the harbor. José was present to pursue. It would seem that the day's hunt would be lost, though, as Andre went straight on board a British sloop of war, which we now know it was the *Vulture*.

It seems that by gold, influence or disguise José also boarded the ship. At least it is sure that André was very closely kept. When an American boat approached the *Vulture* under a flag of truce, André lowered to the incoming vessel. According the leather-covered copybook, the Major stood on the boat, in his red coat and hussar sword very much conspicuous to behold, while sailing to the land held by the American Revolutionaries.

José also achieved to land, but apparently lost view of the seducer for a long time. When he finds the officer, it was already night and they were far away on a forested area; André was engaged in a long, seemingly covert meeting with a older, assertive man. The shinning British uniform was gone or hidden, André had now the common garb of a local civilian. Peeking through the bushes, José saw papers to be exchanged. André inserted the documents in his boot, and scurried away on a grey horse.

José was a hunter by natural disposition. In his late middle age, returned to Desterro to carry out an undistinguished career as public translator, he took more time chasing jaguars and the wild local boar called *catete*, than in his idiomatic pursuits. José's version of grandfatherly love was shown to the author of the copybook through long incursions together to the core of the island or into the hinterland, always surrounded by hounds.

This instinct should have served him well when hunting André through the woods. The major reached the outskirts of the forest by early dawn, dismounted and rested, probably waiting for an opportunity: patrols by American soldiers were lazily wandering the field beyond Tarry-Town.

José has no reason to fear the patriots. He left the place where André rested and went forward to meet a group of three of militiamen playing cards in an indifereend mood. It was Saturday, the twenty-third of September 1780.

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It is natural to presume that José has a foreigner's accent. Probably for this reason, he introduced himself as a Portuguese fellow militiaman from Boston. The soldiers were told of the suspicious person in high cavalry boots who was lying close by. It was almost nine in the morning. The four of them approached the sleeping officer. The passport in his surtout

coat identified the man by another name, but José was very sure of his prey.

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The leather-covered copybook is imprecise as to the days that followed the Major's arrest. We read from other sources, however, the proceedings of the court martial held six days after, at Tappan. John André seems to have been a gentleman of his time, worried only in being tried as a regular soldier, and not a spy. He wanted the honor of fusillade instead of the ignominy of the common man hanging.

Winston Churchill's History describes André's latter days in a very romantic fashion:

André was executed as a spy. He wrote a graceful and dignified letter to Washington asking to be shot instead of hanged - in vain. He was a young man of great personal beauty, and in his scarlet uniform, standing upon the gallows, and himself arranging the noose round his neck, he made an appealing sight. His courage reduced to tears the rough crowd that had gathered to see him die. In all the anger of the struggle, with the exasperation of Arnold's desertion hardening every Patriot heart, no one could be found to perform the task of executioner, and in the end a nameless figure, with his face blackened as a disguise, did the work.

The copybook was cruder in its details.

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The trial was a very discrete affair at the time. Despite all ferocious interest that José had in André's future, no admission could be bought or cajoled. Yet, the death sentence was made public and conducted as a major spectacle with all sound and fury of those times of war.

The copybook states that José spent half year of trading income in buying the regular executioner's sudden disappearance. Able and insinuating, José managed to offer his help and be accepted to assure that the show would go on despite the missing official. He was, against his desire, blackened in the face and arms to disguise the occasional executioner: no shame and much pride he has in this very office.

The copybook registers that José was so confused by hate and exhilaration that could not perform as hanger should be. André was gallant as it was his custom: helped the avenger with elegance and poise. José left the gallows soiled with his own urine.

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The leather-covered copybook uses five pages of its convoluted handwriting to question whether José's act was sheer Justice or the darkest of all sins. By 1850, when the text was

written, those considerations could be *de riguer*. We think the style proper to these times is just to let the thing speak by itself.

José died in 1832, estranged to the rest of his family but, as the story goes, a man of pure soul and the insuperable completeness of someone who did not believe in any future life.