

DINAH SILVEIRA DE QUEIROZ:
AN INNOVATOR IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE

by Maria Teresa Leal de Martínez

I. BIO-BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Since Brazilian literature is still very little known outside of Brazil—for reasons which will not be dealt with in this article—it seems necessary to provide some information about Dinah Silveira de Queiroz. For the last forty years she has occupied a prominent place among Brazilian writers of fiction. Her first novel, *Floradas na Serra* (When the Hills Are Blooming, 1939), reached seventeen editions in Portuguese; it was translated into Spanish and made into a film. After this came the following publications:

- 1941 *Sereia Verde* (Green Mermaid)—novel and short stories.
- 1949 *Margarida La Rocque*—novel translated into French under the title *L'île aux démons* (Paris: Julliard, 1952) and into Spanish under the title *El juicio de Dios* (Barcelona: Ed. Ahr., 1952); the French translation was a personal project of Daniel Rops.
- 1950 *Eles herdarão a terra* (They Will Inherit the Earth)—science fiction.
- 1955 *A muralha* (The Wall)—historical novel. Eight editions; translated into Japanese by Hahanaru Okuchi, in which language it had reached three editions as of July 1977; chosen to be included in a collection of twenty important modern novels published in Korean (*Sinpi Ui Mibrim*, Joong Ang il Bo, Seoul, 1977); and translated into German and English (in press, no publication data available).
- 1956 *O oitavo dia* (The Eighth Day)—drama, Biblical theme.

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- 1965 *Os Invasores* (The Invaders)—historical novel.
- 1969 *Verão dos Infieis* (Summer of the Infidels)—incursion into the *nouveau roman*.
- 1975 *Eu venho* (I'm Coming)—essay and novelized biography of Christ.

Until now, her published works add up to nearly forty volumes, including novels, short stories, plays, children's books, and *crônicas*.¹ Several of these have appeared in translation in Israel, Argentina, Venezuela, Peru, and the United States.²

Queiroz has received several literary prizes³ and is a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (Brasilia). She is a direct descendant of the "bandeirante"⁴ Carlos Pedroso da Silveira, the man who first minted gold coins in Brazil, at a time when it was not permitted to coin and circulate national currency. No other family has given so many writers to Brazil: an uncle, her sister Helena, and six cousins either preceded or have accompanied her in literary fame. Her father was a learned man who decisively influenced her career.

Queiroz was Cultural Attaché at the Brazilian Embassy in Madrid (1962) and lived in Moscow and Rome (1964-1967).⁵ Her literary activity, including her daily radio *crônica*, transmitted in Brazil, was never interrupted during her stay abroad.

The work she has done outside Brazil towards the spread of Brazilian culture is noteworthy, as is the very effective stimulus she has given young writers by providing them with a weekly space in her newspaper column *A Manhã* (The Morning). Short-story writers, poets, and critics who are well-known today began their careers there.⁶

In 1970 she began a successful national campaign for the revision of the by-laws of the Brazilian Academy of Letters (Rio), which until then prohibited the election of women to its ranks.

II. THE WORKS OF DINAH SILVEIRA DE QUEIROZ IN CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN LITERATURE

The most noticeable quality in Dinah Silveira de Queiroz's fiction is the desire for renewal, the courage to experiment, to "defy the ridiculous" as she herself puts it.⁷ Nevertheless, within the variety of her work, correspondences in the genesis of certain novels can be observed, as well as an evolutionary process in certain elements which situate some of her works within a given genre. The author confesses in an interview with Danilo Gomes⁸ that her work of science fiction (*Eles herdarão a terra*) was "presaged" by the "demonic" novel *Margarida la Rocque*. This last novel was "written in a period of great suffering,"⁹ and has a strong symbolic content. Narrated in the first person, "it is really an interior adventure in the form of a story, the descent into the hell

of loneliness which leads Margarida to confront her own image."¹⁰ The structure of the novel is itself symbolic. The fantastic is a vehicle for liberation, the flight to a space and time—an island in the sixteenth century—created for habitation by her “devils,” her struggle with them and victory over them.

Science fiction has a common denominator of creative liberty with the fantastic. It differs, however, in its need to maintain a discipline of the imagination which touches on verisimilitude. It must correspond to a rigorous deduction: “the sum of that which happened yesterday, and of that which is happening today, unfolding into that which will happen tomorrow.”¹¹

The connection between *Margarida La Rocque* and *O memorial do Cristo* (the title of a two-volume work, the first of which was published in 1975 as *Eu venho* and the second still in preparation) is made at the level of the internal motivation of the author, and is “cathartic” in nature: “. . . I had promised it to myself from the time that I wrote the ‘demonic’ *Margarida La Rocque* in 1948. The *Memorial do Cristo* was foretold on Margarida La Rocque’s night of passion with such a fatality as not even I could glimpse.”¹²

In *Era uma vez uma princesa* (Once Upon a Time There Was a Princess), a novelized biography of the princess Isabel de Orleans e Bragança,¹³ there is evidence of Queiroz’s inclination towards the historical novel, understood as a bringing to life of exemplary personages whom legend has made distant and/or whom history has schematized.

Verão dos infieis (1968), according to the author, is the most Brazilian of all her books and is technically influenced by the *nouveau roman*. It represents another road taken by Queiroz. The novel can be read in several ways: as the process of disintegration of an urban family in Rio de Janeiro, at the time of the suicide of President Vargas (a true historical fact); symbolically, as the search of a family for its father, corresponding to the nation in search of a head of state; or as an expression of the existential anxieties of the present in which God is missing.

The facts are presented without concern for time sequence, without psychological introspection, without critical implication, *without meaning*. Queiroz confesses that the idea for *Verão dos infieis* came to her when she was in Rome listening to the Pope speak of the world’s problems. In this book Domingos (Dominus) is the great character *in absentia* whose coming would solve all conflicts, but who never arrives.

Later Queiroz wrote *Eu venho*, her biography-essay about Jesus Christ. She sees a relationship in the genesis of the two books. Indeed, it is as if the second were an answer to the first.

Eu venho (1975) must have been the book which presented the most difficulties for the author. To assume today—a time of prevailing rationalism—an intrepid attitude of religious faith (even though the book is by no means evangelical) and to take up as a theme the life of Christ represent considerable risks. The preparation of this book took years of study, criticism and selection

of religious texts, documents, and biographies of Christ, in order to arrive at a simple retelling of his story, in poetic language, predominantly in the form of a descriptive essay. The author justifies her "daring" with the license of an artist to create. Just as there are plastic expressions of the greatest moments of the life of Christ, "the moment which did not exist was eternalized by art in its profound poetic sense and in its religious conception (if it had happened, it would have been in this way)."¹⁴

III. SCIENCE FICTION AND HISTORICAL NOVEL: NEW GENRES IN BRAZILIAN LITERATURE

When Dinah Silveira de Queiroz dared to publish a science fiction novel she ran other risks: that it was a genre not accepted as "literary" in intellectual Brazilian circles (except for such writers as Huxley, Orwell, and more recently Simak, Ballard, or Stefan Wul, and these by a very restricted public), and that science fiction had few roots in a country lacking the scientific and technical development of the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the genre was born and is very successful. Latin American literature has primarily been concerned with race or mythic image, not with possible scientific and technological revolutions.¹⁵

Eles herdarão a terra was published in 1950. Ten years later several novels of science fiction began to appear in Brazil, written by authors of recognized literary merit.¹⁶ Reading Jules Verne and H. G. Wells at an early age inclined Queiroz toward speculating on the possible conditions of life for mankind in the future. Because of her faith in humanity and in the transcendence of its destiny, her science fiction novel and stories belong more to the optimistic-utopian current than to the pessimistic vein of Huxley and Orwell. The characters move in a space that is deliberately different from the one we know, but their actions and psychological reactions obey a logic comprehensible and familiar to the reader. The language should not be anachronistic. It was necessary to "invent words, jargon, a whole climate in the language of the novel which would clothe it in a reality, just as must be done in the historical novel, where a character must be created from more than just his wardrobe."¹⁷

Judging by the critical acclaim and the international projection reached by her historical novel *A Muralha*, this is Queiroz's most important work. It is considered "the first great historical novel of our literature, the one which in fact among us signals the projection of the genre, in spite of earlier attempts."¹⁸

In the nineteenth century, José de Alencar, the most representative writer of fiction in Brazilian Romanticism, wrote historical novels. His subject was the Indian. This topic fit perfectly with romantic idealism (the "bon sauvage," the American utopia, the return to the past, the origins of nationality, liberty, and all the ideas transplanted from European idealism, were paradoxically opposed to the intention of the identification of national origins) in its

capacity as a symbol of nationality: the true owner of the land enslaved. Alencar created, in the opinion of Queiroz, an "exalted allegory." Even though he studied the historical accounts of Indian customs, he idealized them, omitting that which did not suit his portrait and exaggerating the natives' physical and moral perfection.

Queiroz's sources are both literary and oral: books and stories transmitted from generation to generation in her own family, which lives in the same locale where the epic adventure occurred.

In *A muralha*, characterization in a particular time and space is achieved by means of the representation of objects, language, social classes, and institutions in an animated portrayal of the customs of the period, as opposed to the idealizing portrayal of Romanticism or to documentary realism. In other words, with a noteworthy economy of expression, every item mentioned is functional to the story, every object represents the intimate life of the individuals, intervenes in their relationships and their destinies, and is incorporated into the retelling of the process of a society in creation. For example, a chest, which the protagonist brings from Portugal with presents for her in-laws, is lost, and she thinks that with this loss she has lost the favor of her foreign relatives. The situation brings forth lies, the unmasking of these, and conflicts. The chest reappears during an Indian attack on the plantation (the Indians have found it and used its contents), and this stimulates a struggle. A book in which the patriarch of the family records what has happened also documents this determination about what is to happen in the future. The first coins minted in Brazil will allow the heroine to pay her passage back to her home country, Portugal, thus creating options and decisions. All the elements of the outer reality are related to inner dramas, which are much more universal than the individual destinies of the protagonists.

When Lukacs speaks of the Hegelian idea of the "totality of objects," he says,

Obviously, no literary character can contain the infinite and inexhaustible wealth of features and reactions to be found in life itself. But the nature of artistic creation consists in the ability of this relative, incomplete image to appear like life itself, indeed in a more heightened, intense and alive form than in objective reality.¹⁹

A Muralha has succeeded in it.

An attempt to recapture archaic linguistic forms is made at the syntactic level in the dialogue and in the vocabulary of the narration. The epic-mythic tone, or *in illo tempore*, is reinforced, then, by the language used.

The relationships among the social classes—oppression/submission/rebellion/justice/injustice/loyalty/betrayal—are shown in facts, action, or dialogue, with a minimal use of description.

Criticism is left to the reader. Characterization is not derived from a modern humanistic code, but from the individual psychology of each character, from his cultural conditioning, from his own laws of survival. The

nucleus of individual and collective conflicts, acts of injustice and violence may be rationalized by the necessity for the preservation of life, power, or honor of an individual or sub-group of characters, at the same time that they are unacceptable for the alien heroine whose previous experience is so different from theirs. The principal thematic nucleus, *gold*, motivates human behavior: indifferent, abusive, or cruel treatment of the Indian and black slaves; racist pride; hypocrisy and lies used as a shield for family honor.

The search for gold determines and organizes all activities, and gives rise to all conflicts at individual, social, and political levels. It leads the hero and his followers to death, and causes the loneliness and arduous conditions in the women's lives. It is the road to fulfillment and to destruction, the obstacle to love, and the instrument of the social revolution of a country. It is the proof of courage or the revelation of cowardice. The motivation of this search might be access to a life of comfort: riches, social status, and political power. In the character of hero, there is the consciousness of the transcendence of his historical destiny, of the significance of gold as a factor in a profound social revolution which will lead, in a perhaps remote future, to the economic and political independence of the country. The hero is not idealized (although he is necessarily out of proportion) because his stature rests on the other features of elevation and strength: moral authority, generosity, physical health, wisdom, and leadership qualities attracting upon him the recognition and approval of the legally-constituted authorities. The success of his undertaking, therefore, means a *becoming* more than just his individual destiny. Total dedication to his life's work creates and enlarges his personal conflicts as he envisions his own historical significance.

In the "historical-universal" individual (according to Hegelian typology) the "historical significance was best brought out epically when, viewed compositionally, they played minor parts in the story."²⁰ In *A Muralha* the father is the model *ab initio*, with an undertaking for which he is prepared and destined; he *is* and *he knows himself*. The son and the daughter-in-law—protagonists of the story—live the process of apprenticeship, self-knowledge, and acceptance of obligation over and above their personal happiness, exercising the options offered to them. The real death of the father and the symbolic death of the mother are presented as a solution, and the young assume their roles.

The unity reached among the individual destinies of the characters, their life's work, and the social significance of their life's work make *A Muralha* a successful historical novel.

Critics are quick to point out the feminine character of a woman writer's works. In the case of Dinah Silveira de Queiroz, the supposedly feminine qualities of tenderness, sensitivity, etc., have been attributed to her, especially in critical observations about *Floradas na Serra*. More recently, a (male) critic has perceived that *feminist* novels were being written in São Paulo and

that Queiroz was among their writers, not because she was a woman, but because she gave the women she wrote about in *A Muralha* the status of builders of a country. The author creates a great psychological variety among many characters, who are equally indispensable to the plot and the dramatic conflict. She also succeeds in revealing, through the women, systems of family, honor, religiosity, custom, carefully observed and subtly transmitted institutions. In *A Muralha*, women are frequently men's victims, yet they offer their solidarity to them and become equal to them whenever it is necessary to transcend the immediate significance of events. Ultimately, women can claim equal credit for the men's accomplishments.

Insofar as the pertinence of historic and socio-economic observation of a past period in Brazilian history is concerned, it must be observed that *A Muralha* comes as close as possible to the reality of the society being portrayed. The chronicles about Brazilian colonial life in São Paulo are sharply divided between *aulic* historians and a series of documents dealing with different aspects of life from which a careful study can draw a picture of Brazilian society at that time. The first ones picture a luxurious material life and an intense intellectual activity impossible to have existed in the colonial period. The later ones show the extremes of difference between the social classes, isolation of rural landowners, slavery in the countryside, and a fledgling urban life, in which conditions for the more elevated forms of culture and artistic expression were non-existent. Queiroz opts for good sense and portrays an almost-poor or at best minimally rich society, which had no access to luxury (being far from Europe and without industry), badly dressed and ignorant of social manners in use in Europe. In *A muralha* only one woman knows how to read and write, much to the outrage of the others, and this is not even the heroine, a Portuguese girl from the country herself.

By means of presenting the significant components of habits and ways of life in an interactive relationship with the conflictive situations, the author arrives at a social study of a given community. Its cultural context can be defined as "Brazilian," or "Paulist" but reaches a much more vast reality, and reflects the moral values of Western Judeo-Christian culture.

The same ability to bring the conditions of a remote period to life can be seen in *Os invasores*, a novel concerning the eighteenth-century French invasion of Rio de Janeiro.

As in her historical novels, Queiroz's other works always reflect the author's conscious attitude of artistic experimentation and constant interest in life and literature.

NOTES

1. The *crônica* has acquired the status of a literary genre in Brazil (possibly for economic reasons), after being cultivated by the most famous poets and writers of fiction. It is commentary,

reflection, almost a story, poetry of daily life composed for journalistic consumption and eventually compiled in books.

2. 'Tarciso' in *Eye of the Heart* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1972); 'A moralista' (The Moralist), *Odyssey*, New York, Dec. 1961.

3. The Prize of the Academy of Letters, the Afonso Arinos Prize, the Machado de Assis Prize and others.

4. *Bandeirante*: head of the expedition which discovered and explored certain mines and other territory in Brazil in the eighteenth century.

5. Married to Ambassador Dario de Castro Alves (1962), she accompanied her husband, who was then Consul of Brazil, to Moscow and Rome.

6. E.g., Samuel Rawet, Fausto Cunha, Renard Pérez, Luis Canabrava, Nataniel Dantas, Teresinha Eboli, Leda Barreto, Fabio Lucas.

7. Cf. Bella Jozef, "Perfil de Dinah Silveira de Queiroz," *Seleta* (Rio: Livaria José Olympio Editora, 1974), p. XIV. All translations from the original into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

8. *Minas Gerais, Suplemento Literario* (Feb. 5, 1977), p. 8.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Bella Jozef, "Perfil," p. 163.

11. Dinah Silveira de Queiroz, quoted by Bella Jozef, *ibid.*, p. 169.

12. Interview, *Minas Gerais, Suplemento Literario*, p. 8.

13. The daughter of the Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, and known historically as the Redemptress. She ordered the abolition of slavery during her regency.

14. Dinah Silveira de Queiroz, *Eu venho-limar do Cristo* (Rio: José Olympio Editora, 1974), p. XI.

15. Monteiro Lobato had published *O choque das raças e o presidente negro* (The Racial Conflict and the Black President) in 1926. The action is situated in the United States in 2228, where the first black president has just been elected. The work turns out to be a pamphleteering, even racist satire, which presents suggestions for avoiding racial conflict. It is the only precursor of Dinah Silveira de Queiroz's science fiction, and its inclusion in this group is doubtful. There is a lack of several elements such as uniqueness of space and the lucid characteristics of the genre.

16. 1960—Fausto Cunha, *Noites marcianas*

1961—Jeronimo Monteiro, *Fuga para lugar algum*

1963—Jeronimo Monteiro, *Visitantes do espaço*

1963—André Carneiro, *Diario de nave perdida*

1966—André Carneiro, *O homem que adivinhava*

1963—Guido Wilmar Sassi, *Testemunha do tempo*

1965—Levy Menezes, *O Terceiro Planeta*; and more recently (1975) *Os planupedes*, by Manuel Garcia de Paiva.

17. Queiroz, quoted in *Minas Gerais, Suplemento Literario*, p. 8.

18. Fausto Cunha, quoted by Bella Jozef, "Perfil," p. 164.

19. G. Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (New York: Humanities Press, 1965), pp. 92-93.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 103.