



LUCIA HELENA AND THE CANON

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...sou antes de tudo uma professora, e que eu escrevo e penso porque eu gosto muito de estudar e de aprender.

(Interview in *Pensares em Revista*, 2012)

Lucia Helena, colleague and close friend for many years, was a conscientious, rigorous and prolific scholar whose devotion to her profession was steadfast and absolute. It is impossible to comment on her many writings, but I hope this short essay-homage will give a sense of some of her work on the canon.

In 1977, Lucia published *A Cosmo-agonia de Augusto dos Anjos*, which discusses *Eu* (1912), the poet's only published work, in terms of its scatological language and synthesis of the epic and the dramatic. Although critics often associated the poet's language with the philosophies of evolutionism and determinism in the period, Lucia argues that Anjo's use of scientific terminology was his way of contesting and repudiating the norms of what then was considered aesthetically "belo." She also calls attention to his "unique

dialogue of confluences,” involving aspects of the romantic, the Parnassian, and the symbolist. According to her, Anjos failed to be recognized for this style, which influenced later poets associated with early Brazilian modernism.

Perhaps it was her interest in the literary confluences in Augusto dos Anjos and her reading of Raul Bopp’s *Vida e Morte da Antropofagia* (1977) that led Lucia to her next book, which was about the anthropophagic character of Brazilian literature. In *Uma Literatura Antropofágica* (1983), she employs Oswald de Andrade’s famous 1928 manifesto as the basis for her argument about an “aesthetic-cultural attitude” in Brazilian literature characterized by a “native project that saw itself oppressed by the colonizer’s culture” (9). What she describes as a transgressive “cultural devouring” is best exemplified by the works of Oswald. As an “ethos” of Brazilian culture, she also argues that the literary anthropophagic can be traced back to colonial times and the poetry of Gregório de Matos.

Lucia’s engagement with Oswald’s writings continued in her next two books, *Totens e Tabus da Modernidade Brasileira* (1985), a study of his opus read through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory; and *Escrita e Poder* (1985), a collection of her essays written between 1973 and 1984. The latter demonstrates her research interests in four areas: the intellectual on literature, with essays on Gonzaga, Oswald, Alceu de Amoroso Lima and Mário de Andrade; narrative style past and present, with discussions of Cervantes (*Dom Quixote*), Clarice, and Oswald; theater, where she writes about Greek tragedy and the plays of Oswald; and literary theory, with essays on Roland Barthes, mimesis and Benjamin, whose work on allegory would continue to be a touchstone in the next phase of her research on Clarice.

The rise of women’s studies in the U.S. in the 1980s coincided with Lucia’s U.S. visits and lectures at the University of Rochester and Brown University. There and elsewhere, she met colleagues Earl Fitz, Marta Peixoto and Nelson Vieira, who were writing books about Clarice, and gained greater insight into the growing international reception of the author as well as her inclusion in Portuguese and women’s studies courses. In Lucia’s excellent introduction to her book, *Nem Musa, Nem Medusa: Itinerários da escrita em Clarice Lispector* (1997), she looks back at this time in the U.S., amazed at the degree of attention being given to Clarice, acknowledging the seminal importance of

Hélène Cixous' early seminars and writings on her. Clarice was an ideal subject for the two main camps of feminist thinking at the time: the Anglo-American interest in new and neglected women writers with an eye to revising the canon, and the French post-structuralist focus on gender and *écriture féminine*.

Lucia and I first met in 1988 at a conference organized by the Grupo de Trabalho Mulher na Literatura, an encounter that turned into a lifelong friendship. Not long after, she published an important early essay in the field titled "A personagem feminina na ficção brasileira dos anos 70 e 80: Problemas teóricos e históricos," which appeared in a special 1989 issue on women writers organized by Peggy Sharpe-Valadares for the *Luso Brazilian Review*. In her essay, Lucia writes about the relationship between Brazilian politics and women's studies: "Exatamente no momento em que nossa sociedade atravessa um de seus mais graves períodos políticos e econômicos, começa entre nós a surgir uma preocupação em discutir e estudar a representação da mulher na literatura e a sua receptividade no tecido social e ação política" (55). Here she brings attention to the proto-feminist works of Júlia Lopes de Almeida as foundation for her commentary on the resistant or rebellious female characters in works by Lya Luft, Helena Parente Cunha, Sonia Coutinho, Márcia Denser and Sérgio Sant'Anna. Her essay was influential on my own thinking and project at the time, an anthology titled *One Hundred Years After Tomorrow: Brazilian Women's Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (1991).

Interestingly, Clarice does not appear in Lucia's 1989 study, although she is the focus of an article published that same year titled "The Female Body and Desire in Clarice Lispector's 'A Imitação da Rosa'," in the proceedings of the 1988 GT: Mulher na Literatura conference. A version of that article, "Genre and Gender in Clarice Lispector's 'Imitation of the Rose'," appeared shortly after in the journal *Style*. Here she discusses the language of the protagonist Laura, a middle-class housewife who suffers from patriarchy's expectations and suppression of female desires, which gradually lead to her madness. Lucia agrees with Marta Peixoto's earlier analysis of the story that Laura's madness is ultimately liberating, allowing her to escape societal constraints.

Lucia continued to publish on Clarice in the early 1990s, but her research interests broadened to include works by Maria Gabriela Llansol, José de Alencar, and Silviano

Santiago. She also wrote about the formation of comparative literature as a field of literary inquiry; borrowing Llansol's idea of encounters between writers separated by geography or centuries, in 1997, she edited a collection of essays and wrote about an "encounter" between Clarice and Llansol for a commemorative issue on Clarice for *Revista Tempo Brasileiro*. That same year, she published *Nem Musa, nem Medusa: Itinerários da escrita em Clarice Lispector*. Drawing from Llansol, the study proposes a reading based on an imaginary encounter between Clarice and Walter Benjamin:

[A] obra de ambos questiona o poder da linguagem para escapar do habitual (através do próprio uso crítico e arguto do cristalizado e do costumeiro), para se mover além das hierarquias da oposição binária, e para questionar alternativas à representação artística e à leitura da arte como representação. O ponto de contato maior, porém, entre a obra da escritora e do pensador não está na pura eleição e coincidência dos mitos cristalizados do imaginário cultural que revisitam. Está, antes, na própria maneira por meio da qual ambos deles se aproximam, de que resultam não apenas um particular empenho na discussão das formas e escrita da representação cultural, e uma investigação sobre a possível "economia alternativa da escrita," mas também outras formulações, comuns a ambos, e extremamente marcantes, de que se podem destacar: a investigação das relações de poder na sociedade; o tratamento das inter-relações entre objetividade e subjetividade, para além da dicotomia opositiva usual; o posicionamento sobre relações de alteridade; o minimalismo estilístico e discursivo que faz do fragmento, do detalhe, do particular, da antítese, do quiasma e do paradoxo uma hábil instrumentalização crítica acerca do pensamento binário e maniqueísta; e a gravidade dos problemas éticos de que tratam e com os quais se engajam. (24)

She attributes the phrase "economia alternativa da escrita" to Morag Schiach in her work on Cixous and cites Barthes' theory of textuality (*O Prazer do Texto*) as fundamental to her thinking about connections between Clarice and Benjamin.

Following *Nem Musa, nem Medusa*, Lucia turned her attention to a series of re-readings of Alencar, which became part of her next book, *A Solidão Tropical: O Brasil de Alencar e a modernidade* (2006). Here she returns to the transitional period between the nineteenth and twentieth century, exploring little-studied aspects of romanticism in general and Alencar in particular. Her objective in the study is, in her words, to compare and discuss the reception past and present of ideas such as history, identity and nationality formulated by Alencar and their projections into the present (33). She is especially interested in the theme of solitude, recurrent in Alencar's works, and how it has been understood by past critics. For some, she writes, solitude is seen as an expression of the doubts and isolation of a new nation faced by the uncertainty of its course. For others,

solitude in Alencar is associated with the search for a “new code” with which to construct and install a “hypothetical Brazil” based on both indigenous and imported models (85). For her part, Lucia identifies solitude in Alencar’s works as the basis for his ideas and writing about nationality (86).

The theme of nationhood, which runs throughout her volume on Alencar, was a central topic of the Universidade Federal Fluminense and CNPq-sponsored Grupo de Estudos Nação e Narração, which she founded in 1995, and which held its first of several seminar in 2003. The proceedings of that two-day seminar were published in her edition *Nação-Invenção: Ensaíos sobre o nacional em tempos de globalização* (2006). Her own contribution, “Que globalização, que país, que literatura?” begins with commentary on a lecture by J.S. Coetzee at Princeton University, where he assumed the guise of his controversial fictional character Elizabeth Costello, an older, famous Australian novelist, who travels the world lecturing at academies, privately and sometimes publicly scorning the professorial ranks for their dearth of intellectual rigor. Turning from the postmodern author, the essay focuses on a reevaluation of Brazil’s colonial past in relation to Alencar’s little-studied collection of chronicles about seventeenth-century Rio, *O Garatuja* (1873), which critiques, among other things, the pedantic and opaque language used by the dominant class to manipulate others and ensure its status and privileges.

In 2010, Lucia published a collection of essays titled *Ficções do Desassossego: Fragmentos da solidão contemporânea*, about the sense of tragedy and crisis in the writings of authors such as Clarice, João Gilberto Noll, Coetzee, Philip Roth and Ronaldo Lima Lins. As K. David Jackson wrote in his review of the book for *Colóquio: Letras*:

Na visão de Lucia Helena, a modernidade seria uma marcha contínua pontuada por crises, onde as ficções do desassossego da produção recente dialogam com a tragédia grega, num momento em que as utopias românticas estão vedadas ao cidadão comum e até a subjetividade já perdeu as suas marcas de identidade e sua razão. Os romances estudados, seja qual for a língua, abordam essa problemática, com protagonistas que têm em comum um deslocamento (286).

Lucia’s comparative approach in *Ficções do Desassossego* is reflected in her articles published around that time: the “disquieting” poetry of Augusto dos Anjos and Fernando Pessoa; the equally disquieting fiction of Machado, Clarice and Noll; the realist-naturalist

tradition re-visited by Bernardo Kucinski and Chico Buarque; and the themes of fear, love and solitude in the writings of Ana Luiza Escorel, Mariana Portela and Elvira Vigna. Her fascination with the topic of disquiet and globalization led to her volume, co-edited with Paulo César S. Oliveira, titled *Uma Literatura Inquieta: Memória, ficção, mercado, ética* (2016), which includes essays on authors such as Machado, Conrad, Coetzee, Clarice, Bernardo de Carvalho, Bruce Chatwin, Edmund White and Michel Laub. Among the various ideas developed in the collection is the decline of intellectual exchange and debate from pressures exerted by the global marketplace.

Her work in comparative literary studies continued in her essay “A Thick Heart: Migration of Souls and Meaning,” a study of Graciliano’s *Vidas Secas* and Clarice’s *A Hora da Estrela*, that appeared in *Graciliano Ramos and the Making of Modern Brazil*, a 2017 anthology co-edited by Sara Brandellero and Lucia Villares. The essay compares the migrant figures Fabiano and Macabéa in context: The impoverished and displaced Fabiano, whose destiny, despite the possibilities of the 1930s social revolution, is sealed by his lack of language; and the poor young migrant Macabéa, recently arrived in the city, who is eager to learn words and adapt, but unable to deal with the expectations and exigencies of late modernity.

During the pandemic, Lucia was reading widely on the theory of affects, especially the writings by philosophers as distant to one another in time as Baruch Spinoza and Vladimir Safatele. In 2022, her book *O Livro dos Afetos: Cultura e autoritarismo na literatura contemporânea* appeared with two new essays, one on Coetzee and another on Brazilian national identity, along with four previously published articles on works by Silviano Santiago, Clarice, Chico Buarque, Kucinski, Escorel, Portela and Vigna. As in earlier works, her focus is on literature that treats the ideas of fear, solitude and love in a globalized society. Because fear, she writes, has become more pervasive in contemporary times, ties of affect have been greatly weakened—so much so, she adds, that it was no longer the case of finding safe harbor, as Gregório de Matos suggests in his verses about a life “unido, atado e firme” (69). Tying together the various essays is her interest in how characters from different works as well as the nation itself have been shaped by and react to their fears and an increasing sense of helplessness in everyday life.

Though separated by geographical distances (and long before the I-phone or social media programs on the order of Skype, Whatsapp, and Zoom, Lucia and I maintained a friendship through e-mails and regularly renewed by her trips to the U.S. and my trips to Brazil to visit her in her apartment in Leblon. We had a sort of ritual we followed: either a take-out dinner and a bottle of red wine to accompany our hours-long conversations about our work, family and friends; or a trip to our favorite Italian restaurant, Antica Osteria dell'Angolo, where we lingered over glasses of wine and a huge antipasto of meats, cheeses, olives and peppers. Our conversations were always lively: Lucia loved to talk and to laugh and I often found myself leaving her apartment not long before dawn. The next day, we would commiserate on the phone about the curse of too much wine and not enough sleep. But the joy remained.

She was a caring daughter to her mother, Dona Regina, who moved into an apartment in the same building. On one occasion the three of us went to our Italian place; Lucia was surprised and charmed by her mother's unexpected decision to join in our liquid celebration by requesting a beer. Their relationship was very close and her mother's death, like that of her father's many years earlier, was devastating to her. Whenever we returned to that restaurant, we talked about her mother's beer and her happiness at being just one of the gals with us.

The themes of solitude and fear which Lucia wrote about seemed to somehow gain traction in her life. Our outings stopped and we kept to her apartment for our reunions. Violence on the streets and stray bullets frightened her and she worried about my comings and goings. She always called taxis for me, then accompanied me down the apartment elevator to the cab to interrogate the driver to ensure he was reliable and would assure my safe return to my apartment or hotel. I found her concern about my welfare more than touching.

After years of e-mailing, our lives changed with Whatsapp. Now we were able to communicate more easily and occasionally chat. She called me her "irmã" and I felt the same about her. One day last June, she sent me a text message about a terrible cough and then came her alarming voice message filled with fear and helplessness, the very emotions

about which she had been reading and writing for the last years. It was a terrible blow to learn from afar that she did not survive her illness.

Her many brilliant books and articles are testament to her prolific and dedicated scholarly life. Her love and devotion as a colleague and friend were unmatched and inspiring. A strong, independent woman, Lucia earned the joy she shared with me and so many others and is greatly missed.

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