

HATOUM, Milton. *Relato de um Certo Oriente*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989. 166p.

The Amazon region, and Manaus in particular, have, over the last quarter century, been most notably represented, in a fictional vein, by novelists Márcio Souza and Paulo Jacob. Milton Hatoum (b. 1952), whose *Relato de um Certo Oriente* (Account of a Certain Easterner) is both the recipient of the respected Jabuti Award and in the process of multiple translations, adds new dimensions to familiar ethnogeographic clichés; and in so doing, pushes the limits of conventional introspection and retrospection. Indeed, within the porous braces of an odd Prodigal Son motif, the first time author meanders convincingly and lyrically through the intertwined domains of nostalgia and memory, mourning and death. At the same time, he, too, remains cognizant of broader social issues, such as cultural assimilation and even nation building.

Narration in *Relato*, always in the first person, oscillates unevenly between the returning character-observer and her far-off brother (and often times interlocutor). Nestled in among their sibling interchanges, are yet other accounts, retrieved from written observations as well as verbalized eyewitness descriptions – all ostensibly transcribed *verbatim* and duly encased in quotation marks. Ironically, this outward pursuit of clarity, of factual, even photographic recreation, is refracted, rather than filtered, through a continuous and intense array of Symbolist tenets. In a lexicon pregnant with abstract terminology, references to New World exoticism and Old, as well as allusions to color and the senses, Hatoum airbrushes his elusive story in a selfcontained, even oppressive atmosphere.

Whether viewed in its macrocontext, wedged between the Amazon River and the rain forest, or in a more localized way, i.e., in the family home and commercial establishment, the milieu is dense, though never stagnant. It is also witness to the same few, highly symbolic objects, all of which link past to present: Persian rugs, whose embroidery proves analogous to the narrative's textual intricacies; a house clock whose weathered (heart) beat seems to toll the effects of age on characters if not on perceptions; a trunk turned into time capsule; and an ageless fountain statue whose curious presence neither begets eternal youthfulness nor reinforces visions of paradise. No object, however, exudes the ephemeral beauty or fragility of a special, ubiquitous orchid – handled, smelled, photographed, admired and recalled – except maybe for the novel's few recurring *personae*. Their juxtaposed interrelationships, in fact, confined to selected moments over much of the last century, form *Relato*. It is a tenuous cohesion, loosely bonded by the main character-narrator and enveloped in her return to her childhood city, home and, perhaps most relevant of all, to haunting memories. In turn, events are crystalized around, as well as climaxed in her attempt to visit the family matriarch, whose death forestalls any reunion between the two.

The unraveling retrospective is anchored, in space as well, to this aborted reapproachment between granddaughter and grandmother, between markedly Brazilian values (presumably made that much more authentic, given the autochthonous *ufanista* backdrop) and the family's Lebanese ancestry, rooted in so many transplanted if waning Arabic traditions. Spanning the time frame, are colorful if fleeting players: e.g., matriarch Emilie and her husband; present confidant Hindié; "liberated" females and machista males; a longtime servant and her *curandeiro* uncle; and Gustav Dorner, a twentieth century Von Humboldt, with camera in hand, who enters center stage by way of the enigmatic Emir, Emilie's suicidal brother. In varying degrees, all come alive long enough to add their perspective to a deepening web of mental memorabilia and hazy recollections.

Pinceladas of ethnic celebrations and sibling conflict, of sinuous migration and awkward transition simmer rather than boil in *Relato*, whose pages swell with meticulous prose. Lengthy sentences flow with prolonged metaphor and simile, Koranic

aphorisms and folksy *caboclo* insight. Contrasting images come in and out of focus, in old photos and dreams, chronicle and memory, even in the very Parisienne, whose cosmopolitan ring seems to mock the Amazon backwater into which this family business is set. Indeed, each one's conflicts and contradictions are, in a manner of speaking, Brazil's; and it therefore becomes more than coincidental that much significant flashback hones in on Christmas, 1954 – the year of Vargas' suicide and a watershed for ongoing debate over the national identity crisis.

In this abstract quest for the tangible, the paradox is widened still more by Hatoum's repeated and ever more emboldened metaliterary forays. Whether figurative (and indirect) or literal (and direct), passing or extended, such references become overwhelming in the final pages. Again, oneiric impression and objective analysis fuse, in the voice of the main narrator and admitted compiler of others' findings. It is a *de facto* epilog in keeping with the author's style throughout, an ill-defined synthesis of fiction and reality, whose balance, or rather built-in confusion, is as much a mirror of the novel as it is a credit to creator and creation alike. *Enfim*, stressing polish over trendiness, Milton Hatoum's "voyage" is both inward and out, backward and forward, carried along, as it were, on a cloud of aromatic memories.

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