

THE FEMALE READER ON TRIAL¹

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*In memory of Francisco Caetano Lopes
and Roberto Reis*

Este ensaio trata da leitura feminina tal como é retratada em alguns textos literários brasileiros. Seleciona trechos significativos desde a poesia do século XVIII até o romance contemporâneo. Sua tese principal é que a relação entre gênero e leitor passa por diferentes estágios, embora a hegemonia masculina seja sempre a regra dominante. Apesar dessa assimetria, encontram-se sinais convincentes ao longo da história de que, não obstante as condições adversas às práticas da leitura feminina, o direito da mulher à leitura foi objeto de lutas que o conquistaram a alto preço. Cada geração o estendeu até a aparente igualdade da situação atual, em que o limite entre alfabetização e analfabetismo já não é mais uma questão de gênero, mas um problema social, em que mulheres, negros e pobres são segregados do mundo da leitura.

After almost three centuries of general female illiteracy, recorded by all travelers and chroniclers that visited Brazil before the end of eighteenth century, we find the first record of female reading in the neoclassical poetry.

Tomás Antonio Gonzaga (*Liras: Marília de Dirceu*, 1792/1799) was an avant-garde Brazilian intellectual who lived in the eighteenth century in Vila Rica (then capital of Brazil) and was involved in the illuministic utopia. In a poem (*Liras*, Lira III, part 3), he sets the scene for our first glimpse of the relationship between women and reading, a kind of necessary unfolding of the reading/literature/private life relation, as well as of the passage from orality to writing, changes which are possible only because of the effect of the bourgeois influence on manners and feelings: women's reading, sufficiently significant to configure a specific audience, only seems to occur in a bourgeois environment.²

At first we notice that feminine reading is part of daily family life, an ingredient of evening gatherings that, together with other activities, complete the vision of future domestic life that the poet is unfolding in front of the eyes of his beloved young lady.

Verás em cima da espaçosa mesa
Altos volumes de enredados feitos;
Ver-me-ás folhear os grandes livros,
E decidir os pleitos

Enquanto revolver os meus consultos,
Tu me farás gostosa companhia.
Lendo os fastos da sábia mestra história,
E os cantos da poesia.

Lerás em alta voz a imagem bela,
Eu vendo que lhe dás o justo apreço,
Gostoso tornarei a ler de novo
O cansado processo.³

The text suggests a world of separated readings: while male reading belongs to the professional sphere (Gonzaga was part of the juridical staff of the Colony and thus, the shepherd Dirceu brings to the reading room his professional tools: tall volumes, complicated causes, and great books), female reading belongs to the sphere of pleasure and learning.

The size and height of the aforementioned books are convincing metaphors for the distinction and importance of the *contents* of the books held by male hands. For men, professional, judicial, and administrative reading, tied to the world of *duty*; for women, history and poetry. History, *magister vitae*, the wise master, and the songs of poetry. The pattern of wisdom and pleasure to which both of them belong contaminates the relationship between the lovers: *you will provide me with pleasing company*. . .

In one way, the pleasing nature of women's reading is the starting point for the socialization of the domestic pursuit of reading: *you will read out loud me beautiful imagery* points out the moment in which the female reader, enraptured by what she is reading, interrupts the serious reading of her companion who, from then on, assumes the role of a *reading advisor*, that is, he becomes the interlocutor of that reading act, who approves (or disapproves. . .) of the evaluation that takes place at the moment of reading: *And I, watching you give it its due appreciation, I shall return to my own reading*.

This poem thus tells us about a time in which women's right to read is secured, but the application of that right is regulated by a socially established hierarchy which includes, among other asymmetries, that of writing and of reading, the former reserved for men, as we can see in another poem by the very same Gonzaga:

À noite te escrevia na cabana
Os versos que de tarde havia feito;

Mal tos dava, e os lias, os guardavas
No casto e branco peito.⁴

The writing/reading exchange ends up changing the pattern of relationships between men and women, cloaking both the *object* of the reading and the act of reading in eroticism and sensuality:

Beijando os dedos dessa mão formosa,
Banhados com as lágrimas do gosto,
Jurava não cantar mais outras graças
Que as graças do teu rosto.⁵

It seems that this possibility of eroticization of the reading practices is responsible for the *criminalized dimension* the activity of reading develops during the nineteenth century in Brazil: in the long run, women's conquest of reading isn't a linear progression, its representation being rather a curved path full of steps forward and back.

An example of this last assertion is provided by *Inocência*, a novel written by Taunay in 1872 and set in 1860. One of the interesting moments in which reading is mentioned is when Inocência explains herself to her boyfriend Cirino:

Sou filha dos sertões; nunca morei em povoados,
nunca li livros nem tive quem me ensinasse coisa
alguma (. . .) Se eu o magoar, desculpe, será sem
querer.⁶

In *Inocência's* speech, her confessed lack of familiarity with books has two meanings: if, on one hand, it calls attention to Inocência's illiteracy – a fact mentioned by different characters at different moments in the book –, it can also be held responsible for her lack of experience in the ways of love. She is as innocent as her name.

In this sense, the act of reading novels seems to initiate women in the tricks and rhetoric of bourgeois sentimental life. It is exactly this meaning of reading that Inocência's father, Pereira, senses and fears. His intuition seals his daughter's destiny as an illiterate: *reading* books and *scribbling* on paper are pursuits

that mean the same as *going to parties* and using *low-cut dresses* and therefore are to be exorcised by the zealous father:

(. . .) isto de mulheres, não há que fiar. Bem faziam os nossos do tempo antigo. As raparigas andavam direitinhas que nem um fuso. . . Uma piscadela de olho mais duvidosa, era logo pau. . . Contaram-me que hoje, lá nas cidades. . . arrenego!. . . não há menina que por pobrezinha que seja não saiba ler livros de letras de forma e garatujar no papel. . . que deixe de ir à *funçonatas* com vestidos abertos na frente (emphasis in the original).⁷

It seems difficult to link this illiterate Inocência to the literate and enlightened Marília; we are tempted to ask ourselves: Marília, the soirée reader, can not have Inocência as a descendant. Didn't Marília leave any descendants?

Yes, she did. But not in a systematic way.

The fact is that women's access to written culture varies in accordance with the different social niches to which the woman in question ascribes. As we've seen in *Inocência*, women from the backlands (even in the second half of the last century) were kept apart from the world of literature so as not to be contaminated by undesirable behavior.

In other social strata, however, the world of reading and writing remains open to women, as it happens with the protagonist of *A mão e a luva*, written in 1874 by Machado de Assis. Guiomar is a poor girl who was educated by her baroness godmother. Upon proposing teaching as a profession, Guiomar becomes included in a long list of feminine characters from the middle class of the Brazilian population who, faced with the difficulties of a marriage of convenience, find teaching a more attractive (or a less repulsive. . .?) alternative.

Teaching, however, although officializing the entrance of women into the world of reading – actually as a professional in this realm – seems to happen only after the last page of novels. Hovering on the horizon as a virtuality, it leaves the scene once and for all when, after the reestablishment of social balance, the protagonist finds, in marriage, an escape from the condemnation of work.

Tinha a moça dezesseis anos quando passou para o colégio da tia de Estevão, onde pareceu à baronesa se lhe poderia dar mais apurada educação. Guiomar manifestara então o desejo de ser professora. Não há outro recurso, disse ela à baronesa quando lhe confiou esta aspiração.

– Como assim ? – perguntou a madrinha.

– Não há – repetiu Guiomar. Não duvido nem posso negar o amor que a senhora me tem; mas a cada qual cabe uma obrigação, que se deve cumprir. A minha é. . . é ganhar o pão.⁸

So in Machado de Assis teaching remains at an abstract level, without the novel or novelist ever having to recognize the eventual alterations that familiarity with the world of reading might bring to the sphere of female social life.

It is in *A normalista* (1893), by Adolfo Caminha, that women, while crossing the pages of books, also cross the boundaries of desirable behavior. From this point on, the *risks of reading* reveal themselves in full light. Maria do Carmo, the main character, is a student preparing to become a teacher. She authorizes all of the fears of Pereira, Inocência's father: upon becoming an assiduous reader of novels, she finds reading to be the door not only to professionalization but also to ruin. By now definitively eroticized, the pursuit of reading, here, becomes contaminated by the sensuality of the scenes that are read. In an attitude rarely seen in Brazilian novels, Caminha's text mentions a sort of shelf of feminine reading – available, though not recommended – on the eve of the twentieth century:

Até aquela data só lera romances de José de Alencar, por uma espécie de bairrismo mal entendido, e *A Consciência* de Heitor Mallot, publicada em folhetins na *Província*. A leitura do *Primo Basílio* despertou-lhe um interesse extraordinário.

– Aquilo é que é um romance. A gente parece que está vendo as coisas, que está sentindo. . .

Não compreendera bem certas passagens, pensou em consultar a Lídia; sim, a Campelinho devia

saber a história da *champagne* passada num beijo para a boca de Luíza (. . .)⁹

However if Alencar, Mallot and Eça de Queirós were among the authors who attracted the eyes of young female readers in Brazil at the end of the last century, Caminha's novel discusses the polemic nature of women's reading. Here this reading is once again guided, this time by Professor Berredo, a distant echo of the voice of Gonzaga/Dirceu who – as we must remember – approved or disapproved of Marília's reactions to reading in the eighteenth century. From Dirceu to Berredo, that is, from husband to principal of the Teacher's College, the guidance became professional just as the female reader was being prepared for professionalization.

The way of women in the world of reading is being forged between the condemned books and the recommended ones:

. . . Lessem Júlio Verne nas horas d'ócio; era sempre melhor do que perder tempo com leituras sem proveito, muitas vezes impróprias de uma moça de família. . .

– Vá esperando. . . – murmurou a Lídia.

– Eu estou certo, – dizia o Berredo convicto – de que as senhoras não lêem livros obscenos, mas refiro-me a esses romances sentimentais que as moças geralmente gostam de ler, umas historiazinhas fúteis de amores galantes, que não significam absolutamente cousa alguma e só servem de transtornar o espírito às incautas. Aposto como quase todas as senhoras conhecem a *Dama das Camélias*¹⁰ e *Lucíola*.¹¹

Quase todas conheciam.

– Entretanto, rigorosamente são péssimos exemplos. . .¹²

If *O primo Basílio* and *Lucíola* are now part of school canon and *The lady of the camellias* is a rosy novel, *A normalista* leads us from the *Index librorum prohibitorum* to the *Index librorum commendatorum*, where Jules Verne was proclaimed to be adequate reading material for young ladies as an eloquent

hint of the changes through which institutionalized reading passes: Verne is a juvenile reading today. . . But considering all together, the words of Berredo bring all of the snares of the cultural institution of the Brazilian province to the pages of this novel: its setting is a province, a cultured one, since the people there at the end of the nineteenth century discuss Zola, a writer not for damsels.

Regardless of such drawbacks, throughout the twentieth century, women's access to the world of books is almost irreversible; the barriers that separated women from books have been left behind and the role played by reading tutors has been considerably reduced. What remains is a woman reader.

This woman reader, however is, on one hand, liberated; on the other, she is condemned to the loneliness of *difference*.

In 1919, *Romance do Chopim*, a short story by Monteiro Lobato, published in *Cidades mortas*, sets the scene of a female teacher exercising her profession, teaching in a small inland city in São Paulo state. Contrary to what happened to so many of her ancestors, she is not descendant of a ruined family, and she is even a good match. And yet her teaching activities set her apart from *regular social life*. Being an economically independent woman she inverts the traditional male and female roles, and the price she pays for that inversion is high and also suggested by the masculine physique of the teacher who, upon losing her attributes of beauty, loses her main chance to achieve a marriage and, therefore, to find happiness:

Tipo de mulher máscula, angulosa, ar enérgico, autoritária. Gostava de discutir política, entendia de cavalos, lia jornais, tinha idéias sobre a seca do Ceará e o saneamento dos sertões. Apesar de bem conservada, andava perto dos quarenta e não fazia nenhum mistério disso. Se não se casara até então, não é que fosse infensa ao matrimônio: – não achara ainda o seu tipo de homem, dizia.¹³

The short story becomes more complex and focuses directly on reading and writing practices from the moment in which Zenóbia (the teacher) entertains her female teaching colleagues with a syrupy novel of her own creation that she fells

to them daily pretending it is being written by her husband. Once the image of him as a writer begins to circulate through town, his socially intolerable feminization is redeemed.

This suggests that in the beginning of this century, there is still a division between the two universes of writing and reading, of writing and telling and that their borders are hard to define.

Conceição, the protagonist of Queiroz's novel *O quinze* (1930), is a young woman who has read a great variety of books. She reads a lot: her universe of readings includes verses, Sienkewicz,¹⁴ Couvelain, the positivist Nordeau and Renan,¹⁵ readings summed up by the narrator as socialist. But Conceição even goes beyond reading and makes her way towards the world of writing: *she was writing a book about pedagogy, she had scribbled two sonnets* (p. 13).

The frequency and intensity of her reading and writing activities are not well-regarded: she begins to be seen as peculiar, marked as different. In the reaction of her grandmother to her reading, we can see a good summary of the traditional way in which the question of women's reading is directed:

Conceição só a viu quando o ferrolho rangeu, abrindo:

– Já de volta, mãe Nácia?

– E você sem largar este livro! Até em hora de missa!

A moça fechou o livro, rindo:

– Lá vem mãe Nácia com briga! Não é domingo? Estou descansando.

Dona Inácia tomou o volume das mãos da neta e olhou o título:

– E esses livros prestam para moça ler, Conceição? No meu tempo, moça só lia romance que o padre mandava. . .

Conceição riu de novo:

– Isso não é romance, Mãe Nácia. Você não está vendo? É um livro sério, de estudo. . .

– De que trata? Você sabe que eu não entendo francês. . .

(. . .)

– Trata da questão feminina, da situação da mulher na sociedade, dos direitos maternos, do problema. . .

E dona Inácia juntou as mãos, aflita:

– E, minha filha, para que uma moça precisa saber disso? Você quererá ser doutora, dar para escrever livros?¹⁶

As any assiduous and dedicated reader, Conceição has a frame of reference which includes books, authors and characters and intuitively senses that such a familiarity with books brings a high price: her marginality, and her boyfriend's distancing himself from her:

Pensou no esquisito casal que seria o deles, quando à noite, nos serões da fazenda, ela sublinhasse num livro querido um pensamento feliz e quisesse repartir com alguém a impressão recebida. Talvez Vicente levantasse a vista e lhe murmurasse um "é" distraído por detrás do jornal. . . Mas naturalmente a que distância e com quanta indiferença.¹⁷

The question is magnificently taken up again with Madalena, the protagonist of *São Bernardo*, by Graciliano Ramos (1934). In this book the movement to criminalize women's reading ends on a high note.

On one hand, on the female pole *les belles lettres*; on the other, the male point of view *les lettres d'échange*, as Conceição intuitively sensed in *O quinze*. Being a teacher, Madalena also raises the same suspicions which have been hovering above the woman who becomes a professional in the world of reading and writing as had been pictured in *A normalista*.

Although along her first moves in the novel, Madalena's familiarity with the world of written culture is listed among feminine qualities (*a lady who comes from the Teacher's College is different. . . [74], . . . is an excellent teacher (. . .) a superior woman (. . .) very learned [177]*) shortly thereafter Paulo Honório attributes his progressive distancing from Madalena to the cultural abyss which separates them. Disagreements permeate the couple's relationship:

Eu narrava o sertão. Madalena contava fatos da escola normal. Depois vinha o arrefecimento. Infalível. A escola normal! Na opinião do Silveira, as normalistas pintam o bode, e o Silveira conhece instrução pública na ponta dos dedos, até compõe regulamentos. As moças aprendem muito na escola normal.

Não gosto de mulheres sabidas. Chamam-se intelectuais e são horríveis. Tenho visto algumas que recitam versos no teatro, fazem conferências e conduzem um marido ou coisa que o valha (. . .)¹⁸

In *São Bernardo*, the separation of the cultural world into masculine and feminine reaches another level, becoming textualized: the metaphors that the narrator, Paulo Honório, makes use of to configure the misunderstanding between himself and Madalena come from the world of language:

O que eu dizia era simples, direto e procurava de balde em minha mulher concisão e clareza. Usar aquele vocabulário, vasto, cheio de ciladas, não me seria possível. E se ela tentava empregar a minha linguagem resumida, matuta, as expressões mais inofensivas e concretas eram para mim semelhantes às cobras: faziam voltas, picavam e tinham significação venenosa¹⁹

The book closes with Madalena's suicide, which is directly related to Paulo Honório's possessive jealousy, and this jealousy is not indifferent to the fact that Madalena is superior to him in the hierarchy of the world of literacy. Even the conclusive rupture occurs in the presence of writing, in the scene in which Paulo Honório catches his wife writing a letter:

– Deixa ver a carta, galinha.

(. . .)

E eu só sabia dizer:

– Mostra a carta, perua.

Madalena rasgou o papel em pedacinhos e atirou-os pela janela:

– Miserável!

Saiu como um redemoinho. No corredor ainda gritou:

– Assassino!

Atordoadado, murmurei:

– Cachorra!

E fiquei olhando os pedaços de papel que na manhã de vento esvoaçavam pelo jardim, entre as folhas das roseiras. Longe, no salão ou na cozinha, Madalena continuava a gritar:

– Assassino!²⁰

Reading and writing, as emblems of adultery, have a long literary tradition. Perhaps it is sufficient to mention that in *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert, 1857), the theme is splendidly interwoven. But not less so in Ramos' novel. The topic that writing inspires lack of trust and jealousy, is repeated in a chapbook in which the risks of life that women readers run are no longer metaphoric. The book in question is *Cunfissão de caboco*, by Zé da Luz Brasil.

The suspicions of marital infidelity held by the narrator of this poem are as unfounded as the jealousy Paulo Honório has for Madalena. But, just as the lack of foundation for Paulo Honório's suspicions isn't enough to redeem Madalena (whose name, biblically speaking, is quite significant. . .), here, too, the crime reaches the level of consciousness too late, after the murder of the woman. The plot is quite simple, narrated in the seven syllable verses of popular tradition. The narrator, an illiterate mestizo who is possessive and violent, stabs his wife to death upon catching her handing a letter to his supposed rival, a neighbor who had been making advances to her for some time. At the police station, after lamenting his illiteracy he asks the officer to read him the letter, the central factor of the crime. The reader (if he hasn't already guessed. . .) finds out that the letter contained only an unquestionable guarantee of the victim's conjugal fidelity, since it states Maria's definite refusal of the neighbor's advances.

Upon discovering the contents of the letter, the reader – especially if female – is left with the sensation of a sorrowful *dejà vu*. In the narrator, however, the discourse of culpability

is dissolved in the discourse of impunity guaranteed by illiteracy:

– Doutô! doutô, mi arresponda
O qui é qui eu tô ouvindo?
Vosmicê leu a carta,
Ou não leu, tá mi inludindo?

– Doutô! Meu Deus! Seu Doutô,
Maria tava inucente?
Me arresponda pru favô!

Inucente! Sim, sinhô!

Matei! Maria inucente!
Pruquê, seu Doutô, pruquê?
Matei Maria somente
Pruquê não aprendi a lê!²¹

Macabea, a character in Lispector's *A hora da estrela* (1977), brings to the scene a professionalized woman, though not in the teaching field and actually far from being intimate with the world of reading:

Ela que deveria ter ficado no sertão de Alagoas com vestido de chita e sem nenhuma datilografia, já que escrevia tão mal, só tinha até o terceiro ano primário. Por ser ignorante era obrigada na datilografia a copiar lentamente letra por letra – a tia é que lhe dera um curso ralo de como bater à máquina. E a moça ganhara uma dignidade: era enfim datilógrafa. Embora, ao que parecesse, não aprovasse na linguagem duas consoantes juntas e copiava a letra linda e redonda do amado chefe a palavra *designar* de modo como em língua falada diria: *desiguinar*.²²

The story is woven by focalizing Macabea's painful interchange with words and with situations that deal with language, which are emblems of her exclusion from the world

codified within them, in spite of her determination to understand this world:

Havia coisas que não sabia o que significavam. Uma era *efeméride*. E não é que seu Raimundo só mandava copiar com sua letra linda a palavra *efemérides* ou *efeméricas*? Achava o termo *efemírides* absolutamente misterioso. Quando o copiava prestava atenção a cada letra. Glória era estenógrafa e não só ganhava mais como não parecia se atrapalhar com as palavras difíceis das quais o chefe tanto gostava (. . .) (emphasis mine)²³

If Macabea's part in the literate world was to make mangled copies of the beautiful handwriting of her boss, her participation in the cultural world didn't include literature, captive that she was of the radio, the umbilical cord that tied her to the frantic world of mass communication, which for her was reduced to the disjointed programming of Clock Radio.

Todas as madrugadas ligava o rádio emprestado por uma colega de moradia, Maria da Penha, ligava bem baixinho para não acordar as outras, ligava invariavelmente para a Rádio Relógio, que dava hora certa e cultura, e nenhuma música, só pingava em som de gotas que caem – cada gota de minuto que passava. E sobretudo esse canal de rádio aproveitava intervalos entre as tais gotas de minuto para dar anúncios comerciais – ela adorava anúncios. Era a rádio perfeita pois também entre *os pingos* do tempo dava curtos ensinamentos dos quais talvez um dia viesse precisar saber.²⁴

She tries to make use of what she learns on the radio:

– Você sabia que na Rádio Relógio disseram que um homem escreveu um livro chamado *Alice no país das maravilhas* e que era também um matemático? Falaram também em *élgebra*. O que é que quer dizer *élgebra*?

– Saber disso é coisa de fresco, de homem que vira mulher. Desculpe a palavra de eu ter dito fresco porque isso é palavrão para moça direita.

– Nessa rádio eles dizem essa coisa de cultura e palavras difíceis, por exemplo: o que quer dizer eletrônico?

Silêncio.

– Eu sei mas não quero dizer.²⁵

It is interesting, here, to establish the relation between this segment of Lispector's narrative and *O famigerado*, a short story by Guimarães Rosa,²⁶ where the answer to the question *what does X mean?* transforms linguistic practice, mostly in its metalinguistic exercise, into a power game.

Power – this is the game which Macabea's boyfriend Olímpico plays in the episode in question. Upon disguising his ignorance of the meaning of, say, *álgebra* and *eletrônico* in his refusal to give her an answer, Olímpio, in the male/female relationship which he enacts with Macabea, reproduces the same relationship of power and superiority that is already sketched between educated city men and men from the countryside (cf. *O famigerado*). Damázio, like Macabea who came from the backlands of Alagoas, is uncomfortable with polysyllabic words, especially paroxytones. . .

In Macabea's cultural world, cinema also plays a part. Movies add to the orality of radio the colorful visuality of contemporary *made in Hollywood* culture, the interchange that movies provide her with is already filtered by the social reality of the different classes: the theater which Macabea goes to is, like her, degraded, which only serves to increase the contrast between the fantasy projected on the screen and the dusty reality of the audience of people just like her:

– Sabe o que eu mais queria na vida? Pois era ser artista de cinema. Só vou ao cinema no dia em que o chefe me paga. Eu escolho cinema poeira, sai mais barato. Adoro as artistas. Sabe que Marilyn era toda cor-de-rosa?²⁷

A hora da estrela also enacts the impasse always experienced by the Brazilian writer: how to represent the poor people, using the written word which belongs to the hegemonic tradition? The choice of the clarician narrator is to completely avoid the superfluous. But if naiveté of the narrative voice is a way of solving the question of *writing*, the question of *reading* remains unsolved: if the tradition of literature as a symbolic social language is in solidarity with hegemony and with the center, then *reading*, *male readers* and *female readers* echo this social selectivity, which excludes so many Brazilians, men and women, from the world of written textuality.

That is probably why the narrator of *A hora da estrela* warns:

(Se o leitor possui alguma riqueza e vida bem acomodada, sairá de si para ver como é às vezes o outro. Se é pobre, não estará me lendo porque ler-me é supérfluo para quem tem uma leve fome permanente. Faço aqui o papel de vossa válvula de escape e da vida massacrante da média burguesia (. . .))²⁸

Macabea's story, however, has an epiphany, that is, a moment of alleluia triggered by the written world of high literature: among the dirty finger stains on the typing paper, in the midst of stumbling with the polysyllabic proparoxytones.

(. . .) um dia viu algo que por um leve instante coibiu: um livro que Seu Raimundo, dado a literatura, deixara sobre a mesa. O título era *Humilhados e ofendidos*. Ficou pensativa. Talvez tivesse pela primeira vez se definido numa classe social.²⁹

With Macabea the trial of the Brazilian woman reader is closed. Or just adjourned? We shall see. . .

From Marília in the colonial eighteenth century Vila Rica to Macabea in contemporary Rio de Janeiro, I hope my paper has been able to trace the footsteps of female reading in Brazil. It has come a long way from *illiteracy* to *full literacy* and even to professional management of reading and writing. Only after

a long detour of precariousness, prejudice and segregation, literature seems apt to play a political role and thus to redeem the scenery in which we inscribed the relationship between women and reading, following in the footsteps of the Marílias, Inocências, Conceições and Madalenas.

I expect that this so fast sightseeing tour through literary representations of female reading in Brazilian society indicates that the contemporary status of the female reader merges the gender reading question into a broader category of social class, in which the everlasting hegemony of the male voice is fine tuned in some other hegemonic categories. To inscribe literary studies into a reading history and, conversely, to deal with the female reading history through its literary representations might teach us about the intertwined nature of the power struggle involved in the field of reading which will enable us to make literary studies more broadly cultural and, as so, more meaningful as a political weapon in the building of a more just society.

Which, I believe, is what knowledge and academic institutions like universities are for. . .

NOTES

¹ This paper is part of a broader project sponsored by CNPq and partially developed with Professor R. Zilberman from PUCRS. A first version of it has been presented at the COLE (Campinas, July 1993) and a second at the Congress *Mulher e Literatura* held in September 1993 at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte. The present English version has been presented in May 1994 at the Department of Spanish and Portuguese of University of Minnesota. The author wishes to thank Roberto Reis for the invitation to Minnesota and Susan Klein Franchetti for the English revision.

² cf LAJOLO, Marisa e ZILBERMAN, Regina. *A leitura rarefeita*.

³ GONZAGA, Tomás Antônio. *Marília de Dirceu*. Parte 3, Lira 3. p. 188-191. English version (unless otherwise indicated, all English versions are mine): You will see on the spacious table / Tall volumes of complicated causes; / You will see me peruse the great books, / And judge my suits. / While I make these consultations, / You will provide me with pleasing company, / Reading the annals of that wise master called history, / And the songs of poetry. / You will read out loud the beautiful imagery, / And I, watching you give it its due appreciation, / With pleasure shall return to my readings of / The tired court case.

⁴ GONZAGA, Tomás Antônio. *op. cit.* p. 133. English version: (. . .) In the cabin, at night, I wrote down for you / The verses I had composed in the afternoon; / As soon as I gave them to you, and you read them, / you tucked them away / In your chaste white bosom.

⁵ GONZAGA, Tomás Antônio. *op. cit.* p. 133. English version: Kissing the fingers of that beautiful hand, / Bathed with my tears of pleasure, / I swore not to sing of any other beauties / Than of the beauty of your face.

⁶ TAUNAY. *Inocência*, p. 87. English version: I'm a child of the backlands; I've never lived in a town, never read books, never had anyone to teach me anything (. . .) If I hurt you, forgive me. I don't mean to.

⁷ TAUNAY. *op. cit.* p. 31. English version: (. . .) if the subject is women, you can't trust anything. In old times, our men were right. Young women walked a straight line. . . A suspicious wink of the eye and they were punished. . . They tell me that today, in the cities. . . God save us! . . there's no girl too poor to know how to read printed books and scribble on paper. . . or to miss going to a party wearing a low-cut dress.

⁸ MACHADO DE ASSIS. *A mão e a luva*, p. 214-215. English version: The girl was sixteen when she entered the school of Estevão's aunt, where it seemed to the baroness that she could receive a more refined education. At the time, Guiomar had demonstrated the desire to be a teacher. There's no other way, she said to the baroness when confiding her aspiration. "What do you mean", her godmother asked. "There just isn't", Guiomar repeated. "I don't doubt nor can I deny the love that you feel for me; but everyone has an obligation, that must be fulfilled. Mine is to earn a living. . ."

⁹ CAMINHA, Adolfo. *A normalista*, p. 28-29. English version: Until that date she had only read novels by José de Alencar, due to a sort of misunderstood patriotism, and Heitor Mallot's *A Consciência*, published in feuilletons in the *Província*. Reading *O Primo Basílio* awoke an extraordinary interest in her. "That's a real novel. It seems that one sees the things, that one really feels. . ." She hadn't completely understood certain passages, and thought of consulting Lídia; yes, Campelinho should know about this story of champagne passed to Luíza's mouth in a kiss.

¹⁰ *The lady of the camellias* after *Dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas.

¹¹ *Lucíola* is a romantic novel by the Brazilian novelist José de Alencar.

¹² CAMINHA, Adolfo. *op. cit.*, p. 58-59. English version: (. . .) read Jules Verne during your free time; it is always better than losing time with useless readings, often improper for a girl belonging to a good family. . .

– Don't hold your breath – Lídia murmured.

– I'm sure – Berredo said with conviction –, that you ladies don't read obscene books, but I am referring to those sentimental novels that young ladies usually enjoy reading, futile little stories about gallant love, that mean absolutely nothing and that only serve to perturb the spirit of incautious girls. . . I bet almost all of you ladies are familiar with *The Lady of Camellias* and *Lucíola*. Almost all were familiar with them.

– However, they are, in the real sense of the word, terrible examples.

¹³ MONTEIRO LOBATO. *Cidades mortas*, p. 66. English version: A masculine, angular, authoritarian kind of woman with an energetic air about her. She liked to discuss politics, she knew about horses, she read newspapers and had ideas about the drought in Ceará and the sanitation of the backlands. Although she was well preserved, she was near forty and made no secret about it. If she hadn't married until then, it wasn't because she was against marriage: she still hadn't found her type of man, she said.

¹⁴ Sienkiewicz (1846-1916; Nobel Prize in 1905), Polish writer famous by his social and historical novels like *Quo Vadis?* published in 1894-1896.

¹⁵ Max Nordeau (1849-1923) and Joseph Renan (1823-1892) are philosophers.

¹⁶ QUEIROÓS, Rachel de. *O quinze*, p. 124. English version: Conceição only saw her when the latch creaked, opening:

– Already back, Mother Nácia?

– You just won't put down this book! Even when it's time for Mass!

The girl closed the book, laughing:

– Here comes Mother Nácia with a fight! Isn't it Sunday? I'm resting.

Inácia took the volume from the hands of her granddaughter and regarded the title:

– Are these books right for a young lady to read, Conceição? In my time, girls only read novels allowed by the priest. . .

Conceição laughed again:

– This isn't a novel, Mother Nácia. Can't you see? It's a serious book, for studying. . .

– What is it about? You know that I don't understand French.

– It's about the feminine question, the situation of women in society, maternal rights, the problem of. . .

And Inácia clasped her hands, distressed:

– And, my child, for what purpose does a young lady need to know about these things? Do you want to be a scholar, to write books?

¹⁷ QUEIROÓS, Rachel de. *Op. cit.*, p. 81-82. English version: She thought about what a strange couple they would make when, during the family evenings at the ranch, she would underline a happy thought in a beloved book and would want to share her impressions with someone. Perhaps Vicente would raise his eyes and murmur a distracted *of course* from behind his newspaper. . . But, undoubtedly, at such a distance and with so much indifference.

¹⁸ RAMOS, Graciliano. *São Bernardo*, p. 122. English version: I talked about the backlands. Madalena talked about things from the Teacher's College. Afterwards came the cooling off. Always. The Teacher's College! In Silveira's opinion, the students of this school are a wild bunch, and Silveira knows public education like the palm of his hand; he even writes the regulations. The girls learn a lot at Teacher's College. I do not like wise women. They call themselves intellectuals and are horrible. I've seen some that recite verses in the theater, give conferences and lead their husbands or something similar (. . .)

¹⁹ RAMOS, Graciliano. *op. cit.*, p. 141. English version: What I was saying was simple, direct, and I searched in vain for conciseness and clarity in my wife. It would be impossible for me to use that vast vocabulary, full of traps. And if she tried to use my abbreviated, brusque language, the most inoffensive and concrete expressions were like snakes: they twisted, bit and had a poisonous meaning.

²⁰ RAMOS, Graciliano. *op. cit.*, p. 127-128. English version: – Let me see the letter, you whore!

And I was only capable of saying:

– Show me the letter, you tramp!

Madalena tore the sheet into small pieces and threw them out the window:

– Bastard!

She left like a whirlwind. In the hallway, she shouted:

– Murderer!

Stunned, I murmured:

– Bitch!

And I kept looking at the pieces of paper that on that windy morning fluttered through the garden, among the leaves of the rosebushes. Far away, in the front room or in the kitchen, Madalena continued to shout:

– Murderer!

²¹ ZÉ DA LUZ. *Confissão de caboco*, p. 128-129. English version: Sir, sir, answer me. / What am I hearing? / Did you read the letter, / Or didn't you, trying to trick me? / Sir! My God! Sir, / Maria was innocent? / Answer me, please! / Innocent! Yes, sir! / I killed her! Maria was innocent! / Why, sir, why? / I killed Maria only / Because I never learned to read!

²² LISPECTOR, Clarice. *A hora da estrela*, p. 56. English version: This girl, who should have remained in the backlands of Alagoas with her calico dress and without any typing, since she wrote so poorly, only had a third grade education. Because of her ignorance, in typing she was forced to slowly copy letter by letter – it was her aunt who had given her a rudimentary typing course. And the girl gained some dignity: she was finally a typist. Although, as it would seem, she didn't approve of two consonants next to each other in language and she copied the beautiful round handwriting of her beloved boss in such a way that the word *designate*, when spoken, would come out as *designuate*.

²³ LISPECTOR, Clarice, *op. cit.*, p. 56. English version: There where things whose meaning she didn't know. One was *ephemerides*. And wasn't in just the case that Mr. Raimundo, with his beautiful script, ordered her to copy the word *ephemerides* or *ephemeris*? She found the term *ephemiric* completely mysterious. When she copied it, she paid attention to each and every letter. Glória was a stenographer and not only earned more but didn't seem to get confused by the difficult words that the boss liked so much. (. . .)

²⁴ LISPECTOR, Clarice. *op. cit.*, p. 53. English version: Every day in the early hours of the morning she turned on the radio lent to her by a roommate, Maria da Penha, she turned it on very low so as not to awaken the others, invariably she turned on Clock Radio, which gave the correct time and culture, and no music, only making the sound of falling drops – each drop a passing minute. And, above all, this radio stations took advantages of the intervals between these drops of minutes to air commercial – she loved advertisements. It was the perfect station because, between the drops of time, it also gave short lessons which she might need to know someday.

²⁵ LISPECTOR, Clarice. *op. cit.*, p. 61. English version: "Did you know that on Clock Radio they said that a man wrote a book called *Alice in Wonderland* and that he was also a mathematician? They also talked about *elgebra*. What does *elgebra* mean?" "Only faggots, I mean girlish men, care about these things. Excuse my using the word faggots since it's a dirty word for a nice girl." "On this station they say these cultural things and use difficult words, for example: what does *electronic* mean?" Silence. "I know but I don't want to say."

²⁶ cf. GUIMARÃES ROSA, João. *O famigerado*, In: *Primeiras histórias*, p. 8-13.

²⁷ LISPECTOR, Clarice. *op. cit.*, p. 70. English version: Do you know what I want most in life? To be a movie star. I only go to the movies on payday. I choose poor movie theaters, they're cheaper. I love the stars. Did you know that Marilyn was all pink?

²⁸ LISPECTOR, Clarice. *op. cit.*, p. 46. English version: (If the reader has some wealth and a very comfortable life, he'll be able to leave his own world to see how the other sometimes is. If the reader is poor, he won't be reading my words because reading me is superfluous for a person who is permanently a bit hungry.

My role here is that of an escape valve from crushing weight of middle class life. (. . .)

²⁹ LISPECTOR, Clarice. *op. cit.*, p. 56. English version: (. . .) one day she saw something that, for a brief moment, she coveted: a book that Mr. Raimundo, given to reading literature, had left on the table. The title was *Insulted and Humiliated*. She became thoughtful. Perhaps for the first time she felt she was part of a social class.

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