

**GILKA MACHADO: PRECURSOR
IN A "SUBTERRANEAN TRADITION"**

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Este ensaio é uma análise da poesia da poeta brasileira Gilka Machado. Segundo a teoria crítica de Sylvia Paixão, em seu trabalho *A repressão do desejo na poesia feminina: a fala-a-menos*, as escritoras da primeira parte do século XX usavam temas e formas dos movimentos então correntes (Romantismo, Parnasianismo e Simbolismo), porém de maneira a esconder ou reprimir a sexualidade. A partir desse estilo reticente e "feminino", Machado mostra no seu trabalho que as formas "tradicionais", quer "femininas" quer "masculinas", não serviam para exprimir a independência, erotismo e talento das escritoras menos fiéis às regras convencionais. A ousadia de Machado em exprimir fortemente os seus desejos (porém, desejos "femininos") faz parte de uma "tradição subterrânea", assim nomeada por Beth Miller, de mulheres que se sentem mais poetisas do que musas. Algumas características notadas nessa tradição são: a subversão dos símbolos religiosos; a identificação com animais ou "totens" sugestivos de sexualidade (a serpente, o gato); o uso de metáforas do corpo; uma

relação familiar com a Musa (sendo “ela” a poeta mesma em várias formas). Essa “tradição subterrânea” inclui Ana Cristina César e Hilda Hilst, duas poetisas do século XX que também transgridem no seu trabalho as normas estabelecidas pelo cânone acadêmico e o estilo abstrato de Cecília Meireles.

Gilka Machado (1893-1980) epitomizes the remarkable audacity of writing by Brazilian women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Machado's first book, *Cristais partidos*, was published in 1915, when she was only twenty-two years old (Machado, *Apresentação* 7). In 1916 the poet was widowed with two children, a significant development considering the relative freedom of widowed women in Brazilian society to control their own property (Hahner 5). In addition to Machado's independence as a widow, she and other women of her time were afforded some emancipation through urbanization and the contemporaneous abolitionist and suffragette movements. Early twentieth-century Rio allowed women access to public spaces, and some became involved in the new liberation politics. Important also for middle class literate women was the proliferation of the Brazilian feminine press beginning in 1820. The appearance of the new presses corresponded with the increased political fervor for independence (Buitoni 12).

However free from marital roles Machado and other widows of her time were, and in spite of the entrance of more women into the literary sphere as readers and writers, she transgressed at risk expected limits of decorum for women. One of the consequences of her difference was that she remained unclassified as a writer and unhonored by literary mavens until near the end of her life.¹ In 1977, when Machado was 84 years old, Jorge Amado led a campaign to nominate her for a chair of the Casa de Machado de Assis. She was the first woman permitted this honor. Like Virginia Woolf when offered an honorary degree at a university that had refused her access because of her gender, Machado declined the late offer. After the publication of *Poesias completas* in 1978, the Brazilian

Academy of Letters finally awarded her the Machado de Assis prize (Machado, *Apresentação* 7).

Machado's writing has a sexual presence that forcefully contradicts the Freudian assessment of women as lacking. Beth Miller identifies this presence as part of a "subterranean" tradition parallel to but unrecognized by the official canon. Miller names Machado as representative of Brazilian women poets, including Ana Cristina César and Hilda Hilst, who are "anti-canonical, pro-woman and conscious of a subterranean tradition of precursors and feminine foremothers" (61). Machado's "subterranean" characteristics are illuminated by Sylvia Paixão's study of nineteenth-century women writers. In *A repressão do desejo na poesia feminina: a fala-a-menos*, Paixão considers nineteenth-century women writers' themes to be revealing of repressed sexual desire, a bold consideration in view of the assumption that women of the time had no sexual desire – at least, to speak of. Paixão constructs a feminine imaginary from her readings of the magazine *A Mensageira* (São Paulo, 1897). She uses modern psychoanalytic theory to show how division became located in the body or subject, a departure from the body/soul division theorized in earlier theological/philosophical discourses. With the division of self, modern subjecthood began to take shape, and along with it the entry of women into discourse.

A "crisis in legitimacy" (Jardine 76 and *passim*), aided by urbanization and liberation politics in Brazil, entailed writing women's questioning the limitation of their spirits to small inner spaces. Paixão sees writing women of the time as concerned thematically and factually with crossing borders. Spatial themes include the living room and garden as areas mediating between the confines of house and children and the open street. Such spaces mark writing women or "the third sex," as feminists were called (Hahner 152), in the act of defining themselves.² Forms that traversed the space between the private self and the world at large were the diary, the letter, and the epistolary novel. When "personal" letters were published as a feature in women's magazines, the blurring of boundaries became literal and the private became the signifier of an already fictionalized Woman who could pass muster upon examination by any patriarchal standards: "I received a

few days ago a gentle little letter, written on pink perfumed paper and with beautiful calligraphy. I guessed that it came from the hands of a person in love. I don't have the pleasure of knowing the interesting young lady who asks advice about her future 'menage'" (Qtd. in Paixão 50). Under the mask of the "feminine", which male critics at the time regarded as innocuous and ineffectual, women also invested libido in texture, perfume, colors, and sensual shapes. Paixão deduces an aesthetics of clothing and flowers for an era based on the feminine body incarcerated in "roupas sérias, sóbrias e de cores escuras. . ." (70). Clothing both covered and expressed desire, so women had to use it advisedly upon the approval of a husband or father. In addition, Paixão documents the desire to fly and madness, forms of escape intensely figured in the poetry of the women writing for *A Mensageira* and other women's journals at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Symbolist poetic themes, such as winter, night, silence, death, flying, and madness are mimicked in women's poetry of the period. In women's writing, however, the captured, silenced bird, the turn to insanity at the point of realizing the object of desire, and death as the end of captivity are less symbols of transcendence or a static eternal than symbols of new beginnings beyond the confines of unbearable social constriction. Read today in the context of a tradition of women's poetry or a "subterranean tradition" and an expected feminine audience,³ the author's gender is a factor that changes the text's signifiers. The following poem is from *A Mensageira* (v. 2, n. 32, ca. 1898), and an example of the work Machado as a woman would be expected to emulate. Published in a women's journal, it was classified as "women's" poetry and the author consigned to oblivion. The poem is not romantic in the sense of a nationalistic exploration of Brazilian origins, or Symbolist in its otherworldly loftiness. It would not even be considered pastoral, since it does not employ Greek allusions. In short, it fits no discernible tradition in phallogocentric discourse, except in its derivative couplet rhyme scheme:

*De flor em flor, as providas abelhas
ébricas do rocio em lúcidas ampolas,
Vão dos jardins nas ideais corbelhas*

*Sugar o mel das virginais corolas.
E ora beijam as castas verdeselhas,
Ora imergem no seio das papoulas,
Sobre o corpo a luzir, como centelhas,
Do pólen fulso as áureas lantejoulas.*

[Maria Júca, qtd. in Paixão 74]

The poem uses ostensibly the naive pastoral signifiers of bees, flowers, and fields. Using Paixão's reasoning, however, the poem is considerably less naive than it appears in terms of the narrator's desire. The site of the narration moves from the "nuptial" garden to the wilder "virginal" fields beyond, where the "intoxicated" bee roams "from flower to flower" rather than focussing on the task of endogenous pollination.

An examination of selected poems from Machado's collected poems, *Poesias completas*, reiterates the themes discussed by Paixão and the nonconventional significance rendered by a metaphorically feminine reading. The first poem of *Cristais partidos*, untitled, manifests Machado's use of Parnassian and Symbolist forms and themes to express a nontraditional aesthetic. The poem reveals a poetic persona in conflict with the poet's self-knowledge and the inadequacy of traditional form, a sonnet, to express her wholeness. The desire for poetic perfection, manifest in the use of traditional poetic device and form alternates with the theme of a repeatedly shattered identity.

The first two lines invoke the muse in the classical Horatian tradition used by the Parnassians in their attention to Greek and Latin form. In this case, however, the muse is the poet herself and the formal invocation a means of avoiding the lyrical "I" as subject. Rather, the poet speaking to her muse self speaks of "us", of "you", or alternates between "you" and "I": "No tórculo da forma o alvo cristal do Sonho, / Ó Musa, vamos polir, em faina singular / os versos que compões, os versos que componho" (19).⁴ The poet's diction makes no pretense regarding the involvement of difficult skilled labor in the creation of the poem. Rather, she claims for herself, even if ambivalently, the art and technique of the poet in creation. *Tórculo* is a device, possibly used by miners, to polish stones; *faina* is a ship term that is associated with any arduous task

(Ferreira 1389; Taylor 284). The work as process, then, is the polishing of the poem by arduous labor into a professional, cultured product.

The second stanza continues the "split" persona, but also shows the source of conflict as a debilitating taciturnity and naivete: "Para sempre abandona esse teu ar bisonho, / esse teu taciturno, esse teu simples ar; / a perfeição de que dispões e de que disponho, / nesta artística empresa, é mister empregar." The third stanza explicitly divides the poet's self between a "bad" part of herself and a good; however, the poet wishes the Muse to reflect her/the poet's self as whole through art: "Seja espelho o cristal e, em seu todo, reflita / a trágica feição que o mal consigo traz / e o infinito esplendor da beleza infinita." This is a variation on the alternating pronouns of the first and second stanzas, as the poet weighs her identity and worth outside the confines of a "feminine" naivete and/or silence. What she wishes in the polished poem is an unrestricted reflection of her totality, in excess of both the "bad" part and the infinite beauty of classical, Parnassian, and Symbolist perfection.

The heart of this poem and the "turn" of the sonnet is the paradox of a perfection that can only be imperfect, the breaking of the mirror as polished crystal: "E, quando a rima soar, vaidosa sentirás / percutir no teu ser, que pela Arte palpita, / o sonoro rumor do choque dos cristais." Within the sound of breaking at the moment of perfection, accompanied by palpable repercussions within the poet, purity, silence, and classically constructed identity are smashed. In that self-destruction the poet implies further invocations of a muse/self repeatedly seeking a believable self through art in an image that reflects the narrator as a self-knowing woman.

"Ser mulher" (106), also from *Cristais partidos*, despairingly registers Machado's recognition of her position as a poet in the canonical tradition and in society at large. In "Ser Mulher" Machado questions the suitability of the Symbolist aesthetic for herself as she questioned the Parnassian aesthetic in the title poem of *Cristais partidos*: "Ser mulher, vir à luz trazendo a alma talhada / para os gozos da vida; a liberdade e o amor; / tentar da glória a etérea e altívola escalada, / na eterna aspiração de um sonho superior. . .". The banality and dull

repetition of a life in which the best things, independence and love, are denied, turns the notion of the eternal into a bitter illusion. In this case, it is not transcendence that is eternal, but the aspiration for transcendence. The themes of Symbolist poetry, then, are ridiculously misrepresentative of a life deprived of basic autonomy. Machado conveys the heavy dullness of this existence in two lines from the second stanza: “sentir a vida *triste, insípida, isolada*, / buscar um companheiro e encontrar um senhor . . .” (emphasis added). Her ideals are inevitably misread as she is eternally consigned to falling short of attaining her spiritual and intellectual ideals. The signifier of women’s social restriction in the “subterranean” tradition, the caged bird, is in this poem a symbol of curtailed intellectual ability. To be a woman is to “ficar na vida como uma águia inerte, presa / nos pesados grilhões dos preceitos sociais!” Paixão notes that the eagle is a symbol of intelligence and wisdom. To be bound in the chains of domesticity is a torture beyond physical captivity (128). It is to force upon a powerful and resourceful being capable of flight a sad, insipid, lonely, half life.

In “Aspiração” (113) from *Estados da alma* (1917), the bird becomes a symbol of a life “quase incorpórea,” subject only to natural laws: “viver sem rumo, procurar guarida / à noite para, em sono, o corpo descansar, / viver em vôos, de corrida / roçar apenas pela vida!” Again, Symbolist transcendence is hardly a goal. The poet would accept the physical prison of earth that the Symbolists found unbearable if she were free from imposed mores: “Eu quisera viver sem leis e sem senhor, / tão somente sujeita às leis da natureza, / tão somente sujeita aos caprichos do amor . . .”. With “Aspiração,” Machado uses signifiers from romantic tradition. To write, sleep, eat, and love as her natural wants dictate in a dazzling sun-filled jungle eroticizes the landscape in the mode of Brazilian romanticism. Machado’s marginality to the canon is a factor in her attempting different forms; but equally important is her knowledge of these forms and her versatility. As is characteristic of women writers, the poet invents herself both within phallogocentric discourse and apart from it.

“Volúpia” (128), also from *Estados de alma*, is one of a number of Machado’s poems (including “Sândalo” and “Comigo mesma”) in which the poet aligns herself with a snake or

serpent, and, importantly, by ingestion: "Tenho-te, do meu sangue alongada nos veios / à tua sensação me alheio a todo o ambiente." The snake's venom gives the poet power and fluency as she shapes herself to its undulations. As in "Cristais partidos" Machado acquires, takes, and molds this shape and power: "Por te trazer em mim, adquirir-os, tomei-os, / o teu modo sutil, o teu gesto indolente. / Por te trazer em mim moldei-me aos teus coleios. . .". The serpent, known in Christian lore for its subtlety with words, is a transgressive image. Its power rivals God's. The cannibalistic insinuation of its qualities into the poet's veins and blood mocks Jesuit teaching against the rites of the Tupis, suggests the alignment, indeed, of Woman with the enemy in the downfall of Man. The poet's totem gives her the power of a knowing ambivalence in this symbol of both fertility and death.⁵ The poet's "taking" the serpent's venom recalls Christ's bidding the apostles to "take" his body and blood, suggesting the poet in the priestly role of performing a sacrament. Fortified by taking the serpent's deadly qualities into herself, the poet is able to suppress the ideals of eternal beauty, transcendence, and original sin or ontological lack: "e a alma pura que trago e que te repudia, / inutilmente anseia esquivar-me aos teus laços." She celebrates instead her chthonic power in the sinuosity of her body: "Teu veneno letal torna-me o corpo langue, / numa circulação longa, lenta, macia, / a subir e a descer, no curso do meu sangue." With this poem, Machado has found the "bad" side of herself that hardly dared to be known in "Cristais partidos." Movement is substituted for brittleness, the freer rhythms of speech for the perfect sonnet form.

"Quero-te sempre assim" (178-79) is a fragment from a series poem, "Poema de amor (Versos antigos)" (157-83) in *Estados de alma*. "Quero-te" is an example of Machado's metaphysical style, which combines Symbolist diction and metaphysical conceits: "Quero que para mim sejas um perfume, / sejas raio de sol, sejas fulgor de luar: / - aquilo que se goza e não se assume / - aquilo que se vê sem se poder tocar." The ineffable perfume suggests the decadent side of early Symbolism as it was linked to the occult and especially to Baudelaire. The phrase, "what is seen without touching" is evocative of a fragment of Aquinas' metaphysical devotional

hymn "Lauda Sion Salvatorem": "Sight, taste, touch, in you fail; / but only hearing is safely believed. / I believe whatever the Son of God has said: / nothing is truer than the word of truth" (Raby 403).⁶ Metaphysical poetry, especially its secular form, is concerned with the senses, by which the other is known but never possessed. The knowing is rational, even while the poem avoids denotative terms. Sight in Aquinas' poem is distrusted and hearing is favored so that one "sees" in the sense of understanding. As in the Christian story of the Pentecost, the faithful comprehend Christ's suffering without touching the wounds. When Machado says "what is seen without touching," therefore, "see" is read as a synonym for understanding. Such an interpretation affirms Machado's poem as a meditation on poetry: "é amor que só se manifesta em verso, / que em verso ficará vivendo eternamente". The poem is also a mask covering the narrator's self-knowledge and self-seeking as meditation. Machado uses the castigated figure of the nun to describe her intense relationship with poetry: "Por este amor me esquivo ao prazer turbulento, / por este amor serei a monja da Tristeza, / da Renúncia para o convento." In her familiar fictional status, the nun is a metaphor for confinement, intellectual castration, and denial of desire. The poet adopts this romantic image as a symbol of poetry in the manner of the romantics' figure of tragic love, the Parnassians' statue of a Classical Greek female figure, and the Symbolists' figure of the pale, sterile woman.

In 1922 *Mulher nua* was published. In this same year the Semana de Arte Moderna was held in São Paulo. Part of the aesthetic revolution was a vision of modern woman by Menotti del Picchia. In an oration delivered at the municipal theater in São Paulo del Picchia offered a renunciation of an image most famously associated with aesthetes who were part of the romantic and Symbolist movements:

Morra a mulher tuberculosa lírica! No acampamento de nossa civilização pragmatista, a mulher é colaboradora inteligente e solerte da batalha diuturna e voa no aeroplano, que reafirma a vitória brasileira de Santos Dumont, e cria o mecânico de amanhã que descobrirá o aparelho destinado à conquista dos astros! (36-37)

Machado and other women writers had long been attempting spaces beyond the fetishistic and drugged woman of Baudelarian fame. Their poetry, however, could not be read as self-determining in the context of a tradition that defined them as Muses and assistants to great artists: when *Mulher nua* was published, Machado was about twenty-nine years old and had been widowed for six years. The poem "Comigo mesma" (201–203) registers her familiarity, seven years after the publication of her first book, with her well-developed persona, as suggested by the title *Mulher nua*. Like the snake in "Volúpia" as an earth creature symbolizing chthonic power, the muse in "Comigo mesma", Salomé, is a fertility goddess in the Dionysian spirit: "Dança para esse gozo, / o grande gozo maternal / da Terra". And like the "nervosa e rúbida serpente", Salomé is associated with the color of passion and blood: "patenteia a nudez desse teu ser puníceo." In "Cristais partidos" the poet used pronouns ambivalently to hint at her identification with the muse; "Comigo mesma", however, indicates that the dance of Salomé is the poet's own. Sinuousity and nudity together suggest the possibilities for poetry broken from nineteenth century forms: "que assim como há na Dança a poesia dos gestos, / há nos versos a dança da Poesia." And Machado combines Parnassian, Symbolist, and now Futurist style in her image of a new aesthetic. She invests the Parnassian statue with serpentine movement ("Alma de pomba, corpo de serpente") and suggests the capacity of the muse to contain old forms:

.....
*e possas em teu ritmo recompor
 tudo que viste extática, surpresa,
 e a imprevista beleza,
 a beleza incorpórea
 dos perfumes e sons indefinidos
 de tudo que te andou pelos sentidos,
 de tudo que conservas na memória.*

The dichotomy of the dove and the serpent suggests a persona in excess of the individual qualities associated with either of these emblems or the taciturn "bad" poet or the unbreakable, "perfect" poet in "Cristais partidos". The same

resolution is found in oppositional pairs throughout "Comigo mesma": "Tua dança dirá renúncias e queres"; "gargalhadas de gozo e lamentos de dor"; "de lisonjeiros e de malfetores"; "Musa satânica e divina"; and "teus menejos lânguidos ou lestos." This figure in excess is what will move poetic tradition, aided by outworn images of Woman, from its prison of forms:

.....
Que importa a injúria hostil de quem te não
[compreenda?

Dança, porém, não como Salomé da lenda
a lírica assassina:

dança de um modo vivificador;

dança de todo nua,

mas que seja a nudez da dança tua

a imortalização do teu Amor!

In "Página esquecida" (215-16), also from *Mulher nua*, the poet textualizes the writing process as alternating autoeroticism and censorship. This ambivalence is similar to that in "Cristais partidos" in that the writer projects an other who responds to her voice. In "Página esquecida", however, the writing subject is able to travel farther into herself. She begins to explore her sensations by taking on the slow reflexes "de gata e de serpente." But soon Machado projects an imagined other whom she tries to incorporate: "Estás dentro da minha conjectura". The noun "conjectura" expresses the poet's awareness of her thought process. She does not address the Muse as much as fuse her writing voice with an image as an invocation of the poetic mood. But like an admonishing superego, the other accuses her of madness: "veja-te sim! dirás: 'Uma ilusão!' / dirás: 'Uma doidice!'" She regains herself by imagining an erotic contact: "dois lábios que um beijo reunisse. . .".

The contrast of two and one is interesting in an erotic context. First, the image of the two lips recalls Luce Irigaray's metaphor for metonymy, along with Fuss's conjecture that metonymy is a specifically feminine mode.⁷ Second, two lips in Machado's poem, especially in proximity to fur, suggests

the female genital. The next passage is one of the most audacious found anywhere in any poetic tradition:

.....
*No vestido que trago
há um macio debrum, debrum de arminho;
este vestido, em qualquer parte,
faz-me sentir-te, faz-me gozar-te
roçando-me a garganta, de mansinho.
de um modo quase etéreo, muito vago.
Acham-me todos diversa, estranha,
sempre que este vestido me acompanha.
Assim feito, enfeixando numa boa,
este vestido (devo t'ó dizer)
me enlanguece, me acarinha, me atordoa
e me sufoca de prazer.*
.....

Machado's earlier recourse to animal images in her imagination of desire is here abandoned as she interacts with clothing. Though her feelings are catlike and serpentlike, her own skin and body react to the sensuality of her dress as if it were another skin, so close it "suffocates" her with pleasure. The autoerotic possibilities of clothing is the subject of *Adorned in dreams: fashion and modernity*, Elizabeth Wilson's study of the history of fashion. The author considers, among other things, the constriction of nineteenth century women's underclothing as a pleasurable experience. Certainly the ostensible arbitrariness of fashion indicates some unspoken dynamic in play. Almost as certain is the inability of all but the most honest of women to name as sexual the "almost ethereal, very vague" pleasures of familiar objects.

In 1927 the journal *Festa* published poems and short stories by Machado. The following year her *Meu glorioso pecado* was published, which Paixão calls Machado's "most inventive and audacious book" (163). Though Machado was not claimed by the Modernists, her work was contemporaneous with theirs and she was beginning to be known at the same time. Paixão notes that in the same year that *Meu glorioso pecado* appeared, Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* was published, a

narrative ahead of its time in its use of multiplicity as a figure for race relations in Brazil. In 1930 Machado's work was included in *9 poetas novos del Brasil*, an anthology that included work by Guilherme de Almeida, Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira, and Ronald de Carvalho (Machado, *Apresentação* 7).

Meu glorioso pecado does not express the split consciousness to the degree that structured Machado's earlier work. Instead, the book invests more in the "anti-canonical, pro-woman" consciousness that Miller associates with a "subterranean" women's tradition. In "Teus lindos cravos" (273) Machado uses a flower to signify her relationship with the Muse. Because of its button shape, the flower is also the same word for "stake," a device with a rounded top for pounding, as in crucifixions. The aroma that the strong-smelling flower emits is easily associated with a cannibalistic drunkenness, or a vampirish ingestion of blood from a wound as the poet's eroticism pervades the spirit of the other and vice versa:

*Teus lindos cravos como vieram cheios
do aroma que trescalas sem saber!
– Meus velhos desenganos embriaguei-os,
a espiritualidade do teu ser.*

*Teus lindos cravos . . . Que mortais receios
de, neles te possuindo, te perder!
Ponho-os entre os cabelos, sobre os seios,
por todo o corpo, em mórbido prazer.*

The poem, like "Volúpia", centers the poet as maker in its use of the active verb "ponho" to suggest more than simple fusion: the poet "takes" or "puts" the material into relation to herself. As in "Página esquecida" the relationship is autoerotic in the proximity of the flower as a second skin or a lover. The closed garden where the "wounded" petals bleed their perfume metaphorizes the old space of semi-confinement, the private, cultivated garden, into the Hortus Maria of the Middle Ages, an enclosed space where men cannot intrude. As a poetic device, "jardins fechados" imparts an aura of nostalgia over which the poet reigns as queen:

*Ó tu que tens, como os jardins fechados,
um perfume de pétalos magoados
que jamais meu olfato esquecerá!*

*– Às tuas flores, tenho-te comigo,
sonho-te, sonho todo um reino antigo,
sonhando-me a rainha de Sabá.*

Sue Ellen Case's contention in "Tracking the vampire" that a pronominal relation to other "shes" crosses out the category heterosexualism is central to my interpretation of "Teus lindos cravos". Case constructs a theory of women's writing apart from lesbian feminist theory. Her choice of "queer" is a term that, she says, "works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology . . ." (3). For Case, the figure that Baudelaire represented as lesbian is "the wounding, desiring, transgressive position that weds, through sex, an unnatural being". Further, "the doubled tropes of 'shes'" textualizes a double inferiority and impurity (8). Since the pronominal marker "you" is ambiguous, the observation of what has been called "narcissism" in women's poetry enables the assertion that this "you" is a projection of the poet's desire onto a "she" in "Teus lindos cravos". With "reino antigo" and Rainha de Sabá, the poet unites the suggestions of the cannibalistic ingestion of the life substance of the flower, the wounded petals, and a closed but permeable garden where the nostalgia-obsessed queen reigns. In a doubly impure proximity to "the monster"⁸ vis-à-vis identity with the contaminating flower and the mask of night queen, the poet's entranced response is lesbian desire. Machado's proximity to the twilight world of nightly ritual gives her a subversive power to, as Case puts it, "unseat the Platonic world view". In her guise as serpent, Salomé, or Sabbath Queen, Machado aligns herself with "the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically-proscribed position of same-sex desire" (3).

Woman's body as impurity but with formidable subversive power is the central idea in "Se, um dia" (310), also from *Meu glorioso pecado*. Again, the notion is combined with a theme from the tradition of women's poetry: flying as a form of freedom. In "Se, um dia", however, the escape is aborted and

the "bird" pulled back into the "festering cave" or wound of the woman's body. By now it is to be assumed that the "bird" or other is an aspect of the poet's self or a "she." This "she" then, is split between the attempt to fly, aided by the "rag-tags" of the woman's body ("farrapos do meu corpo subirão / momentaneamente / contigo") and the futility of trying. The metamorphosis of beautiful wings into shredded human skin or the likeness of a human body is a mockery of futuristic notions of Woman as "intelligent and skillful collaborator who flies in an airplane in the continuing battle". In addition, the futility of effort — symbolist in flavor — is, from a woman's pen, imbued with "queer" essence in the multiplicity of associations with decay, wounding, the womb, and devouring:

Voarás...

*Voarás apenas por segundos,
para tombar logo depois,
vencido pelo esforço inútil,
de asas quebradas,
agonizante,
para tombar no túmulo absorvente
da cava chaga que em meu ser deixares.*

In the death of the other, the poet lives as "art", changing meaning to suit her purpose and her desire, as the "bird" changes to a tree and then to metaphors for her work:

*Meu amor, meu Amor, viverei tua morte,
sou a Arte – a terra devoradora,
que dá tudo e que exige quanto dá;
ensaia os vôos, voa, se puderes,
és mais meu do que teu, pois, quando mais não fores,
árvore, viçarás nos meus versos eternos!*

Renunciation, castigation, and the choice of death over life for the sake of art was a theme in "Quero te sempre assim". The fecund womb that generates art and the devouring grave that fertilizes trees, however, are more chthonic — in league with the snake — than the cloistered nun. The two figures, the queen who is able to permeate the enclosed garden

and the nun who from her walled habitation attracts the other as a flower, are forms that surpass gender dichotomy in the mutuality of "the gaze" — the power of the writing woman to manipulate forms in the expression of her desire.

The opening poem of Machado's final book, *Velha poesia* (1965), is entitled "O retrato fiel" (405). On the one hand, the poem is the poet's somewhat bitter denial of her own desire. On the other hand, it is a warning to the reader that the subject herself does not hold to a single identity: "Não creias nos meus retratos, / nenhum deles me revela. . .". The poet admits, instead, a multiplicity of identities, born of repeated shatterings and renewed attempts at perfection: "Os meus retratos são vários / e neles não terás nunca / o meu rosto de poesia." These lines reflect also the various forms that the subterranean tradition may take. Machado's literary heirs according to Miller, Ana Cristina César and Hilda Hilst, share their precursor's audacity and sexual presence, although the forms these qualities take vary. Writing at the height of the feminist movement in Brazil, César appears to have been trapped by tradition, even the subterranean one, realizing the impossibility of self identity except as constructed. César committed suicide in her early 30s at the brink of a sexual revolution that could have given her more possibilities for producing meaning through poetry. César's contemporary, Hilda Hilst, is known for her radical explorations of forbidden sexuality. Pornography as a form of migration within the subterranean tradition is of particular interest in the wake of a feminist movement that has been concerned with "positive images", fearful of risking its reputation by being "bad." Hilst's contribution to the body of Brazilian erotic poetry by women has the advantage of spanning the period from 1950 (*Presságio*) to the present (*Do desejo*). Her work exhibits a clear succession from the use of traditional forms in the manner of Portuguese *Cantigas de Amigo* to experimental studies in female sexuality that, as mentioned, employ pornographic images. Hilst's writing in her short stories is, in the vein of the plays of Nelson Rodrigues, wildly ironic regarding Brazilian family relationships, while also being an audacious articulation of taboo-breaking by a libidinous female subject. The effect of transgressing the boundaries of constructed meaning is, of course, censorship and condemnation; but such transgression is also a form of migration and survival, as

shown by the long “subterranean” tradition represented by Gilka Machado.

NOTES

¹ In 1933 Machado was nominated by a convention sponsored by *O Malho* as the major “poetisa brasileira.” This was an important honor by a magazine that, according to Buitoni, remained critical long after other women’s journals began to present less literature and criticism and became mere mirrors of bourgeois taste (35).

² Paixão notes that working class women do not conform to this scenario, since they had long been required to support themselves outside the house (44).

³ Debra Castillo considers the feminine reader, specifically, the “metaphorically feminine” reader, to be an important factor in women’s communication with one another. In view of *de facto* censorship, women writers adopt codes for signifying meanings beyond the obvious. Castillo discusses “the polished surface” in Latin American fiction as a textual response to censorship, which she names collectively as “*el lector inimigo*” (22). Castillo’s thesis invites rereading of ostensibly nonfeminist or antifeminist texts as ambivalent or ambiguous.

⁴ Quoted poems by Machado are from *Poesias completas*, by Gilka Machado.

⁵ Greek art starting from the Geometric Period (900-700 BC), used snakes to represent the great mother (Potnia Theron), Artemis, Athena, Kybele, Demeter, Kore, Triptolemos, Dionysos, Satyrs and Mainads, Nymphs, and Eumenides. See Elpis Mitropoulou, *Deities and heroes in the form of snakes* (Athens: Pyli, 1977), 15-49; Balaji Munkjur, *The cult of the serpent* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 21; and Karen Randolph Joines, *Serpent symbolism in the Old Testament* (Haddonfield, N.J.: Haddonfield House, 1974), 109.

⁶ Translation to English is mine, with the help of Professor David Lattimore.

⁷ Irigaray’s famous image of two lips, besides mocking and impugning the singularity of Lacan’s phallus, is a metaphor for *parler femme* and a poetics of the feminine. Fuss considers the metaphor a collapsing of the “classic metaphor/metonymy binarism,” being a metaphor for metonymy. Basing her thought on this poetics, Fuss theorizes the possibility that “the feminine neither has an unconscious of its own nor represents man’s unconscious but rather articulates itself as a specific operation within the unconscious: the play of metonymy” (66).

⁸ Case uses the term *monster* following its use by Linda Williams in her article on the dynamics of horror films.

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