

Adelaide Festival – 28 February – 5 March 2010

Pioneer Women's Memorial Gardens

Adelaide Writers' Week, Thursday 5 March

Panel *Europe Europe* - 1:45 pm

Chair: John Coetzee. Anna Enquist (The Netherlands), Lolo Houbein (Australia), Marina Lewycka (UK), Cristovão Tezza (Brazil)

Cristovão Tezza

How strong are the various European literary traditions today? Does Europe still have anything to teach writers from its one-time colonies, or should Europe be looking to its ex-colonies for inspiration and renewal?

The writing of literature has perhaps been the first really globalised human activity. To a certain extent, literature assumed a universality of the human condition well before any of the philosophical, social or political movements put forward the notion of a global culture or a universal person. This political concept of universality is a European creation, and since the eighteenth century, the rest of the world beyond Europe, like Brazil, has lived through this problematic notion of a universal being and the concrete reality of the singularity of cultures.

Brazilian literature came into existence as an imitation of what was transpiring in Europe. In the first instance, it was as a replication of Portuguese literature, and from the nineteenth century onwards, it became a copy of the French literature that was so influential upon all of us. In Brazil, the Romantic Movement arose directly from that of French Romanticism.

There was also a valorisation of the presence of the native Indian which was a way of replacing our memory of the Middle Ages, something we had not managed to do. This was a means too of attempting to forget the much stronger presence of black people, from slavery, in everyday life. It is from this point that Portugal almost completely ceased to be a reference for us.

Interestingly, the greatest Brazilian prose writer to date, Machado de Assis, who died in 1908, was greatly influenced by English literature. Significantly, Machado de Assis was dark-skinned, the grandson of enfranchised slaves. He was a committed reader of Laurence Sterne. In terms of theme, Machado de Assis was a writer who wrote about the city and urban life and of the bourgeoisie of Rio de Janeiro at the end of the nineteenth century. He did not write about supposed real or authentic themes like the indigenous population or other ethnological aspects of Brazilian culture.

There was nothing “exotic” or “typical” in Machado de Assis’s literature; not even “nature” itself, as there were no descriptions or lengthy narrative in his work. It really was Machado who defined our literary maturity. Even today, he is our greatest literary reference.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the modernist movement (1922) raised the question of Brazilian identity as a central theme for literary discussion. Who were we, after all? That was the big question. A significant writer of the movement, Oswald de Andrade, made a famous play on words, highlighting the name of the dominant indigenous group in Brazil, the Tupi tribe: “Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question”. On one side, in terms of formal aspect, writers absorbed the European modernist movements; yet on the other, in terms of thematic content, they were searching for a literature that was authentically “Brazilian”.

A classic book of this period by Mário de Andrade, and which was published in 1928, was *Macunaíma*, which has the curious subtitle of “the hero without character”. This protagonist, Macunaíma, was typical of “magic realism”: he was born black and becomes white; he seemed to embody all influences simultaneously, including being able to absorb linguistic forms of popular speech; and he tries to affirm a rightful Brazilian identity through this mix of influences. Incidentally, the name of one of the modernist trends of the time was “Anthropofagy” or literary cannibalism. Symbolically, the Brazilian culture would become one which devoured all cultures that approached it and gave it a touch of originality.

Today the question of Brazilian identity as a positive proposal has ceased to be a critical topic for our literature. Brazil today is an urbanised country whose culture is created and transformed in the great metropolises. This is most fitting as the city is, by nature, an obligatory point of contact with the world.

Finally, I am not sure what exactly the relationship between Europe and its ex-colonies should be. What I am sure about is that Brazil should not fear the influence of Europe. Our part of the world has always suffered due to its geographic isolation (its “tyranny of distance”, if you like) and, even more so, due to its linguistic isolation. On the other hand however, the highpoints of Brazilian literature have always been marked by their search for universality, not by the wilful compartmentalisation into one, often artificially-created, idea of uniqueness. I believe that in literature also, our ambition is to be citizens of the world. I hope that this summary has given you some idea as to my view on the topic. Thank you for listening.

(Translated by Dr. Denise MacLeod)