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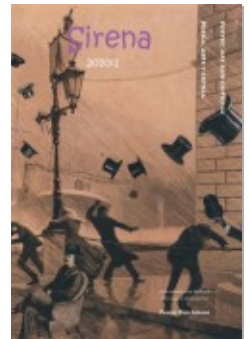
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Darcy França Denófrio, Alexis Levitin

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Cora Coralina: Who are you?

by Darcy França Denófrio

Translated from the Portuguese by Alexis Levitin¹

What can one say, as a prologue to a foreign reader, about the Brazilian writer whose literary name is Cora Coralina?

Although a writer of chronicles and short stories, she is best known as one of the most singular and celebrated lyric voices in contemporary Brazil. Her poetic work is already being studied in academic circles abroad, in Europe and in the United States in articles, masters theses and doctoral dissertations, such as those already defended at the Sorbonne, in Paris, and at the Complutense University of Madrid.

Cora Coralina, who lived almost 100 years, was born in the 19th century, in the city of Goiás, more precisely on August 20th, 1889, just before the proclamation of the Brazilian Republic. For that very reason she declares in her poem “Cora Coralina, who are you?” (included in her book *Meu livro de cordel*) that she belongs “to a generation/bridging the freeing/of the slaves and the free worker./Between the fallen monarchy/and the rising Republic.”

She died in Goiânia, capital of the state of Goiás, on April 10, 1985, at the age of 96. She published her first book of poems when she was already 76, although she had been connected to literary movements in the former capital of Goiás since her early youth. She also contributed articles to local newspapers and, when she left Goiás, to others in the state of São Paulo, where she lived for 45 years.

Though she attended a small private school for two or three years, (there are some biographical controversies about this period of her life), she was basically an autodidact. In fact, she was an eager reader and, thanks to her mother who at the time subscribed to an important newspaper from Rio de Janeiro (*O Paiz*), she was familiar with what was happening in the world. Thanks again to the example of her mother, she also attended, with her sisters, the Literary Guild of Goiás, a kind of public library whose assets included consecrated literary works of both Brazilian and foreign authors, as well as philosophical and scientific studies.

¹ The translator wishes to thank Darcy Denófrio, Vera Tietzmann, and Marina Tschiptschin for their kind assistance in helping resolve various translation problems.



When she had just turned twenty, she fell in love with a lawyer from São Paulo who had recently been installed as Chief of Police in the city of Goiás. Although her mother had at first considered him a good partner for her daughter, it was later discovered that he was already married back in his native state. Her mother, a widow three times over, strongly opposed the amatory involvement of the couple, and made efforts to get him – an outsider – to leave the city immediately. She threatened to carry her daughter off into seclusion at Paradise Farm, a rural property of Cora Coralina's grandfather, where she had spent lovely days in her childhood, when her mother, recently widowed, needed the help of her father. Paradise Farm was the only paradise that the girl (called Annie, at that time) would ever know. But now, there was a different reason: Cora Coralina was pregnant. The farm would function as a kind of feudal holding or a monastery where she would be cloistered. The life she sheltered in her womb would not be in her own hands. Cora Coralina and the lawyer Cantidio, in an attitude that scandalized the old capital, fled to São Paulo. It took them 14 days on horseback and two days by train to reach the capital city of São Paulo. Afterwards, they left the city to settle down in the countryside.

In that era of moral and religious restrictions, society did not forgive the sinners, although Cora Coralina's mother did, with time, come to forgive her daughter. Yet 45 years later, finally legally married to her beloved husband, the poet was still not well received upon returning to her native city and, in fact, remained unwelcomed by most of her contemporaries throughout her long life. Strange as it might seem to us, there are still vestiges of bad feelings and prejudice toward her, even though we are already living the beginning of the third millennium. Nonetheless, Cora Coralina never let herself be beaten down and was always a proud woman. Upon returning to her hometown, she established herself in the so called Old House by the Bridge (today the Cora Coralina Museum), which she bought at a public auction, mainly with money she had earned as a confectioner, avoiding the possibility that some relative of hers invoking squatter's rights.

It hadn't been easy to publish her first book in early spring of 1965, at the age of 76. But, at last, an important Brazilian publisher, José Olympio, in Rio de Janeiro, had accepted her manuscript. Even so, her poetry hibernated for another dozen years, until the Federal University of Goiás Press took on the task of reediting and disseminating her work, which, little by little, gained a national dimension. This institution went on to publish two editions of her first collection and four editions of her second book of poetry.



We have always considered the poem “The Flower”,² from her second book, a true symbol of Cora Coralina. It reveals the entire process of the poet blossoming into her art. In truth, it is an allegorical poem: the expression of a thought in a figurative form. As we read, everything we encounter suggests an idea of something else. So, it is a sequence of metaphors, translating one idea in words, another with its feelings. At first, it seems that the lyric voice is merely speaking of a daily experience, and maybe that is true, since the one articulating that voice always grew flowers. And the majority of readers only notice this first level of reading. However, it is noteworthy that in this text the word *flower* appears four times with a small letter, pointing to its concrete meaning and, significantly, four times more with a capital letter, suggesting a symbolic interpretation. In this case, the noun itself is emphasized by appearing in a one-line stanza of only two or three words, and always aligned in isolation toward the extreme right-hand margin of the page. And so we see that the botanic reference of the words is just a point of departure. Each element woven into the syntax, under apparent simplicity, in a language at times just a step from the colloquial, goes on gathering meaning and lyric-symbolic splendor, reminding us that literature, after all, always preserves and transcends the literal meaning of words.

Atypical for this author, her poem starts off with a solemn tone, supported by the “hieratic” vertical sign, reminiscent perhaps of the sacred character of poetry, already seen as “a gift from Apollo or the Muses” in Plato’s *Ion*. Also unusual is the blank verse, with many words ending in dactylic feet (I don’t remember having seen so many in any of her other poems) and, as usual, we have the presence of assonance, occasional rhymes (not as strict technically as one might have expected) and the strong presence of rhythm that characterizes her poetry, influenced as it is by Brazilian Modernism. She herself admitted that only after the arrival of free verse did she dare to begin writing poetry.

The lyric voice speaks, at the beginning of the poem, of a dream or premonition of something yet to come:

On a hieratic
vertical stem
it waves.
The flower
rises upwards toward the light ...

Not yet.

2 For referential purposes, the entire poem appears at the end of this essay translated into English.



The first stanza could suggest the self-perception that the one employing such speech, or pronouncing the poetic word, is destined to occupy some day a space within our literature (implied by the words “Not yet”). Perhaps not on the national, but at least on the local level.

Since the poet returned to Goiás (name of both her native city and state) from São Paulo after a 45 year absence and faced broad discrimination, the second stanza of the poem takes on more than one meaning, as it suggests the absence of human warmth on the part of those around her, and perhaps her own low self-esteem at that time, given the circumstances. Cora Coralina came from far away, just like that “traveling seed”, when she had already been forgotten among us. Or rather: intentionally forgotten, tossed out like a piece of rubbish. Let us hear her words:

It has come from far away.
A traveling seed
forgotten inside a plastic bag.
Nor did I care
for that great, rough fecundated womb.
Plucked from a pile of garbage.

The northeastern voice of Mr. Vincent, in the third stanza, also represents a collective voice (that of her surroundings, the people), permeated with scorn and rejection: “wild onion”, that has to be buried without reverence – “Some eighty odd years of spade and soil”. Obvious is his contempt for “flowers”, a word the poet deliberately puts within quotation marks, just like the voice of Mr. Vincent, or the collective voice that he represents, echoing the accents of popular speech: “What are they good for?”

Only someone aware of Cora Coralina’s struggle to get her first book published, something that finally happened when she was already 76, could grasp the symbolism of the following lines that reveal the solitary perception of her own lyric blossoming. One must remember that this poem belongs to her second book, which was first published in 1976, when Cora Coralina was already 87 years old. She had expected public and critical recognition for her first book, *Poems of the Alleys of Goiás and Other Stories*, published in 1965, but this recognition hadn’t come yet. She even complained about it in “My lost penny”, a poem from her third collection, *Copper Penny*, published by the Federal University Press in 1983. She planted her lyric seeds. She awaited the delayed blossoming. Observe that, in clearly demarked points, in isolated lines forming each a one-verse stanza, placed always to the right of the text, the noun “Flower” is from



now on invariably written with a capital letter, even when it does not begin a verse or a sentence.

And I, my God,
ecstatic,
seeing, feeling , quivering
accompanying
that unexpected pregnancy.
A bulb, a tuber, a cell
of rejected life, delivered at the right moment
to the earth's maternity.

The Flower...

She senses that her moment to blossom, to reveal herself to a select literary circle, to be recognized, is about to arrive, but it is *not yet* the time:

Not yet.
Spatulate. Healthy bud
closed, hermetic,
involute
in its mystery.
Tender plant, swollen with sap.
Promise, enchantment.
Long, flattened leaves.
Green swords
mounting guard.

For the Flower...

A double reading works perfectly with the sixth stanza: on the one hand, there is the anxiety of someone who has planted, on the literal level, a simple bulb and wants to witness its blossoming; on the other, the anxiety of the poet over her lyrical labor, that is, the fear that her lyric stem might be broken or snapped "in the darkness of the night," since she had not yet achieved literary visibility. Various hostile forces could still crush her. Including prejudice. Let's look at the whole stanza:



Expectation, fear.
 That fragile stem
 snapped in two in the darkness of the night.
 Wind, rain, hail.

The slimy irreverence
 of a crawling worm.
 The unexpected assault
 of another's hand
 conscious or not.

There is the announcement of a permanent vigilance over this lyrical flower, already anticipated in the couplet – “Alert. Awake. Creature of the earliest hours.” – a vigil which is stated in the next stanza, and which moves gradually from that previously announced dawn, passing to the early morning hours, then reaching the scalding sun of noon, and, again, closing the circle in the “soothing misty silence of the night.” Here is the stanza:

At dawn's first flush,
 all in rose-colored lace,
 thick with light,
 beneath the blazing sun of noon.
 In the soothing misty silence of the night
 I, midwife to the flower's birth,
 as it emerges from the uterine
 cloister of a bud.
 Romboïd.

For the Flower...

There are two very strong symbolic actions on the part of the lyric voice: the vigil, structured in the hazy syntax of lyrical diction, and the explicit statement of the presence of the poet herself (the biographical being) “midwife to the flower's birth”, that lyric flower still lying inside its silken womb. For it has not yet exploded before the eyes of those who can attest to its lyric existence.

The next three stanzas, at times almost colloquial in tone, at other times somewhat academic, suggest something that cannot be anything but autobiographical: the indifference of those who knew of her first poetic efforts. Cora Coralina explicitly



refers to this in “My lost penny”, a poem we have already referred to. In “The Flower” she alludes to this fact again:

I called to so many...
Indifferent, distant,
no one felt with me
the mystery of that floral liturgy.
Nestled in the bud’s safe-keeping,
she adorns herself for the nuptials of the sun.
She combs her hair, and dons her wedding gown
for the splendor of her ephemeral
vegetal life.

In my painful vigil
I wonder:
– What will the color of this flower be?

I cry out, summoning from alien distances
alien sensibilities.
No one answers.
No one feels with me
that hidden ministry
that breaking spell.

Finally the Flower...

The lyric voice cries out, but no one answers, no one shares with her the spell of that emergence. She alone takes on the perception of her *physis* (“Finally the Flower”), her gift from the gods. And, in a hieratic tone, seldom present in her poetry, Cora Coralina, who has eyes with which to see, as the final lines of the poem reveal, concludes by saying:

From the mystic marriage of earth and sun
this bursting forth. Four lilies,
half-opened,
aiming at the cardinal points
from the apex of the stem.
A flourishing wand of holy chastity.
Heraldic scepter. Liturgical emblem
of some biblical prophet prince



emerged from the sacred pages
of the Book of the Kings or from Habakkuk.

And that is how I saw the flower.

One day, inspired by the repeated questioning of students besieging her, Cora Coralina asked herself who she really was and gave her answer in the poem “Cora Coralina, who are you?”, a poem that conveys her personal history, a history that includes the last decade of the 19th century and most of the 20th century, for, as already mentioned, she lived almost a hundred years. From that poem, two stanzas, in particular, draw my attention:

The wild cliffs gave answer to
my yearnings.
And I, enclosed within those
endless mountain ranges
turning blue in far off
distances.

In my yearning for life I took flight
on the impossible wings
of dreams.

I see, as I follow the literary trajectory of this woman from Goiás, that she did not remain trapped within the limits of the Serra Dourada that surrounded her, as she must have imagined she would at one time. And that the wings of dreams are not impossible either. On the contrary, they are exactly what lifts all human beings toward their greater destiny. Cora Coralina dreamed and dared. That’s exactly why her “four lilies/half-opened” are already aiming at “their cardinal points / from the apex of the stem.” In Brazil she has already conquered the four directions of the compass. Abroad, she has reached Europe through Spain and France. And she is now also penetrating the United States, achieving a position in the world she never dreamed of.

And that is how I saw the flower.



The Flower
by Cora Coralina

On a hieratic
vertical stem
it waves.
A flower
rising upward toward the light...

Not yet.

It has come from far away.
A traveling seed
forgotten inside a plastic bag.
Nor did I care
for that great rough fecundated womb.
Plucked from a pile of garbage.

“Wild onion” in Mr. Vincent’s
learned botany.
Eighty odd years of spade and soil.
Bitter wisdom of the earth.
A Godson of Padim Cicero.
Scorn for “flowers”:
What are they good for?
Careless, assured, unbending.

And I, my God,
ecstatic,
seeing, feeling, quivering,
accompanying
that unexpected pregnancy.
A bulb, a tuber, a cell
of rejected life, delivered at the right moment
to the earth’s maternity.

The Flower...

Not yet.
Spatulate. Healthy bud,
closed, hermetic,
inviolable



in its mystery.
Tender plant, swollen with sap.
Promise, enchantment.
Long, flattened leaves.
Green swords
mounting guard.

For the Flower.

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snapped in two in the darkness of the night.
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of a crawling worm.
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of another's hand
conscious or not.

Alert. Awake.
Creature of the earliest hours.

At dawn's first flush,
all in rose-colored lace,
thick with light,
beneath the blazing sun of noon.
In the soothing misty silence of the night
I, midwife to the flower's birth,
As it emerges from the uterine
cloister of a bud.
Romboid.

For the Flower...

I called to so many...
indifferent, distant,
no one felt with me
the mystery of that floral liturgy.
Nestled in the bud's safe-keeping,
she adorns herself for the nuptials of the sun.
She combs her hair and dons her wedding gown



for the splendor of her ephemeral
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*(Translated into English by
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