

Silva Carvalho. *A Linguagem Porética*. Porto: Brasília Editora, 1996.

George Monteiro

This book should not be dismissed as the potpourri that in one sense it is. For it mixes critical pieces of evaluation, translations of poems, an interview, essays at theorizing, an explanatory reading or two, and numerous passages relating this book to author's earlier work - both critical and poetic. Whatever unity the book possesses lies, to a large extent, in the author's single-minded intention for it: it is, at its best, insistently heuristic.

The essential worth and significant contribution of *A Linguagem Porética* lies as much in the author's eye and ear for good literature as it does in his intelligent way of thinking about literature. If it seems natural for Silva Carvalho to theorize about what the writer does when he writes and publishes or about what the reader does when he reads such literature, it seems just as natural for him to serve as a cicerone to books and texts not always as well known or as widely read as he thinks they should be.

It is in his capacity as informed and intelligent cicerone that I choose to approach his own writing in *A Linguagem Porética*. Even to students of modern American poetry it will come as a pleasant surprise to see him championing poets he has discovered not by following the lead of critics and scholars but through his own inner-directed reading. Indeed, if one resurrects David Reisman's tripartite division of American character as "other-directed," "tradition-directed," and "inner-directed," any reader of Silva Carvalho's book can readily see that neither of the first two terms applies to him. He eschews both the well-worn paths of tradition and the newly worn ways of fashion in favor of making his own, sometimes lonely, way. Hence under the guise of considering the poetry of Robert Lowell, Silva Carvalho discovers the long career and the notable poetic achievement of the still-with-us Hayden Carruth.

Following the example of the modern Portuguese he seems most to have admired and emulated, Jorge de Sena, Silva Carvalho records his discoveries with a narrative of "what, when and how." That is to say, he sets down the circumstances surrounding his discoveries and the detailed sequence of his deepening appreciations. This reader of poetry, again like his Portuguese mentor, does not efface himself before the poets he reads and admires. On the contrary, the synergy of this work of criticism emanates precisely from

the author's fidelity to his awareness that the vitality of literature depends on the drama of the two-way flow between reader and writer. Immersing himself in the work of a poet neither the literary histories nor the quarterlies have singled out, he achieves a singularly original relationship with the poetry. But that is not all, for he also must do justice to Carruth's own not inconsiderable critical ability, which metonymically, in this case, means taking the measure of Carruth's own understanding of Robert Lowell's poetry. It works: Carruth examines Lowell's poetry and Silva Carvalho looks at Carruth's examination critically (and admiringly). The trick that is pulled off is that one gets a good sense of what all three principals - Lowell, Carruth, and Silva Carvalho - are all about.

The beat goes on. Reading Carruth's fine anthology, *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*, Silva Carvalho discovers William Bronk. He begins his introduction to Bronk and his poetry by pointing out that he is certain that Bronk is an American poet completely unknown to the Portuguese, including those who devote themselves to twentieth-century American literature. This is entirely fair, of course, for, as he himself admits, Bronk is not widely known or studied in the United States either. Rather than trying to analyze or explain the pessimist Bronk's rationally philosophical poetry, he wisely provides translations of ten or so poems. These translations are matched with translations of poems or parts of poems by Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Hayden Carruth himself.

When Silva Carvalho turns to modern Portuguese literature, interestingly enough, he does not discover any unduly neglected poets like the Americans Carruth and Bronk. But he does take the measure of what he considers to be the inflated reputations of minor poets such as Herberto Helder, António Ramos Rosa, and Eugénio de Andrade. Each of these poets, exemplifying in some form or other a Bloomian anxiety of influence, fails to emerge as a strong poet in his own right. For this critic of poetry, the two great twentieth-century names are those of (predictably) Fernando Pessoa and (perhaps not so predictably) Jorge de Sena. The above-mentioned poets' cardinal sin, charges Silva Carvalho, is their individual failure to face and overcome what he calls the problems inherent in the powerful legacies of Pessoa and Sena. Sena himself faced successfully the problem Pessoa posed for him. Not surprisingly, he emerges as Silva Carvalho's chosen mentor. In fact, Sena's intriguing novella, *O Físico Prodigioso*, given the fullest academic attention in *A Linguagem Porética*, is given a close reading focusing on the almost indis-

tinguishable themes of sexuality and eroticism. A second essay on Sena, arguing that he should be re-read as a post-modernist, has the virtue of being responsibly provocative.

Arguing soundly against the poem as final, polished, rounded off (perhaps even autotelic) creation, Silva Carvalho comes out loudly, if I read him accurately, in favor of poetry as process. He might say something similar about fictional and non-fictional prose. At its best his work exemplifies what the great nineteenth-century American thinker and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson, called for - not the work of a man of thought but that of a man thinking. Or, to adduce the words of another of Silva Carvalho's favored modern American poets, Wallace Stevens, who called for "the poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice." Silva Carvalho himself might be post-modern enough, I suspect, to expand the meaning of "poem" in Stevens's fortunate aphorism to cover all texts and most writing.