

Contemporary Brazilian Women's Autobiography and the Forgotten Case of Adalgisa Nery

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Since the early decades of the twentieth century autobiography has enjoyed increasing popularity in Brazil.¹ Prior to 1933, a year Antonio Candido identifies as a major watershed due to the success of Humberto de Campos' *Memórias*, autobiographical publications were relatively rare ("Literatura" 12). An impulse towards self-revelation may be found in some eighteenth-century poetry and a handful of nineteenth-century literary-political memoirs, but such self-display was the exception rather than the rule (Candido, "Poesia" 51-2). Beginning in the 1930s, this situation was drastically reversed as Modernism threw the autobiographical floodgates wide open. Since then, different decades have seen differing emphases on the political or the psychological, on the seemingly trivial details of childhood or the experience of prison and torture, but cultivation of openly personal literature has not significantly waned.²

Curiously, autobiography in twentieth-century Brazil seems to have been largely a male affair, or so it would appear from a perusal of the few bibliographies on the subject.³ With only a few exceptions, the most famous probably being Helena Morley and Carolina Maria de Jesus, women have either opted out of writing their autobiographies or perhaps have not been able to interest publishers in them.⁴ This is not to say that they have not written self-referentially, but they have tended to favor other prose or poetic vehicles over explicit, book-length autobiography. The *crônica*, "a short form of commentary principally based upon life experiences that has developed into a literary genre unique to Brazil" (Vieira 354), has been one way in which many women writers have cultivated self-writing. Another popular vehicle has been the autobiographical novel.

A potential explanation for such preferences may be found in Rachel de Queiroz' recent auto/biography, *Tantos Anos* (1998). Including a composite of passages written by Rachel, reproductions of conversations between her and her sister Maria Luíza, and various "interventions" by the latter (10), the book is both an autobiography and a biography. The reason for its hybrid composition, according to Maria Luíza, was Rachel's reluctance to write her own memoirs (9-10). In the opening pages, Rachel spells out her reservations about the autobiographical act:

You know I don't like memoirs... It is a literary genre—and is it really literary?—in which the author places himself openly as protagonist and, whether saying good things about himself or confessing evil deeds, he is in reality indulging the pretensions of his ego... The most dubious aspect of memoirs is confession, a genre I have always abhorred, for there are some things in one's life that are not to be told. (11)⁵

According to this, what most perturbs the writer, aside from the genre's dubious literary status,⁶ is its impropriety: its emphasis on self-aggrandizement and the airing of dirty laundry. Whether or not this was indeed the main factor in keeping her from writing her memoirs, it is suggestive that Rachel should invoke such notions as modesty, self-effacement and discretion, all attributes of "proper" female behavior expected of earlier generations, including her own.⁷ Here such attributes are generalized, through the use of the "universalizing" male noun "*o autor*" in the quote above, as desired characteristics for all "literary" writers.

If a writer should not "place [her]self openly as protagonist," however, it would seem she can forge her protagonists in her own image. In several novels Rachel de Queiroz explored personal concerns through female characters which appear as more or less transparent alter egos. Such is the case in *O Quinze* (1930) and *As Três Marias* (1939), for example, in which tensions between "emancipated" femininity vs. traditional female roles are ambivalently probed (*Três* 446). In these and other novels, Rachel makes use of the fictional medium to play out conflicting positions and to give shape to desires and fears without the uncomfortable exposure of "confession." Of course, the same could be said of all writers of fiction—that their fictional edifices and personal memories and experiences are inevitably and deeply implicated in each other. Graciliano Ramos, a contemporary of Rachel, speaks

of his novelistic production as such: "I was never able to leave myself... And if my characters behave in different ways, it is because I am not one" (Senna 55).⁸ Yet, unlike Rachel, Graciliano eventually turns to explicit autobiography, publicly discarding the character masks in favor of the naked, "irritating little [first-person] pronoun" (Ramos 1: 37).

For Graciliano, as for other Brazilian male writers, autobiography seems to provide something fiction does not: a stronger authoritative position from which to bear witness. The opening pages of Graciliano's prison memoirs are revealing in this regard: while the writer eschews any naive notion of absolute truth in autobiography, his urgent "duty" to bear witness to historical atrocities cannot be met through fictional "deforma[tion]," but only through the assumption of full personal responsibility performed by autobiography's self-exposure (Ramos 1: 35, 33). In his view, this assumption, rather than any claim to a more exact truth, lends a special authority to the autobiographical act.

This idea of autobiography's peculiar value may shed further light on Brazilian women writers' choices. If many women have favored the novel's "autobiography by intermediary" over outright autobiography, it is perhaps not only out of questions of propriety, but out of the related and fundamental issue of authority. For in order to lay claim to the special authority of autobiography, a writer must already possess a certain measure of authority. That is, he or she must believe that autobiography's founding affirmation of personal responsibility will carry significant social weight and command readers' respect. Such a belief has historically been more problematic for women writers than for men.

The problem of autobiography and authority is perhaps most cogently formulated by Adalgisa Nery, who develops an incisive theory and practice of female autobiographics. Well-known during her lifetime as a poet, novelist, journalist and politician, Adalgisa Nery (1905-1980) has since been all but forgotten by literary scholars. She is now remembered mostly for her journalistic and political activities, a selective focus demonstrated in a recent biography.⁹ And yet her first novel, *A Imaginária* (1959), was acclaimed by critics and well-received by the general public, running through three subsequent editions (Callado 100). Most readers seem to have immediately recognized the novel as a thinly veiled autobiography (Callado 33), and the appeal of an intimate confession by the widow of renowned painter Ismael Nery may have contributed to the book's success. While the general and critical public alike were quick to be seduced by the prospect of juicy gossip,

they seem to have remained largely unattended to the more subtle literary, social and psychological aspects of Nery's narrative. In one of the few published critical readings of *A Imaginária*, Affonso Romano de Sant'Anna argues that it is "a fundamental text for studying the constitution of the female narrator in modern Brazilian fiction" (91). I would go further, and add that it is fundamental for studying the female *autobiographical* narrator in Brazilian letters.

Although noting that the novel lies "between biography and fiction," Sant'Anna does not present this as a critical problem (92). However, in the last two decades, feminist scholarship has highlighted the urgency of attending to the specificities of women's autobiographical practice, particularly to the ways in which gender ideologies, notions of subjectivity and self-writing necessarily inform each other. In the case of *A Imaginária*, this urgency is underscored by the novel itself, which calls repeated attention to the disparities between female reality and the requirements of traditional autobiography. In his model of autobiography, Philippe Lejeune grounds the distinctiveness of the genre in a "pact," in which, through use of his "proper name" the writer enters into an implied contract with his reader (8-14). The contract is one Graciliano Ramos would probably recognize, for it involves an assumption of personal responsibility, the promise that the writer will "honor" his declaration of identity (14). Lejeune's contractual/legal model of autobiography poses significant problems for the reading of women's texts, however, because it rests on a masculine notion of the proper name's authority. A woman's name, on the other hand, has historically carried little authority, signaling most often not her entrance into an authoritative subjectivity, but rather her subjection as property (Gilmore 81). As site of a problematic identity, marked by limitations rather than confirmations of agency, the female signature has therefore frequently been evaded, through use of a pseudonym, "Anon" or fictional disguise (Gilmore 81).

Adalgisa Nery seems to be acutely aware of these tensions, which become major structuring elements in her text. How can a woman lay claim to the powerful authority of autobiography in order to bear witness to female experience? This question itself drives *A Imaginária*, which proposes a solution through irony, among other novelistic strategies. The text's first move is to call itself a novel while making no effort to disguise its autobiographical provenance. This would seem to simply collapse fiction into autobiography, erasing all significant distinctions. However, a framing device

reintroduces generic difference, foregrounding the text's packaging as a deliberate—and ironic—choice. In the opening pages of the narrative, Berenice, the female narrator-protagonist, denies that she intends to write her “autobiography”: “I could not describe my entire life... because then I would be trying to write autobiography... I want precisely to avoid this idea, for... I feel I am at the juncture of... an experience and not an event. Experience does not carry the sense of the definite” (7). Autobiography pertains to definitive event, whereas what she has to tell falls under “muta[ble]” experience (7). This denial is repeated more forcefully in the book's final pages, where it acquires a distinctly self-denigrating cast: “Were I less high-strung, if I did not live continuously under the caustic eye of disbelief and analysis, were I not certain of my life's lack of importance, I would try to begin my biography” (208). After a sleepless night, Berenice feels she has fruitlessly brooded over her unimportant life, but we, of course, have just finished reading her autobiography. This framework of a double denial opens up two distinctions—between fiction and autobiography, and between fictional protagonist and authorial structuring will—and destabilizes the idea of autobiographical authority.

Berenice tells us that autobiography demands both a particular content and a particular attitude of the autobiographer. Autobiographers must be self-confident in the importance of their lives, which is based on the perception of life as “event.” Elsewhere, however, she herself questions the hierarchical dichotomy between event and experience. In a scene in which she watches an unnamed “revolutionary movement” march by her front door, event is equated with history, and promptly unmasked as anything but definitive. When she asks one of the protesting men what he means by shouting “Down with oppression,” his words are revealed to be “puerile,” mere slogans he repeats without any personal knowledge of their meaning (123). The “revolution”—probably a reference to the Revolution of 1930 and a major event in national history—is rooted in empty words. Meanwhile, Berenice realizes she has a much more solid understanding of “oppression,” founded on intimate female experience: “My oppression was within the home” (123). The values of experience and event are inverted, and autobiography's importance and authority, as Berenice understands them, suddenly appear to be based on far less solid ground.

The narrative frame and Berenice's reading of the “revolution,” along with various other scenes in the text, achieve their particular meanings through an

ironic gap between the character's perceptions and the views of the implied author or what I have called the authorial structuring will. Berenice voices conventional wisdom on generic and gender categories, but her narrative undermines that wisdom. If by the novel's end the protagonist still feels she cannot write her "biography," the implied author has redefined what constitutes legitimate autobiographical material: not event, which historically has been a male domain, but female experience. Despite *A Imaginária's* early success, it would seem that the significance of this message was not understood, judging from the subsequent critical silence. We would do well to look again, for Nery's narrative offers a strategic model for female self-writing, in which fictional tools are used not as guardians of propriety but, on the contrary, as invaluable instruments of genre and gender critique.

Notes

¹ Philippe Lejeune's now famous definition of autobiography limits it to "a retrospective prose narrative written by a real person . . . where the focus is his individual life" (4). I, however, follow Antonio Candido's broader use of the term, to include both narratives focused primarily on an individual and family/community memoirs. See "Poesia" and "Literatura."

² See Zagury on Brazilian childhood autobiography, Santiago on modernist autobiography and more recent trends, and Süsskind on post-1964 political memoirs.

³ See Sodré and, more recently, Vieira.

⁴ Morley's *Minha Vida de Menina* (1942) and Jesus' *Quarto de Despejo* (1960) were both bestsellers and have been translated into English, among other languages. It is unclear how many other women may have written autobiographies that await recovery, but since the wave of political memoirs in the 1970s and 1980s there has been a visible increase in the publication of female autobiographies.

⁵ This and other translations of literary passages are mine.

⁶ See Molloy on the unstable status of autobiography in Spanish America. The general lines of her argument speak to Brazil as well.

⁷ Another potential explanation for her resistance to writing memoirs may lie in a desire for "discretion" concerning her support of the 1964 military coup and subsequent dictatorship.

⁸ Or, as Georges Gusdorf observes, "[e]very novel is an autobiography by intermediary" (46).

⁹ See Callado.

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