

THIS HEROIC MUSIC: ELEGY TO
TANIA FRANCO CARVALHAL

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Starting from the beginning, I describe a personality of mythical and historical proportions, enraptured with life, passion, Beethoven symphonies, and autumnal sonatas.¹

Professor Tania passed away on the afternoon of September 10, 2006. Immediately, phones rang and e-mails flashed to and from distant places where comparative literature plays its role of 'knight errant' of the new millennium, including my home town in Brazil's Center-West region, as the entire comparative literature fraternity poured out its grief. That afternoon I circulated a memo to friends, and to the University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). It was from this campus in Porto Alegre that Professor Tania orchestrated her bold strategy for the creation of the Brazilian Comparative Literature Association (ABRALIC), which, by means of a critical and particular form of discourse, projected Brazil and all countries of Latin America into the global network of international associations that has proliferated throughout the Western World since the onset of the modern era, and provides forums for democratic debate, so characteristic of our times. The founding and fostering of associations as spaces for debate and reflection on our practices at given times and in given contexts has merited the attention of specialists in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and literature, and contributed greatly toward the general development of ideas.

I composed the memo that day in a state of high emotion, reflecting upon memories, and upon the sentiments expressed in a poem by Cecília Meireles. Her stanzas on wind allude to our passage through this life and our earthly mission, just as a falling star drawn toward the sea illuminates the night sky before being finally extinguished. Our earthly passage attains permanence, however, when we leave indelible marks in the form of works produced as we reconnoiter space, and of others approached in our pursuit of shared dreams, as a star traces its fleeting trajectory. It is to record such a luminous and fleeting moment that I evoke the memory of Tania Carvalho, especially of her zest for activities in the field of comparativism, and the implementation of Comparative Literature as a scholarly discipline at this period of transition, the turn of the century and of the millennium.

I first met Professor Tania in the 1970s at a congress in Rio de Janeiro when I was an undergraduate in Letters. I was spellbound. She spoke with such enchanting candor on the aesthetics of impressionism, and on the works of Marcel Proust, a writer whose *Recherche* was subsequently to become one of my life-long interests. Much later, in 1986, as founder and first President of ABRALIC, she authorized my membership of the Association, after which my admiration for her and my interest in Comparative Literature grew apace.

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Professor Tania and her close association with Comparative Literature became major influences in my life, and helped guide my vocation, my “felicity in literature”.

I traveled to Porto Alegre to attend the 1st ABRALIC Congress, organized after the 1st Latin-American Seminar on Compared Literature, in accordance with a decision published in the minutes of a Board meeting held at the Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio) and announced to members on September 17, 1987. Since that time, I have not missed a single ABRALIC International Congress. These events were always an opportunity to share the company of our amiable host, the center of attention, Professor Tania.

Later, as a Doctoral student, it was my privilege to encounter Professor Tania again, in her capacity as CAPES evaluator during her visit to the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), where she took time to talk to the student body, and hear grievances relating to the lack of scholarships and much else. In 1989, we were together in Montevideo at the 2nd Latin-American Seminar on Compared Literature. Most graciously, she would always report to the ABRALIC Board on the participation of Brazilians in foreign events.

It was principally after 1995, however, when I was striving to consolidate the Department of Comparative Literature at the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul, (UFMS) that our friendship deepened, and I was able fully to appreciate Tania’s frankness, detachment, spirit of cooperation, and vocation for leadership in the challenging task of bringing people together, and harnessing efforts for attainment of a shared ideal. It is her pursuit of this ideal that has endowed Tania with immortal status in the field of Brazilian Letters. Her calling led her to establish contacts and relationships among literatures and cultures, and her outstanding leadership resulted in the founding of various comparative literature associations throughout Latin America. She was appointed President of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) and was the moving force behind the decision to hold the first ICLA Congress in the southern hemisphere, in Brazil. Also in 1995, Professor Tania accepted our invitation to teach extension courses for the two campuses of our university (UFMS). In 1996, in 2001, and in 2003, in her capacity as lecturer, mentor, and advisor, she helped prepare our agenda, and assisted our integration with the ANPOLL Working Group and with ABRALIC. Her participation in seminars was of unimaginable significance for audiences at our university, so far removed from the principal Brazilian metropolitan centers.

My most indelible memory of Professor Tania’s personality harks back to an event in 1996 when, much in demand as a conference speaker, she attended to various projects and activities. Aside from the pertinence

of her contributions, her most outstanding quality was politeness, a virtue as rare today as the most endangered of bird species. The intellectual brilliance and politeness she displayed in that year bring to mind another renowned woman traveler: Madame de Staël. I fear I never drew this comparison to Tania's attention, but I draw it now, as the highest honor a disciple of comparative literature can ascribe. Most certainly, Madame de Staël epitomizes the woman traveler, and was one of the earliest and most decisively important influences on the crystallization of Comparative Literature. Her works, particularly her romantic manifesto *De l'Allemagne*, and her life as a wandering intellectual, persecuted by Napoleon, make her the emblematic woman traveler who could pass seamlessly from the literature and culture of one country to another. By fostering the circulation of ideas, and bringing romanticism to the attention both of France and of the Italians, Madame de Staël proved one of the most exuberant and accomplished woman travelers of her century. She was the most extraordinary woman of her age, according to (the also extraordinary) Saint-Simon, who begged her hand in marriage, pleading that they should "collaborate in producing a child that would be even more extraordinary," according to Edmund Wilson in his famous book on writers and actors of history. In *Luís Lambert*, Balzac recounts his meeting with Madame de Staël, who had enrolled and kept him at Collège Vendôme, and predicted his greatness. The name of Madame de Staël still merits remembrance today, for it is said that without her contribution, a part of European thinking might have taken an altogether different direction.

We Brazilians, in a Latin American context far removed from the era of the great dame of romanticism, are very fortunate to have had among us a woman traveler to represent our corner of the world. I quote from background remarks that Professor Tania made in her speech upon taking office as President of the International Comparative Literature Association, in Hong Kong, as published in the *ICLA Bulletin*:

2004 stands out as particularly important in the literary world of South America, from where I come. Among other events, we may just point to the centennial of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda; the centennial of the publication of the novel *Esau e Jacó* by the Brazilian Machado de Assis; the sixtieth anniversary of the publication of the work *Ficciones* by the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges; the tenth anniversary of the death of Armonia Somers, born in Uruguay in 1914; the twentieth anniversary of the edition of "Galáxias" – a long poem by the Brazilian Haroldo de Campos. This could well be a never-ending list. And in this puzzle of worldwide literary works there is one in particular that readers will not forget to celebrate: the publication of the first edition of Miguel de

Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which will be four hundred years old next December. Published in 1604, in Spain, this book has become a fascinating literary myth and one of the most cherished of contemporary criticism.

In 2001 and in 2003, we organized colloquiums that were to have international repercussions. We were all gathered in expectation of hearing from the Muse, but were disappointed, as she was herself, when she was unable to attend. Her text "Interfaces of Comparative Literature" was read at the opening session and published in the annals of the colloquium. Evoking a "comparativism in transition" and the "interfaces of today", the article makes reference to the seminar of 1996 on the practice of Comparative Literature, and to the poetry of Manoel de Barros, unveiling the contradiction facing modernity at the onset of the 3rd Millennium. She wrote two letters graciously justifying her absence, and I quote from the one written on April 2, 2001, in which she expressed special interest in activities underway at UFMS and in our region, revealing both her earthly mission and her role as an innate comparatist. Tania most clearly described her mission as a comparatist in her last essay, published in the 8th edition of *ABRALIC Magazine*: "Under the aegis of the knight errant, in multiple variations, comparative literature experiences the adventure of our times and, through formulation of questions, moves toward its permanent validation". With regard to her other mission, she wrote:

Dear Professor, Colleague, and Friend:

We all know that life is what happens while we are busy making other plans. Never have I used this phrase with greater and deeper regret. It saddens me to have to alter plans when I least expect and least desire to do so. For reasons of health, I will be unable to participate in the event to which you and your colleagues of the Dourados campus of the Federal University of Mato Grosso do Sul have dedicated so much effort, competence, and devotion.

This letter, on letterhead paper, bearing the signature of Professor Tania, then Vice-President of ICLA, I have framed and is displayed among other mementos at the Faculty of Letters, of which I am Director. I, like many others who carry on her mission, have but such fragments with which to fill the gap she has left. Her image, and strong personality – the bold knight errant – remain vividly in my memory.

My last meeting with Professor Tania was at the International Colloquium of Literature and Related Fields, held in Porto Alegre from April 17 to 19, 2006, upon her arrival at the meeting hall (Salão dos Atos 2) of the Dean's Office, where the opening session of the event and introduction of our foreign guests was taking place. Once the head table had assembled,

Professor Tania withdrew, accompanied by members of her family. As she left, she asked me to visit her home, and said her colleague Lucia Rebello would provide the telephone number. Though she had greeted me most affectionately, I remained anxious to see her, my main reason for traveling to the South.

When I visited her home, on April 19, she asked if I wanted anything to drink; I declined, not wanting to bother her with my incorrigible yearning for coffee. She, however, urged me thus: "Look, I am not the one who will be making the coffee". So we drank coffee as we conversed and she showed me her desk. It was piled high with hundreds of documents, and there were photographs from everywhere and of everyone, a veritable record of her achievements. Among all those photos, I remember one of her with Clarice Lispector; another with Saramago; and one of the 1st ANPOLL Meeting with various teachers, among whom she pointed out my friend and teacher Neide de Faria, of the Comparative Literature Department of the University of Brasilia (UnB).

With my digital camera I registered the moment with two photos, which I later posted on my website, and have since had printed. Upon taking my leave, I renewed the open invitation to visit my university whenever she liked, and she answered that she would be too glad to do so. As she accompanied me to the door, she gave me a copy of Augusto Meyer's *Os pêssegos verdes* (The green peaches), which she had edited and introduced, published by the Brazilian Academy of Letters. Our final exchange related to an upcoming UNESP/SJRP event, for which we both had invitations to lecture. On September 21, I attended the UNESP event on "History, Culture, and Literature" and was deeply moved as the comparative literature community paid posthumous tribute to Tania, our knight errant.

After my visit to her home on April 19 we had been in touch by e-mail, and in my personal files I retain photos of her inauguration as President of ICLA. I had sent her a copy of my most recent publication, *O outdoor invisível* (The invisible billboard), in which I had dedicated the title essay to her. She answered by e-mail on June 29 and, having read the book, kindly commended its relevance to our common efforts on behalf of comparative literature. She mentioned that in the latest edition of *Revue de Littérature Comparée* (number 306, 2005), published in Paris, of which she was the editor, dedicated to relations between France and Brazil, there is a critical article signed by Daniel Henri Pageaux that traces her entire comparatist career. She, characteristically, felt that the author had been too kind. On August 13, I received my last e-mail from her; after that, silence...

Among the books on my desk is her *O próprio e o alheio: Ensaio de Literatura Comparada* (Our own and others': Essays on Compared Literature),

and another portentous volume: a memorial written in her honor by some of our finest authors: *Elogio da lucidez: a comparação literária em âmbito universal: textos em homenagem a Tania Franco Carvalhal* (In praise of lucidity: literary comparison at the universal level: texts in honor of Tania Franco Carvalhal). Among the various contributions it contains a poem in her honor by Mario Quintana, entitled “O vento e a canção” (The wind and the song), and a text by bibliophile José Mindlin (since appointed Immortal Member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters) entitled “Uma jovem talentosa” (A talented maiden).

I began writing this text in Tania’s honor with reference to Mario Quintana’s poem. I now come back to it, as I recall a recent interview, shown on the Globo News network, in which Tania lavishes praise upon the author of sonnet XVII, “A rua dos cataventos” (The street of windmills). It is, however, in the sonnet “O vento e a canção” (The wind and the song) (on p. 15 of *O elogio da lucidez* that Quintana dedicated “To Tania Franco Carvalhal”) that I find the most appropriate expression and outlook. All literature requires beauty and virtuosity; qualities which, with gentle gestures, Tania imbued the things she touched. As the sonnet says, “só o vento é que sabe versejar” (only the wind can versify).

The last word is from Cecília Meireles, evoked in Quintana’s verses, using the comparativist outlook taught so vividly by Professor Tania, employing intelligence and critical faculties in pursuit of permanent validation of studies of comparative literature:

.....
Canst thou not see?
Dishes of gold must be cast down marble staircases.
Necklaces rent, mirrors shattered, crystal broken,
Sword blades bent, and statues demolished,
Lamps destroyed, cupolas brought down,
And drums and lyres flung far...

The magnificent smile is a stanza of this deluded music.

But there must be dishes of gold,
Doest thou understand?
— and necklaces, and mirrors, and swords, and statues.
And lamps, God in Heaven!
And skillfully beaten drums and sonorous, tremulous lyres...

Listen carefully:
.....
Only from three sources has this heroic music sprung to date:
from the sky whence the wind blows,

from the sea that dances,
and from me.

(Cecília Meireles, Gargalhada [Peel of laughter]. In: *Viagem*)

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