

My intimate story with Moacyr¹

Jean-Marie Ozanne

I am not sure that I ever wanted to be born. In fact, I am not at all sure that I wanted to leave my mother's womb. I was born at noon, my mother keeps telling me, adding that I agreed to leave her womb just to sit in front of the table. I know that's not true. What I do know is that I agreed to come out so that stories could be told to me in the morning, in the evening, at midnight, or at noon. And my mother was extraordinary in that respect. She read a lot, a lot, a lot of stories to me.

I confess that when I finally became a bookseller and publisher, it was to be able to go in search of stories that would give me as much emotion as those of my youth. Of course, I found them. From many publishers, from many authors: windows wide open to the world, winding paths across languages, landscapes of words, and oceans of sentences. Philip Roth, Maurice Sendak, Italo Calvino, Stefan Zweig, Alain Gluckstein, Joseph Roth, Georges Perec... I could fill many pages with the names of authors who have moved me so much. One in particular is very special: Moacyr Scliar.

Moacyr has had a number of publications in France. I read his books, and they enchanted me. By "enchanted," I mean they endlessly sang the mythological story of life to me (it is a never-ending song). Moacyr is both Johann Sebastian Bach, creating a fugue on a 5-octave harpsichord, and Beethoven, sculpting the sonic mass on a 7-octave piano, as well as Messiaen and Varese, experimenting with the unexpected on instruments with innumerable octaves.

I was at the Rio Book Fair a few years ago. I walked by a glass-enclosed conference room. The audience inside were laughing hysterically, bending over laughing. I was surprised. It's quite rare to hear such loud laughter at a book fair. I entered the room and observed the person causing the laughter. He looked English, sporting a tweed jacket, an impeccable tie, an equally impeccable mustache, a mischievous eye, and another eye just as mischievous. Since I don't speak Portuguese, I didn't understand a word. To put on a good face, I smiled foolishly every time he told what seemed to be a good joke. At a certain point, I finally realized that this elegant gentleman was Moacyr Scliar. The great Moacyr Scliar. I blamed myself for not understanding what he was saying. I blamed myself for not studying harder at school; I blamed my parents for never making me listen to the melody of the Portuguese language; I blamed the entire Earth; I blamed Moacyr Scliar for speaking Portuguese to everyone else and not French just to me; and I blamed Philippe Poncet for not being there.

The event that had begun as a conference and apparently turned into joyful chaos finally came to an end. Moacyr was immediately surrounded by masses of people. It was annoying. What could be so important to ask him? So, I had to wait and wait. When he finally got up, I ran over to him and asked him (in French): "You were widely

published in France. Almost all of your books are out of print. I would be very honored if I could publish your work. But not like the others: one book and that's it. No, I want to follow you; follow the path of your work." I said this in a single breath. And I was very surprised by his answer, in French: *d'accord*.

Now I realize that I became a publisher to publish Moacyr Scliar (not only him, but especially him). Of course, everything I say is neither scientific nor academic. But literature is important for the path it takes for each of us. Moacyr makes me discover the paths of yesterday, the paths of today, and the universal paths. It's an intimate story.

Moacyr makes it all visible. But not like the Americans: it's not about the "eye of the camera" so dear to Dos Passos. He is never an outsider. Moacyr is his grandfather, who came to Brazil by boat. He is his father, who fought the Germans on the beach at Capão da Canoa. He is also the doctor who treats his sister on the high plateaus of the Andes; he is a homeless bohemian in a wagon whose floor is covered with straw and bones; he is a centaur and a mare; he is his mother, who tells stories and makes sure her children have enough to eat; he is Max; he is a Gaucho and a Jew; he is funny and serious; he is eyes and voice. It was like he had the gift of inventing a new camera, one that was no longer outside himself but at just the right distance. Of course, the whole tradition of Jewish humor is invoked. Distance. Oh, precious distance that stories provide us to better understand life.

¹ The testimonials of Jean-Marie Ozanne, editor, and Philippe Poncet, translator of Moacyr Scliar, are the result of cross-interviews with them.