

Moacyr Scliar, a transcultural Gaucho¹

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First of all, I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to participate in this panel, which has special meaning as we remember our dear friend Moacyr while paying tribute to the great writer, Moacyr Scliar, who has enriched Gaucho and Brazilian literature to an extent we have not yet had enough time to assess. Perhaps it is much broader than we are thinking right now.

It's hard to find the right tone at a time when we are guided both by the emotion of remembering a friend and by the desire to understand the immense impact of Scliar's work on Brazilian and world literature, since it has been translated into more than ten languages.

Let me begin by reflecting on the title chosen for this event: "A Transcultural Gaucho." In 2004, Prof. Regina Zilberman and I organized a collective in tribute to the writer called "The Transcultural Traveler," alluding to the tireless traveler who never refused an invitation, no matter how humble, to participate in fairs, launches, congresses, and other literary activities in Brazil and around the world. It also refers to the intellectual nomad he was, creating new cultural elements that transcended the Jewish and Brazilian contexts, producing a literature marked by heterogeneity.

The transcultural processes he initiated, recalling the substrates of Judaism and inscribing them in the context of the Americas, revitalize the memory of Jewish immigration. Scliar incorporates the Jewish immigrant into the framework of Gaucho and Brazilian identity, initiating a fruitful line of writers who use the various migratory flows to Brazil as raw material for their narratives. These include writers such as Pozenatto on Italian immigration, Josué Guimarães on German immigration, Salim Miguel, Milton Hatoun, and Raduan Nassar on Syrian Lebanese immigration, and, more recently, Letícia Wierchowski on Polish immigration, among others.

What seduces readers of Scliar is his "migratory spirit," a term used by the Quebec writer and poet Pierre Ouellet. It refers not only to writers who, in their fiction, recall the saga of the immigrant's crossing and adaptation to a new geographical and cultural context, but also to writers who reflect on the cultures of both home and host country, making their literary work an in-between space, a place for negotiating identities. With the term "migratory spirit," Pierre Ouellet also alludes to the intellectual nomadism of certain writers who, like our Scliar, move through different literary events, choosing their intellectual roots in different contexts of universal literature in order to compose works that become meaningful for readers from different latitudes.

Scliar, one of the most prolific writers and an avid reader himself, made significant transitions in his literary career. He began by witnessing the saga of Jewish immigration

in Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul. His work expanded by revisiting characters such as Noel Nutels (*A Majestade do Xingu*), who moves through different spaces such as Russia, the upper Xingu, and São Paulo, becoming a great advocate of the Indigenous cause. In his last book, *Eu vos abraço, O milhões* (I embrace you, all of you), he turns to reinterpreting and rewriting biblical myths, as seen in *Os vendilhões do templo* (The merchants of the Temple), *Manual da paixão solitária* (A manual of the solitary passion), and *A mulher que escreveu a Bíblia* (The woman who wrote the Bible). Through a clever narrative, a rare sense of humor, and a skillful practice of multiple genres, such as short stories, novels, chronicles, essays, and young adult literature, Moacyr Scliar's work maintains an impressive coherence, always returning to fundamental themes of otherness, the construction of heterogeneous identities, and diversity. The transcultural passages he makes throughout his nearly fifty-year literary career make his work an example of dynamic and relational rootedness. His desire to highlight the Jewish contribution to Brazilian culture is always an act of inclusion, of generous solidarity, and of being open to dialogue with all the other cultures present in our state and country. He clearly understands that the recovery of memory and the construction of identity are dynamic processes that never fall into essentialist traps.

A great builder of utopias and fantastic imagery, Scliar explores key American myths, such as journeys, crossings, migrations, and metamorphoses, which, in the context of the Americas, prefigure utopias of survival, renewal, and rebirth, as seen in the short and fascinating *Max and the Cats* (1981) and *The Centaur in the Garden*, in which the monstrosity of the character, Guedali, due to his dual nature, human and animal, refers to the multiethnic and multifaceted context of the Americas.

The richness of Scliar's work is largely related to the incredible mobility of his stories, which are set in different areas (from Jerusalem to the hinterlands of Rio Grande do Sul, from Rio de Janeiro to the Amazon, etc.) and different times (biblical and contemporary). But it is, above all, the transactional mobility that fascinates us because transactions involve negotiation to reach an agreement after periods of contention. It implies concessions, exchanges, mutual compromises, and the renewal of meaning through transit or hybridization. Thus, his books offer lessons of wisdom in the fight against racism, cultural intolerance, and discriminatory attitudes. The novel *Um sonho no caroço do abacate* (1995) (A dream in the avocado pit), which was adapted into a film, reveals various forms of intolerance towards religion, skin color, culture, and even the ideas and feelings of the characters. The love between a young Jewish man and a mulatto serves as a pretext for the author to illustrate the different forms of racism, ranging from simple jokes or tasteless remarks about the cultural characteristics of blacks and Jews to brutal forms of physical violence against the discriminated group. The literary work, as well as the resulting film, can be understood as an anti-racist pedagogy that reveals the irrationality of the brutality of racism. It also focuses on the protagonists' inability to understand the reasons why they are stigmatized, precisely because racist

manifestations are based on fallacious and unscientific arguments about the alleged superiority of certain ethnicities or cultures over others.

Scliar knew that Brazil was not in fact the racial democracy it claimed to be, and he warned that we still live in the “land of improbable dreams.” Overcoming racism, in Scliar’s view, requires the will to confront it and the recognition that the fight against it and its offshoots is a task for each and every one of us.

Once again, I am grateful for the opportunity to pay this simple tribute to a great friend and a great writer. I yield the floor to the next speaker, still stunned by Moacyr’s unexpected departure, with no time for goodbyes and farewells. We are all left orphaned, without understanding the reasons for this unforeseen journey. Let us seek consolation in the greater legacy he left us: his writing. The last sentence of *Manual da paixão solitária* (Manual of the solitary passion) says the following: “In life, as in dreams, there is much we can never understand” (2008, p. 215).

¹ Text presented at the Memorial do Rio Grande do Sul on March 29, 2011.