

The Territory of My Imagination

NÉLIDA PIÑON



Piñon in early childhood

I

I BEGAN TO WRITE WHILE STILL A YOUNG GIRL, reading the books that were given to me and inventing ones that I did not have at hand. Inventing is an ancient tradition. Maybe this was the vocation of my grandfather, Daniel, a Galician immigrant, who early on ventured to cross the Atlantic, obeying his thirst for adventure and the need to be in a land that offered him wide-open horizons. Or perhaps inventing began with my father, Lino, who was a bookworm, entranced by all he read. I myself would not be able to interpret my own past, give it credibility, or point to any underlying pattern or personal mythology. Human aspirations, after all, get mixed up amid so many things, and we are so little aware of the moments that shape our destiny.

As an eight-year-old, I proclaimed myself an author. I don't know, however, at what moment and from where this author who I am today appeared. And who, recognizing how difficult it is to deal with the world as we find it, helped me advance so far into creativity and the realm of the unseen? From whence did this woman come, resisting conventional forms and their refined finishes? I believe that the writer I am, vigilant and demanding, materialized through reflection—through experience, and through the challenges and the seductions of the work itself.

I certainly had good luck to be able to read whatever I wanted. I was never censored and had access to all kinds of writers who, in effect, became my teachers. I would read them passionately, learning how they forged a text that convinced me of its reality. I knew from an early age that talent alone was insufficient for putting a story together. I had to continue to learn to think and create at the same time, all this without losing sight of the mystery of the characters themselves. One must never forget that illusion, at whatever point of development, must convince the reader that he or she is an accomplice in the drama of how a story unfolds.

I also learned from mentors outside of literature. I was an attentive reader of history, theology, and philosophy. Thus, writing opened paths for me by consolidating my moral and ethical sensibilities. I read and reread Homer, Shakespeare, and Proust. Dostoyevsky especially showed me the darkness that keeps humans prisoners of desire. In Brazil, Machado de Assis influenced me greatly, and I revered Cervantes from Spain and could add so many more names—Monteiro

Lobato, Karl May, and others. Any progress I've made has always come from intense devotion to my profession and the determination to advance beyond the imperfect work I had done already.

In my role as president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, I certainly tried to build on what my predecessors had accomplished and to maintain the dignity of the academy, especially in its centennial year. This institution pushed Brazil forward for all to see, and I learned much during that period. Above all, I wanted to give back to Brazil and also to my language. I take pride in presenting Brazilian culture to foreign universities and at international conferences. It is difficult to perform this role in light of our being such an unknown culture, and I always maintain the feeling that we have been forgotten throughout history, but I happily take on this struggle.

Currently, I see both turbulence and calm in Brazilian literature. Now is not so much a time of cultural dormancy as a pause preceding great eruption and revelation. At times I do get discouraged; good leadership in my country could make all the difference, even though the present government is determined to ignore all signs of the need to change. I applaud the numbers of courageous young people who are starting to write, and when I think about them I am hopeful for Brazil and its quest for social justice.

I am a Taurus, and my rising sign is Sagittarius. I wonder if this helps explain who I am. As for my dreams, they are mine alone. In short, I want to learn how to live, to die, to maintain dignity, to go on believing in noble sentiments and the necessity to work from my true passion for living life.

II

AFTER EXPLORING THE ORIGINS OF BRAZIL in the novel *A República dos sonhos* (1984; Eng. *The Republic of Dreams*, 1989), I began to experiment with a more personal kind of novel. I wanted to immerse readers in a world that would connect values from our personal history with the larger history that surrounds us. I went to the Middle East, the region that gave birth to monotheism, an invisible and abstract god, and a new concept of faith. I went into the desert and found a landscape crisscrossed with caravans, lies, histories, intrigues, demons, spices, silk, and inspiration for all kinds of stories. I chose to work with Scheherazade and decided to put her in Baghdad, the legendary, eternal city. With Scheherazade and



Piñon with her parents, Lino and Carmen



Piñon with her mother



Piñon in early adulthood

her troupe in place, my imagination went to work. I read, studied, and immersed myself in the Islamic world, and then wrote for five years.

Whereas in *The Republic of Dreams* I had tried to come to terms with Brazil over the last two hundred years, in *Voices do Deserto* (2004; *Voices of the desert*) I traversed the territory of the imagination itself and explored human nature. The novel takes place in the tenth century at the time of the Abbasid dynasty, in an urban enclave surrounded by huge walls. In this setting, I found great aspirations, incredible wonders, and intense passion—the complete knowledge of the time. Operating in such a fantastic world, Scheherazade defies the Caliph and seduces him in spite of his cruelty toward women.

Connected to the Middle East, to a desert world, to the nomadic life that disregards political borders, Scheherazade and her friends travel with a collection of stories and a picture of the world that are part of the Arabic and, indeed, the human mind. They are committed to innovation and to doing whatever it takes to sustain their lives and, if possible, to make them livable.

Without a doubt, Scheherazade is one of the great fictional characters. However, her well-known stories do not appear in this book. Rather, she surfaces in unexpected ways, especially when she is in a bind or even faces imminent death. Unsinkable in demeanor, she opposes the Caliph's tyranny with a passion that she also directs to other causes in which she believes. This Vizier's daughter, once she married a Caliph, becomes a guerrilla of the imagination and a speaker on behalf of words that resonate through fascinating tellings and retellings.

The confrontation between this libertarian, fearless character and the Abbasid Caliph creates a drama out of intense sexuality, the threat of death, and the hidden rivalries among women. It is the Caliphate of Baghdad, Mohammed's earthly representative, that she describes, and the story unveils the complex nature of Arabic culture intertwined with strands of devotion drawn from the Koran. Disguising herself sometimes as a man and at other times as a woman, and always with a brilliant imagination, she defends the lot of miserable people, beggars, and dervishes, and her many sensual indulgences soon move into the realm of fantasy. Often surrounded by women, she and the others lose themselves in their imaginations,

which is never innocent. In this way, Scheherazade sculpts, rearranges, and in various ways tries to change the human heart. She pulls us into her language, which reveals who we are as singular and enigmatic beings. She encourages a metamorphosis, which is, finally, a state compatible with the very audacity of being human.

These voices from the desert search for a route paved with dreams and metaphors, and they discover how to scrutinize the Caliph, the Vizier, and the kingdom itself. Scheherazade knows that the mystery she narrates, prolonged until dawn, is the true revenge of knowledge against cruelty. In this spirit, she faces her tyrant, who, after his wife's betrayal, falls into the clutches of a Scheherazade who opens the door for him to a strange and disturbing universe.

I read voraciously to prepare for *Voices do Deserto*, and eventually I was caught up in the caravans and saw myself as a visitor to the Caliphate's cities from which my characters originated. Absorbing what I learned from the Koran, I of course had to process what I knew to make it useful and so that Scheherazade could get through the night, infused by her talent, her perspicacity, and her doubts. I moved naturally through this fantastic world, a world in which Scheherazade engaged in scenes full of sexuality, but nothing, absolutely nothing, distracted her from her purpose of staying alive.

Literature and life so easily intermingle, and the very act of thinking inspires me to create. There is a sentence, in chapter 31 of *Voices do Deserto*, that probably defines me: "Scheherazade sees herself as an instrument of her race. God gave her a harvest of words, which are her wheat." That is what I have felt about words and creativity throughout my life. **WLT**

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Translation from the Portuguese

By Luciana Camargo Namorato & Paul M. Sneed

Editorial Note: The editors worked closely with the translators to achieve a final text that, while not a word-for-word translation of the original, nevertheless strove to preserve the spirit of the author's intended meaning.

LUCIANA CAMARGO NAMORATO is Assistant Professor of Portuguese at the University of Oklahoma. Her research explores postcolonial identities in modern and contemporary Portuguese, African, Brazilian, and other Latin American literatures. She has published articles on Machado de Assis, Erico Veríssimo, and Agustina Bessa-Luís.

PAUL M. SNEED is Assistant Professor of Portuguese at the University of Oklahoma, where he focuses on popular culture and organized crime in Brazil. He is also president of the Two Brothers Foundation, an NGO based in Rio de Janeiro that seeks to provide educational opportunities for young people in low-income communities.