Subaltern voices in nineteenth-century Peru:
review of Clorinda Matto de Turner, AVES SIN NIDO
(novel of 1889; critical edition by Dora Sales Salvador, 2006)

Details:
Castellón de la Plana (Comunidad Valenciana, Spain): Universidad Jaume I / Ellago Ediciones (Colección Sendes), 2006, ISBN 84-8021-557-7, 300 pp. -
www.tienda.uji.es, www.ellagoediciones.com

Author of review: Dr Christopher Rollason - Metz, France, rollason@9online.fr

***

In the literary landscape of Peru of the second half of the nineteenth century, increasing retrospective importance is today being given to the figure of Clorinda Matto de Turner (Cuzco, 1852 - Buenos Aires, 1909), a writer who stands out thanks to her work for women's education, for appearing on the papal *Index of Banned Books* despite being a practising and believing Christian, and for her novel *Aves sin nido* (*Birds Without a Nest*[1]), first published in 1889, which marked a key moment in the history of socially committed writing in Latin America, and which now appears, for the first time on the Spanish market, in a critical edition[2], with a full introduction (including a chronology of the author) plus an extensive bibliography. This valuable contribution to Latin American studies is the work of Dora Sales Salvador, of the Universidad Jaume I de Castellón (Spain), whose earlier publications in the field include a detailed study of another Peruvian writer, José María Arguedas (a comparative analysis examining Arguedas' similarities with the Indian novelist Vikram Chandra)[3] and a critical edition of a major Mexican novel, *Balún Canán* by Rosario Castellanos[4]. It may be noted that in this edition of *Aves sin nido* the editor has ensured, for the Spanish-speaking reader, the understanding of the numerous Quechua words which appear in the text, both by reproducing Clorinda's original glossary and by adding other terms not appearing there by means of contextualised footnotes.

Clorinda Matto de Turner was born in Cuzco, in 1852, under the name of Grimanesa Martina Matto Usandivares. The adopted name Clorinda under which she wrote her works was bestowed on her by her husband, José Turner, a businessman of British origin whom she married in 1871. Her father hailed from the upper-middle class and owned a property in the locality of Paullo Chico (near Coya in the *departamento* (province) of Cuzco), where his young daughter stayed on a number of occasions. These stays enabled her, in the words of Dora Sales, to 'observar de cerca la vida y costumbres de los indígenas quechuas' ('observe the life and customs of the Quechua natives from close up' - Introduction, 28). She also learned the Quechua language, thus becoming a bilingual intellectual (indeed, after 1901 she published a series of biblical translations in Quechua)[5]. She may thus be compared with later writers like Castellanos and Arguedas, who also came from the white/Spanish-speaking/middle-class strata but had an intimate knowledge of the lives of the subaltern natives and were convinced defenders of their rights and dignity. At the same time, Matto

---

[1] English translation: *Birds Without a Nest*, tr. "J.G.H." (translation emended by Naomi Lindstrom), Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1996. The English quotations from the novel in this review are taken from this edition. Cf. discussion below.

[2] Other critical editions have appeared in Latin American countries.

[3] Dora Sales Salvador, *Puentes sobre el mundo: Cultura, traducción y forma literaria en las narrativas de transculturación de José María Arguedas y Vikram Chandra (Bridges over the world: Culture, tradition and literary form in the transcultural narratives of José María Arguedas and Vikram Chandra)*, Berne/New York/Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004.

[4] Rosario Castellanos, *Balún Canán* (1957), ed. Dora Sales Salvador, Madrid: Cátedra, 2004.

[5] She translated the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

was from early on an active promoter of the cause of Peruvian and Latin American women, whatever their ethnic origin. After her husband's death in 1881, she sought, with success, an independent life: she became the editor-in-chief of two important newspapers, *La Bolsa* of Arequipa (the first woman in Latin America to occupy such a position - 1883), and, later, *El Perú Ilustrado* of Lima (1889). Also in the capital, she even founded, in 1892, a printing-press, *La Equitativa*, which was staffed exclusively by women. In addition, she lectured, in Peru and later in Argentina, on women's issues and literary subjects, and here we may note that Dora Sales' edition includes, as an illustrative appendix, the full text of one of Clorinda's lectures, 'Las obreras del pensamiento en la América del Sud' ('The female builders of thought in South America'), given in Buenos Aires in 1895.

Aves sin nido was the first work of fiction by a writer who had previously specialised in brief texts in the *costumbrista* (approximately, fokloric) genre. She followed it up with two other novels, *Índole* (*Character*, 1891) and *Herencia* (*Heredity*, 1893), but it is this, the first, which has always been her best-regarded work. The reception of *Aves* involved controversy from the beginning: while the author received a personal letter of support from Peru's then President, Andrés Avelino Cáceres, the reaction of the church hierarchy could not have been more negative. Things came to a head in 1890, with the appearance, in *El Perú Ilustrado* (the newspaper edited by Clorinda), of 'Magdala', a short story by the Brazilian writer Henrique Maximiano Coelho Neto, which suggested a possible less-than-platonic relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. The Catholic church responded with a series of harsh reprisals: Matto was excommunicated and forced to resign her editorship, and the church's revenge extended to her novel, which in principle had nothing to do with the matter. *Aves sin nido* was placed on the Vatican's feared *Index of banned books*, and its author was even burned in effigy on the streets of Arequipa and Cuzco. Clorinda held out in Perú until 1895, in which year, after another serious incident (the women's press which she had run since 1892 was looted), she went into exile in Argentina (it was there, in Buenos Aires, that she ended her days), and, still a Christian believer, transferred her interest to the Protestant faith, developing close links with the American Bible Society.

What, then, is this novel about, to have provoked such extreme reactions? The reply lies, beyond any doubt, in its plot itself. The story is located mostly in Killac, an invented small town presumably modelled on the real locality of Tinta, in the *departamento* of Cuzco (where the Turner couple lived), and, in the closing chapters, in an imposing city which, if unnamed, is evidently Lima. It is a fiction pertaining to the realist, if not naturalist, mode, told by a third-person narrator of the omniscient-didactic type who may be identified, in general terms, with the author herself. Given the socially engaged nature of the novel, it is not surprising to find that the characters fall, in all but black-and-white fashion, into two categories, the 'good' and the 'bad' - the former being the downtrodden natives and the white liberals who support their cause, and the latter being the representatives of power, administrative and clerical.

The main agents of the plot are a young couple of liberal and reformist convictions, Fernando Marín, a manager for a mining company, and his wife Lucía, who are newcomers to the town. They develop a friendship with another couple, from the subaltern strata: the Quechua natives Juan and Marcela Yupanqui, whose home is a humble hut. This desire to breach the social norms receives a severe punishment from the authorities, headed by the governor and the priest, who mastermind a raid by third parties on the Marín couple's house, for which they subsequently fix the blame on another native, the sexton Isidro Champí, who is thrown into jail. The raid leaves Juan and Marcela wounded to death, and the Marín couple adopt their two daughters, the now orphaned Margarita and Rosalía (the 'birds without a nest' of the title). Fernando and Lucía soon find themselves harassed into quitting Killac. Meanwhile, however, Manuel, a young idealist who has been brought up in the governor's house as his son, falls in love with Margarita. His feelings are returned, and thus the

possibility is glimpsed of an ethnic and cultural *métissage* which would contribute to breaking barriers. All agree that the Marín couple will go to Lima with their adopted daughters, and that Manuel will quickly join them in order to formalise his engagement to Margarita. The Marín family's journey is complicated by a dramatic episode when their train is derailed and their lives hang in the balance, but finally they all meet up with Manuel in a Lima hotel. It is at that moment that the cruel dénouement takes place which marks the end of the novel: it is revealed that Manuel is in reality not the governor's son, but the illegitimate offspring of the late bishop of Killac, that Margarita is the natural daughter of the same ecclesiastic, that the revered bishop had cynically taken advantage of the mothers of both young people, and that Margarita will thus remain, irremediably, a hapless 'bird without a nest'.

Matto's story, while it may be called naturalist in general terms, also has a number of characteristics of a nature that may be called, as Dora Sales puts it, 'folletinesco' ('sensationalist' - Introduction, 45). The subject of clerical abuses recalls another naturalist work, the novel *O Crime do Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*, (1875) by Portugal's José Maria Eça de Queiróz, while the presence of involuntary incestuous desire suggests comparison with *La madre naturaleza* (*Mother Nature*), the naturalist novel of 1887 by Emilia Pardo Bazán from Galicia (Spain). Despite the sensationalist charge, the novel's harsh ending may be justified as dramatising the difficulty, or near-impossibility, of breaking the barriers of ethnicity and class in a deeply unequal society, however good the intentions may be. Another element which has been questioned by critics is the train crash, which some have seen as a narrative diversion adding nothing to the book's themes. In addition, within the realist and/or melodramatic narrative there occur almost constant interpolations, visibly didactic comments by the narrator/author whose programmatic intention is evident, since through these narratorial remarks Clorinda spells out her ideas on reforms such as dietary improvement for the working classes or the need for a married clergy as a bulwark against abuses.

Despite the furious reaction of the church hierarchy, Matto's novel was well received by the critics when it came out. In the second half of the twentieth century it fell into relative disfavour, no doubt because its attitude to social reform did not fit with the revolutionary discourse in vogue in Latin America at the time. More recently, with the rise of feminist criticism and Subaltern Studies, Matto's commitment to marginalised groups has favoured a resurgence of interest in her novel, and today it is frequently included on courses in Latin American literature the world over. It is also relevant to mention the always important aspect of translation, specifically into English. *Aves sin nido* appeared in English for the first time, as *Birds Without a Nest*, in 1904 in a version translated by 'J.G.H'[6]. However, as Naomi Lindstrom explains in her emended text of that translation (University of Texas Press, 1996), this first English version took numerous liberties with the text, on both aesthetic and ideological grounds, removing passages considered indelicate, reorganising the sequence of chapters and, indeed, eliminating the train crash altogether. Translation here appears as a highly ambiguous act, making Clorinda's message available to non-Hispanophone readers yet blurring that same message - no doubt seen as over-radical - in the process. Fortunately, thanks to Lindstrom's efforts today's English-speaking reading public has access to Matto's work free of those distortions.

At the same time, Spanish-speaking readers can now enter Clorinda's world in an informed fashion, by means of this first critical edition in Spain offered by Dora Sales. Her critical apparatus is extremely comprehensive, providing full factual information backed up by an evident empathy on the editor's part with Matto's feminist beliefs and solidarity with the Quechua natives. As the editor puts it, with all clarity and without forgetting the need for qualification: 'Feminismo e indigenismo, incipientes, revisables desde nuestra actualidad, pero innegablemente presentes y pioneros,

[6] These initials appear to conceal the name of J.G. Hudson (Sales, Introduction, 33n).

constituyen los dos pilares fundamentales de la novela' ('Feminism and *indigenismo*, incipient and subject to correction from today's viewpoint, but undeniably present in pioneering guise, form the two vital pillars of this novel' - Introduction, 43). In this connection, Dora Sales stresses a number of aspects of how Clorinda's text succeeds in giving voice to the traditionally silenced subaltern, be they women or natives or both. She argues that the exploitation suffered by Marcela and Juan demonstrates with all eloquence 'la totalización del abuso que sufre la cultura indígena' ('the total nature of the abuse inflicted on the indigenous culture' - 54). Equally, she shows how the native woman, in a case like that of Marcela, 'emprendedora pero marginalizada' ('enterprising but marginalised' - 54), can dare affirm her rights and resist, to the point where she centres in herself the voice of an entire oppressed people. Further, the editor indicates how the friendship between Lucía and Marcela, two women of totally different ethnic and social origins, appears as the presage of a future model of women's solidarity and as an exemplary instance of what the Italian feminists have called *affidamento* (relationships of trust and mentoring between women): 'Entre estas dos mujeres que ocupan posiciones sociales tan divergentes se produce una hermandad de género, entre la burguesa y la subalterna' ('Between these two women, who occupy such divergent positions in society, there arises a sisterhood based on gender, between the middle-class woman and the subaltern' - 54-55)'; 'La sororidad y el *affidamento* ... son prácticas de acción e intervención que pueden sentar bases para crear redes colaborativas entre mujeres' ('Sisterhood and *affidamento* … are practices of action and intervention which can lay the bases of cooperative networks among women' - 56).

This analysis of Matto's novel, proposed by Dora Sales from the vantage point of Subaltern Studies, is fully justified by the text. The validity of her positions is demonstrated, for instance, when, after the raid on her house which leads to the death of Juan, Lucía declares: '"¡Pobre Juan! ¡pobre Marcela! ahora que la desventura nos ha hermanado, mis afanes serán para ella, y sus hijas"' ('"Poor Juan! Poor Marcela! Now that misfortune has made us sisters, my tenderest solicitude will be for her and her daughters!"' - *Aves sin nido*, 150/54)[7]; or when, a little later, she affirms to her husband: '"Para mí, no se ha extinguido en el Perú esa raza con principios de rectitud y nobleza, que caracterizó a los fundadores del imperio conquistado por Pizarro"' ('"For me, (…) they have not entirely extinguished in Peru that race with principles of rectitude and nobleness that characterised the founders of the empire conquered by Pizarro"' - 153-154/58). These moments confirm the editor's reading of the character of Lucía (and through her, of the author herself) as a defender, despite her class origins, both of the women of another social class with whom she feels *made sisters*, and of the *nobleness* of the endlessly devalued original inhabitants of her country.

Additionally, and while in no way questioning the editor's positions on the aspects mentioned above, we believe it is legitimate to stress certain other facets of Matto's book which are not emphasised in the critical apparatus of this edition, but which we nonetheless believe may be of interest for understanding the text. We refer to Clorinda's treatment of Andean traditional or popular culture, and also to her presentation of the countervailing force of modern technology, in its nineteenth-century manifestation.

One of the most recurrent features of Matto's text is the presence of background details relating to the artisanal culture (mostly indigenous) of Peru. Thus, we may note how in Marcela's hut she weaves 'un bonito poncho listado con todos los colores que usan los indios mediante la combinación del palo brasil, la cochinilla, el achiote y las flores del *quico*' ('a beautiful poncho, patterned with all the colours the Indians use, combining Brazil wood, cochineal, annatto dye, and the yellow flowers of the *quico*' - 110/17); how in the middle-class house of the Marín couple there is 'un servicio de campo, todo de loza azul con filetes colorados' ('country-style tableware, all of blue china

[7] For the quotations from the novel, the page numbers refer first to Dora Sales' edition and secondly to the J.G.H:/Lindstrom translation.

embellished in red' - 109/16); or how Fernando reads the *Tradiciones* of Ricardo Palma, a book describing Peruvian customs (257/160). These details of traditional culture relate to white as much as to native characters, thus forming a link having the potential to break down barriers. This factor of the social environment, together with the numerous Quechua words which appear in the text, constitutes the popular culture as a possible unifying force in Peruvian society, and here it may be affirmed that Clorinda anticipates certain features of the portrayal, certainly much broader and more eloquent, of the popular culture of the Andes which would appear later in the works of José María Arguedas.

Another significant theme in the novel is the presence at plot level of the modern technology of the day, represented emblematically by the railway. As Dora Sales stresses, Clorinda was a firm believer in the civilising force of culture and knowledge, as a source of 'educación para todo ser humano' ('education for all human beings' - Introduction, 69): we may note, for instance, Manuel's desire to study at 'la famosa Universidad de San Marcos' ('the famous San Marcos University' - *Aves sin nido*, 186/90), the Lima institution of higher learning which prides itself on being the oldest university in all the Americas. Here, we may complement the editor's remarks by highlighting the position of technology within what may be termed Clorinda's Enlightenment discourse. As we have seen above, the episode of the train journey and crash has been stigmatised by some as a mere digression. However, we believe it is valid to insist on the train's significance as emblem of modernity: 'De súbito se oye el resoplido de la locomotora, que con su silbato anuncia el progreso llevado por los rieles' ('Suddenly the sharp whistle of a locomotive reached their ears, shrilly announcing the progress brought by rail' - 252/155-156). For Lucía and her adopted daughters, this sensation of modernity is enhanced by the fact that this is a means of transport by which 'iban a viajar por primera vez las mujeres de esta comitiva' ('the ladies of the party were going to take their first railway journey' - 253/157). It is the railway which takes them to the capital and its promises of a better future. Thus, the accident which happens out of the blue is lived as a harsh blow indeed: 'el coche de primera, desabracado por el brequero, fue a encallar en las arenas mojadas de la ribera izquierda del río' ('the first-class car, released from its couplings by the brakeman, came to rest in the moist sand of the left bank of the river' - 259/163). Nonetheless, it is the product of human error - on the part, indeed, of foreign operatives who may come to symbolise the indifference and inhumanity of international capital: '"Sí estos gringos brutos son capaces de llevarnos a los profundos!", dijo uno de los rocamboristas' (""These stupid gringos could take us down to hell!", said one of the card-players' - 264/168). We may conclude that for Clorinda technology, for all its liberating potential, will only ensure a better future for ordinary people if it is subjected to a human and responsible management: all will depend on the nature and quality of the social relations that surround it.

From this point of view and as a final comment, we suggest that the discussion could usefully be opened up to the world outside Latin America, thus situating Clorinda Matto de Turner as an important pioneer of what is today called the literature of the subaltern. It could, for instance, prove illuminating to compare *Aves sin nido* with one of the recognised examples of the social novel in Indian writing in English, namely *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand (1935)[8]. Anand, a prominent Indian intellectual and friend of Gandhi and Orwell, was, like Matto de Turner, a writer who passionately defended the subaltern members of a group to which he did not belong, in this case the Untouchables (today called Dalits), the 'outcastes' at the very bottom of the caste pyramid. The protagonist of Anand's narrative, Bakha, is a young untouchable who rejects the oppression imposed on him by society and aspires to learn English and become educated (we may here compare the role of instruction in Matto's novel). At the end, Anand embraces technology (here not means of transport, but the modern water closet which can replace the Dalit in his traditional and

[8] Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (1935). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940.

degrading role of cleaner of latrines), as the saving principle of a modernisation that can transform the lives of the likes of Bakha.

Almost half a century separates Clorinda's novel from Anand's, and the latter work itself is now more than 70 years old. Nonetheless, the curse of subalternhood still afflicts large numbers of inhabitants of the planet. *Aves sin nido*, for all its didactic or even melodramatic aspects, is a work of literature which depicts, with, ultimately, an implacable realism, both the necessity and the difficulty of a human solidarity that can transcend class and gender barriers in the cause of a better future, for all and without exception. From this perspective, this new edition of the work of Clorinda Matto de Turner offered us by Dora Sales constitutes a significant contribution to a combat which is still very from reaching its desired end.