

A dança das cadeiras: Literatura e política na Academia Brasileira de Letras (1896-1913). By JOÃO PAULO COELHO DE SOUZA RODRIGUES. Coleção Várias Histórias, vol. 9. Campinas, Brazil: UNICAMP, 2001. Illustrations. Appendix. Notes. Bibliography. 251 pp. Paper.

Following the model of the Académie Française, the Academia Brasileira de Letras (ABL) was founded in 1897 in order to congregate Brazil's most eminent writers; it remains to this day a very prestigious institution. Due to its importance in the Brazilian Belle Époque, historians of the period (including Nicolau Sevcenko, Jeffrey Needell, and Roberto Ventura) have interpreted the academy's early years in relation to its broader intellectual and cultural context. But more recently, young scholars like Alessandra El Far have turned to close studies of the institution itself. This is the case in Rodrigues's careful study, derived from his master's thesis at UNICAMP. Focusing on the first 15 years of the academy, the book critiques the academy's project as a "depoliticized" and purely literary institution. Such a project envisioned an honorary association dedicated to safeguarding the Portuguese language and Brazilian literary tradition and thus devoid of "politics," both in the sense of internal conflict and in the sense of debate about, and influence on, external political issues. The author persuasively argues that the ABL did not achieve these ideals and demonstrates both internal power disputes and entanglements in national politics. The author thus seeks to unveil a reality "masked" (p. 169) by a mystifying "discourse" (p. 130).

Rodrigues begins with an analysis of the academy's founding. He carefully examines writers' early attempts to create a state-sponsored academy and argues that they failed because the new republican regime resisted sponsoring an association partly composed of notorious oppositionists and monarchists. Founded as an independent institution (although later securing state financial aid), the academy was initially restricted to three kinds of activity, which Rodrigues successively analyzes: elections of new members to replace deceased ones, rites of passage incorporating these new members, and an attempt at orthographic reform. The author's detailed interpretation of inauguration speeches shows the tension between the proclamation of a purely aesthetic conception of literature and the constant reference to contemporary political and social issues. External politics was thus brought into the institution. Conversely, the academics' debates on the proposed orthographic reform, between 1907 and 1913, brought internal dissents and

disputes to the view of the general public, contradicting the constructed image of a harmonic gentlemen's institution.

But Rodrigues is at his best when analyzing ABL's internal electoral politics. Through an intelligent use of documents such as letters and votes, he shows the negotiations and articulations behind every ABL election in the period, which reveal the great power of Machado de Assis and his close group of associates. Moreover, Rodrigues convincingly argues that the hegemony of this group was at the root of the institution's early "depoliticized" project. In fact, the elections after the deaths of Machado and his closest allies culminated in the opening of the academy's doors to eminent figures outside the field of literature. The author sees the elections of scientist Oswaldo Cruz (1911) and diplomat Lauro Muller (1913) as landmarks of the end of ABL's initial project.

The author clearly achieves his goal of showing how politics was at work in ABL's early years. However, one cannot say the same of another goal that Rodrigues occasionally cites: of using his case to investigate "the relation between literature and politics" in the period (p. 16). His conclusion that ABL's "depoliticized" project demonstrates the retreat of writers from political and social involvement is not well grounded, because at no point did the ABL demand that its members depoliticize their practices *outside* the context of the academy. Its internal project cannot be taken as representative of the practices of its members in other contexts, let alone of nonmember authors. In fact, as Rodrigues contradictorily observes that during this period, politics and literature could hardly be distinguished (p. 44)'

Another shortcoming of the book lies in its conceptualization of "politics." I actually disentangled the two meanings mentioned above, since Rodrigues confusingly uses the term to indicate different things and treats the writers' use of the term as transparent. It falls to the reader to single out the signified of the signifier *politics* in different moments of the book, and it is difficult to differentiate its use in the sources from its use as the author's analytical concept. The study would have gained much in clarity, but especially in insight, had it examined what the writers meant by "politics" and how they constructed this category.

These problems do not subtract from the general value of the book. It is methodologically sound, based on a careful reading of sources researched at the academy's

archives and other appropriate depositories. Although it is of interest mainly to scholars of Latin America, it is refreshingly free of jargon and accessible to the general Portuguese-reading public. Rodrigues makes a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of Brazil's turn-of-the-century intellectual world by focusing on what was undoubtedly one of its most important institutions.

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