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BEYOND THE WORLD REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

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Abstract

This paper draws on a research focused on Brazilian literary life in the first half of the twentieth century. Taking up the idea that Brazilian culture and Brazilian literature must be approached as a language in itself, it aims to contribute to throwing light upon the crucial decades in which Europe's influence as trendsetter begins to fade. A survey of letters sent from abroad by Brazilian writers to their colleagues in that period will show how displacement influenced their views on literature and life and the depth of their dependence on keeping up a dialogue with home-staying literary friends. Most of the Brazilian authors living in foreign countries in the 1940s and 1950s of the last century displayed in their letters the need to remain in touch with their national literature, whereas searching to establish contact with writers from the countries they were residing in was seldom a priority.

Key-words: Brazilian Literature, Literary Life, Writers Abroad.

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On May 31, 1960, the Brazilian poet Mário Faustino sent from New York a letter to a fellow writer in Brazil, Cyro dos Anjos, in which he hoped to come to Brazil in less than a year, for he dreamt of taking part in the "wonderful Brazilian adventure". Brazil was at the time going through one of its best periods, under the democratic leadership of President Juscelino Kubitschek. Culture flourished in all possible branches and literature was taking on a new face and a new pace. So, it did not sound strange to hear that the poet was so anxious to come home again and participate in the enterprise of building a new modern country. Faustino's lack of enthusiasm for his experience abroad,[1] also made clear in the same letter, however little expected from a peripherical writer, is not unique among Brazilian writers of the twentieth century. One stumbles rather often on comments from Faustino's colleagues who happened to be living away from their homeland and displayed the same yearning to come back to Brazil, describing life abroad as almost unbearably dull and devoid of meaning.

Since when this trace has prevailed among Brazilian writers cannot be said with precision. If we acknowledge Gonçalves Dias' "Canção do exílio" (Song of the exile), published 25 years after the Proclamation of Independence, as a first manifestation, we may suppose that the feeling of doleful expatriation has been there since the time when the sons of well-to-do families used to go to Portugal to study. In a later period, however, when it was already possible to get a bachelor's degree in Brazil, travelling abroad became rather a luxury to be dreamt of. The first cosmopolitan traveler among Brazilian intellectuals was Joaquim Nabuco, who, at the end of the nineteenth century, spent long periods in the United States and Europe. Nabuco did not only enjoy being abroad, but also pursued in his youth the goal to become a French author: not just a Brazilian author known in France, but someone who wrote in French for the French. In Paris, he was in contact with George Sand and Ernest Renan, two of the most influential writers of that time. His first book was a collection of poems called *Amour et dieu*. However, he never made it as a poet, either in France or in Brazil.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Brazilian writers were quite addicted to Paris. Olavo Bilac, the most famous poet of that period, could not live without his yearly dose of "parisine": the air of Paris was a kind of medicine for him, although he never tried to write poetry in French and never became known in France for his literary work.[2] The third decade of the century witnessed a major change in literature in Brazil. With the forthcoming of Modernism, there was a move towards national roots that, to a certain extent, owed to the European avant-garde trend towards exoticism, along with a taste for new forms and procedures including the abandonment of poetic rules and highbrow vocabulary. Engaged in the construction of a native accent in literature, Brazilian modernists nevertheless welcomed European supporters in the beginning,[3] while growing progressively autonomous along the years.

Updating trips to Europe still allured those modernists who had the financial means to indulge them, but some Brazilians took the adventuresque side of the movement further, by embarking in unusual routes to Scandinavia and the Far

East. Raul Bopp went out haphazardly on a long journey that took him as far as Singapore. "I still don't know what I am going to do down there", he writes from the ship. In 1929, Jaime Adour da Câmara, following his example[4] and by instigation of two modernist friends, Oswald (de Andrade) and Tarsila (do Amaral), decides to live "dangerous adventures", sailing to Sweden and Finland, where he is surprisingly acclaimed as a great Brazilian writer.

On the other hand, at the same time, distinguished European artists and authors were landing in Brazil. Manuel Bandeira, in his letters to Ribeiro Couto, tells about the visits of Marinetti, Le Corbusier, Blaise Cendrars and Pirandello. About the Italian futurist, he says: "The poet Marinetti is unimportant" but "Marinetti the healthy man, a radiant, optimistic healthy man is fascinating. I began to like him." "What is the big deal about literature?", he comments, "Literature is for the Ronalds" (June, 1926). Apparently, Bandeira didn't meet Le Corbusier and Pirandello in person. As to Blaise Cendrars, whom he probably already knew, Bandeira mentions him in an unconcerned tone: "he is around but I did not go seek him" (February, 1926). Bandeira refrains from interviewing literary celebrities and declares, in 1929: "Coming back to literature: I don't want to write for any French review. I don't have the least wish to become known outside Brazil" (to Ribeiro Couto, 4th September, 1929). His pen pal Ribeiro Couto, who was sent in 1929 to Europe on a diplomatic mission, did not abide by the same conduct, rather the opposite. Couto may be said to be one of the few Brazilian authors who struggled to make their country's literature known abroad.

But, if anything, Couto's attitude was the unusual one among his peers. Carlos Drummond de Andrade, another homestaying poet, like Bandeira, displayed the same assertive poise, even when, some decades later, a group of writers joined efforts to nominate him to the Nobel Prize. The campaign was led by John Nist, an American critic, of whom Drummond once said (in a letter to Fernando Sabino): "Nist [...] keeps insisting on this ridiculous story of getting me the Nobel Prize when it would be so much easier to send me 5 or 10 copies of 'In the middle of the road' [a translation of Drummond's poem published by Nist] for me to hand out to friends" (16/5/1966).

The 1940s present a scenario of intensive international exchange: many Brazilian authors, most of them poets, are employed as diplomats and sent over for longer periods to European countries. Throughout this decade and the next, Brazilians maintain the same reserve against contemporary writers elsewhere, even though they value and cultivate European literature. Scores of extracts from letters give evidence to this aloofness, while showing, at the same time, a growing appreciation by foreigners of Brazilian poetry and fiction. European and North-American visitors, some of them highly admired in the international literary field, tried earnestly to create bonds with great poets and prose writers in Brazil and were met with constant hospitality and friendliness, but rarely with the return of the same wish to get better acquainted with non-natives as colleagues.[5]

Of course, there are exceptions to the rule, and such as will perhaps provide a valid explanation for the aforesaid lack of interest. Nabuco's attitude remains

unique, but with the Modernists, in the 1920s, some Brazilian writers make an effort to create an international circle of avantgarde artists. The upmost example is Oswald de Andrade, who, in his rather frequent stays in Europe, always tried to develop literary relationships, with varied success. In a letter to Monteiro Lobato, he says: "Paris splendid. Just like São Paulo", putting both places on the same level. His positive outlook in the approach of contemporary poets in Europe is even surpassed by Murilo Mendes, who made friends with some of the most distinguished names in France and Italy.

The poet João Cabral de Melo Neto, who, having lived decades in Spain as diplomat, did have convivial contact with local artists, is even nowadays appraised by the outstanding critic and fiction writer Silviano Santiago as "*surprisingly* interested" in the Iberian country. This comment comes a few lines below Santiago's statement that "While the nationalistic tone is a settled matter for most, others will work on a universalizing vision of Brazil".[6] Thus, Santiago proposes that there are two concurrent trends, a major one (the nationalistic/ aloof) and a minor one (the "on-the-same-foot" conviviality).

Before examining this hypothesis, we must acknowledge a lineage of "homestaying" writers who, not by coincidence, are the leading literary minds (or "heads of generation") for up to half a century in Brazilian literature: Mário de Andrade, Manuel Bandeira and Carlos Drummond de Andrade. For the sake of argument, it must be informed that each of them came from a different federal state in Brazil. None of the three displayed the willingness or the need to spend extensive time abroad. All of them enjoyed early and constant recognition and enduring fame. None of them could be described as provincial or chauvinist. If anything, they had a decided but unprompted influence on all those Brazilian writers who lived abroad, in spite of the distance. Of course, they did not ignore or keep away from international literature. Bandeira and Drummond translated poetry from various sources. Mário was well acquainted with contemporary German poetry, for instance. But, to recall Bandeiras' expressive words, "none of them wished to become known in Europe".

Their posture can be contrasted to that of writers from other countries, like those North-Americans who abandoned the United States to become English authors, such as Henry James, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Of course, the linguistic issue must be considered in this case. Portuguese, as a far less spoken language, was certainly an obstacle to communication with English or French speaking poets. However, Oswald de Andrade and Murilo Mendes did overcome that difficulty. If we now think of Thomas Mann's circle, when an exile in the United States, we must acknowledge that it consisted almost exclusively of similar exiles from Germany and Austria who, like Brazilian writers abroad, did not always choose to mingle with American contemporary authors. On the other hand, when Mann went back to Europe, after the war, he did not want to stay in his country of origin, Germany, choosing to settle in Switzerland, as if to state the non nationalistic character of his literature.

It can be safely assumed that writers within a given national literature will

always form networks according to shared interests, especially when they are exploring new paths. Those networks usually develop around ideas or originate from common circumstances. Virginia Woolf's group was bent on taking literature to a new level; Thomas Mann's group was drawn together by war and exile. The first well-defined network in Brazilian literature, the modernist one, originating in São Paulo but spreading, in the 1920s, over the whole national territory,[7] organizes itself around the idea of a truly original national accent. In the next decade, the leading writers in this group that did not belong to the initial Paulista core tended to settle in Rio. From then on, Brazilian's literary life becomes more and more idiossincratic, totally independent of foreign models, even self-contained in some aspects, in the countercurrent of the tendency of a minor literature to obtain legitimacy in the world republic of letters.

If we follow Santiago's indication, two major trends could be discerned in the twentieth century. The universalist one favored the creation of international networks, with partial but decisive success, by the iniciative of writers like João Cabral and Murilo Mendes and will be called here the Oswaldian trend. The nationalist, a major tendency in Brazil, responded to circumstances linked to cultural colonialism, which it tried to overcome. Symptomatically, this trend received its initial impulse through the visit of a foreign poet, Blaise Cendrars, who took part in a trip with the major Brazilian modernists to old Baroque towns in Brazil. Afterwards, the "declaration of independence" from European literature was shaped and championed by Mario de Andrade, as a famous letter of his to Carlos Drummond didactically demonstrates.[8] I will call this posture, therefore, "Mario-andradian", as opposed to the Oswaldian one.

Possibly, the difficulties of communication between Europe and Brazil during World War II favored the development in the South American country of the self-oriented position which had as its highest outcome Drummond's poetry, whose singularity defied both epigonism and exoticism. However, war alone is not enough to explain the autonomous development of a singular literary life in Brazil. Fear of "contamination", so to speak, from more imposing European literatures was an issue even before the war, as the analysis by Ronald de Carvalho, in a letter to Prudente de Morais neto indicates:

> The move of the American spirit is vertical. The move of the European spirit is horizontal. The European spirit has achieved. What is left for it to do now is to explore the conquered surface until it loses the contact with the reality built thereby. [....] Now, the American spirit has *not* achieved yet, has not conquered a surface on which to expand and unfold.[....] Wrong or not, I stand by Brazil no matter the fatalities of the whole moral and intellectual substance that composes it.[9]

Besides the ideological option, it also happened that distance from home was felt as a distraction from work that threatened to slacken the perseverance and focus demanded by literary creation. In a letter sent from London by Fernando Sabino to Cyro dos Anjos, the younger writer confesses that the most decided

effect of his colleague's praise of his latest book had been to make him ashamed of such commercial output and says that being away from Brazil had made him reach the "unshakable decision" never to write for money again:

> I was also very happy with your words about my book of chronicles, poor commercial literature that did not deserve so much attention on your part. This season in England was at least useful for me to take the unwavering decision to, from now on, standing firm in the ripe old age, never again to write anything for money or by order, even if I am forced to beg. (London, 12th May, 1966)[10]

Apart from the half-conscious withdrawing from foreign influences, there is another characteristic trait of Brazilian literary life that may be responsible for the great dependence on correspondence with fellow countrymen for inspiration and support: the unconditional appreciation of friendship. More than writers in other contexts, Brazilian writers in the 20th century envisioned literature as a collective pursuit and accordingly relied on constant exchange with one another. It can be said that they *wrote* for each other. As Mário de Andrade puts it,

> What I feel or what I do is – while I write, or read, I have my room inhabited by often one, seldom two friends who stay there (I swear they do), reading over my shoulder what I write, giving advice, guiding me, contradicting me in order to strengthen, for the sake of friendship and engagement, my argumentation. That feels good..."[11]

The French theorist Didier Alexandre distinguishes between two models of literary life. One refers to the topic of the solitary writer, epitomized in Marguerite Duras, who once compared writing with "being in a hole, deep down, in an almost irrevocable loneliness" (2013, 241). The other model, well represented in France by Paul Claudel, is characterized by "collective concerns". According to Alexandre, Claudel's attitude "reveals the fundamental role played by collectivity in a history of literary life written day by day" (243). Claudel knew that a text does not become a literary work except through the legitimation of a community.

In Brazil, the second model would be the rule throughout the twentieth century, while the solitary writer remained the exception. Even Clarice Lispector, often considered an aloof personality, was frequently in contact with four or five fellow writers, either in person or by mail, since the beginning of her career.

That is what makes postal correspondence a most valuable asset of Brazilian literature. While other national literatures encompass a considerable amount of private journals, Brazil's provides instead a large corpus of significant letters between writers, evidencing the development of a veritable art of conversation without which its literature would not be the same. Silviano Santiago understood and reflected on this trait of Brazilian literature like no other critic, being himself a fiction writer as well as a theorist. It must be remembered that two major writer journals of the modernist period, *O perfeito cozinheiro* and *Turista Aprendiz* are collective or meant for the newspapers.

In this view, estrangement from home was not only often a factor of nostalgia but also gave writers the opportunity of exchanging views in a more pressing and at the same time more organized way than what could be done in face-to-face conversation. As a common enterprise, Brazilian literature in the twentieth century was bound to create engagement and commitment, expressed in letters and other autobiographic writings. Mário Faustino's words deserve to be quoted again in full on the subject:

> I count on going back to Brazil in the new year. This stay abroad has, most of all, helped me see Brazil as a whole from the distance – and what I see is good, great, human and moving. (....) When I get there, in 1961, I intend to reintegrate myself, body and soul, in the most creative and positive way I can find, into the wonderful Brazilian adventure".[12]

Notes

1. The letter contains a sharp criticism of America's society: "America seems to me now to be a politically and culturally stationary country, lover of the status quo, even reactionary. The more I know the Americans, the less I admire them and the more I regret the waste of high potential contained in Whitman - Thoreau - James - Melville and Lincoln, Jefferson, Roosevelt - puritanism and capitalist materialism seem to have put these people to waste. I pray to the gods that I may be proven wrong and that they reserve me a pleasant surprise." (The translations of all quotes originally in Portuguese is my own).
2. See Broca, B., 1956, 93.
3. Blaise Cendrars and Marinetti were two poets who were invited to give lectures in Brazil, the first one being responsible for the triggering of a phase of the modernist movement called Pau-Brasil. Differently from Anatole France, who stopped in Brazil on a trip to Argentina in the beginning of the twentieth century, they showed real interest in our literature.
4. In Diário de viagem, original manuscript deposited in Fundação Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro.
5. Each case must be examined on its own merits, but names like Alfonso Reyes, Gabriela Mistral, and Elizabeth Bishop can be mentioned as outstanding examples. Well respected, none of them can be said to have been widely integrated in the Brazilian shiniest literary circle.
6. "Se a tônica nacionalista na nossa literatura é questão fechada para muitos, já outros buscam uma visão universalizante de Brasil". (2003, 31).
7. See Duarte, M., 2012, on the concept of national modernist net.
8. See *Carlos & Mário* (2002, 46-92) for the letters exchanged in November and December, 1924.
9. " O movimento do espírito americano é vertical. O movimento do espírito europeu é horizontal. O europeu realizou. O que ele tem que fazer, agora, é explorar a superfície conquistada até perder o contato com a realidade que ele construiu. (....) Ora, o espírito americano ainda não *realizou*, ainda não conquistou uma superfície para se estender e desenrolar. (...) Errado ou não, eu estou com o Brasil que me impõem as fatalidades de toda a substância moral e intelectual que o representa" (Santiago, 2003, 93-95).

10. "Fiquei muito feliz também com suas palavras sobre o meu livro de crônicas, pobre literatura comercial que nem merecia tamanha atenção de sua parte. Esta temporada na Inglaterra pelo menos me foi útil para assumir a inabalável decisão de, daqui por diante, entrando de pé firme na idade madura, nunca mais escrever o que quer que seja por dinheiro ou encomenda, nem que tenha de viver de pires na mão."

11. "O que sinto, ou o que faço é enquanto estou escrevendo, e até lendo, é ter o quarto habitado, em geral um, raro dois amigos, que estão ali, juro que estão, lendo por cima dos meus ombros o que escrevo, me aconselhando, me dirigindo, me contradizendo para firmar bem, por amizade, por dedicação, as minhas argumentações. É tão bom..." Andrade, M. de. , 1976, 77.

12. "Conto voltar ao Brasil em princípios do ano próximo. Esta viagem me tem servido, antes de tudo, para ver o Brasil em conjunto e à distância – e o que vejo é bom, e grande, humano e comovente. Nunca tive tanta esperança em alguma coisa como tenho nesse momento no Brasil. Aí, em 61, pretendo reincorporar-me, de corpo e alma, e da maneira mais positiva e criadora ao meu alcance, à maravilhosa aventura brasileira." The letter goes on: "Por enquanto, aqui, medito e armo-me. Tenho procurado escrever e o pouco que tenho escrito, mesmo de modestas proporções, me enche de esperança. Falta apenas paz, unidade de espírito e essa eficiência artesanal, esse orgulho-humildade que vejo nos mineiros como o Drummond e o senhor mesmo". ("Meanwhile, I meditate and strenghten myself. I have been trying to write and the few page I have accomplished, even in modest lenght, fill me with hope. All that is lacking is peace, unity of spirit and this efficient craftsmanship, this pride-humbleness that I see in mineiros like Drummond and yourself.") (New York, 31/5/60).

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