

Ways of Seeing the Past in Literary History

ABSTRACT: This article, after presenting one of the perspectives relating to the European derivation of Latin literature and culture, will consider the issue of national affiliation, principally through the categories of "imitation" and "autonomy"/"originality," seeking to highlight certain aspects of the language and circumstances in which the unitary aspiration of the national, in its different manifestations, came into existence.

KEYWORDS: literary history, Latin literature and culture, history of Brazilian literature and culture.

As we all know, there are different ways of seeing the past. Depending on the principle governing the particular way we choose to see it, the results will be different. When we talk about the history of Brazilian literature, we can, among other options, either situate it within a wider selection of texts both temporally and geographically, an approach that characterizes it as one of the manifestations of a legacy dating back to the origins of Latin culture, or situate it within a more restricted selection, beginning in the nineteenth century and relating only to Portugal. In whichever case, the very delineation of what we refer to as Brazilian literature will also follow from the principle used to define it, and history itself, as a form of discourse, is constructed from principles or premises that are not always visible to its producers.

This article, after presenting one of the perspectives relating to the European derivation, will consider the issue of national affiliation, principally through the categories of "imitation" and "autonomy"/"originality," seeking to highlight certain aspects of the language and circumstances in which the unitary aspiration of the national, in its different manifestations, came into existence.

European Derivations in the Americas

If we begin with the wider point of view, temporally and geographically speaking, that is, with the approach that emphasizes the long-term derivation of

national literatures in relation to a Latin legacy (and consequently a European one), we inevitably encounter *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* by Ernst Robert Curtius, originally published in 1948. In this book Curtius contends that, although no period in the history of European literature has been so little known or studied as Latin literature of the High and Low Middle Ages, a historical vision of Europe makes clear that it is precisely this period, as the link between the decline of antiquity and the slowly emerging Western world, that occupies a key position (Curtius 1996). However, in this article I prefer to follow the example of the Dominican intellectual Pedro Henríquez Ureña (1884–1946), whose approach favors contextualizing literature within a wider selection of texts, both temporally and geographically, and who characterizes literature as one of the manifestations of a Latin legacy.

Ureña was a transnational man, a university professor in Mexico, the United States, and Argentina, who, even during the period of the so-called literary vanguards, published *Seis ensayos en busca de nuestra expresión* (Six Essays in Search of Our Expression) in 1928. In this book, which was contemporaneous with Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto antropológico* and Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*, Ureña defends his thesis of a long-standing Latin affiliation with geographically different European centers:

Let's accept frankly as inevitable this complex situation: when we express ourselves there will be within us, along with the unique part that is ours, born of our lives, sometimes as an indigenous heritage, another substantial portion, even if it is just the framework that we received from Spain. I will take this further: not only do we write in the language of Castile, but we belong to the Romance group of countries, the Romance linguistic family that still constitutes a community, a cultural unit, descended from that which Rome organized under its power; we belong—according to the much repeated phrase of Sarmiento's—to the Roman Empire. In terms of literature, since the Romance languages gained a full life of their own, the Romance community has never lacked a center, the successor of the Eternal City: from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries it was France, initially oscillating between the North and South of the country; with the Renaissance it was the turn of Italy; then, for a brief period, the center tended to be situated in Spain; from Louis XIV onward it was located in France again. Many times the Romance community extended its influence to foreign regions, and we know

how Paris governed Europe, and briefly the two Americas in the eighteenth century, but from the beginning of the nineteenth century rival regions, in open and lasting opposition, emerged; . . . Even politically we were born and grew up in the Romance community. Antonio Caso identifies with effective precision the three events in Europe whose influence on our peoples was decisive: the Discovery, which was a Spanish event; the Renaissance, which was Italian; and the Revolution, which was French. The Renaissance only partially took shape in Spain—in cultural forms that would be transplanted to the New World; the Revolution was the forerunner of our wars of independence. The three events belong to Romance peoples. We do not have a direct relationship with the Reformation, nor with the constitutional evolution of England, and even the independence and the Constitution of the United States gained prestige among us only thanks to the propaganda that they received in France. (Ureña, 1960 [1928], 250)

Of course, we also know that among the long-standing meanings of the term *literature* there is the Latin-language derivation, which goes from *litterae* (letters) to *litteratura* and then to all the corresponding words in Western languages, such as *literatura* (Portuguese and Spanish), *literature* (English), *Literatur* (German), *littérature* (French), and *letteratura* (Italian), among others, giving the term an intrinsic association with the written word. But we also know that, after national adjectives were associated with this term (e.g., *Brazilian literature*, *Portuguese literature*, *French literature*), these adjectives gained an enormous semantic force from the nineteenth century onward.

National Histories

In the June 1993 edition of the magazine *Le genre humain*, dedicated to “L’Ancien et le nouveau,” Maurice Olander (1993, 7) writes that in societies with a biblical tradition, the division between the old and the new has a purpose, namely to tell the providential story of humanity, creating a before-and-after narrative whose central pivot is the appearance of Christianity. As regards the histories of Brazilian literature, perhaps we can say that their purpose was often to create a before-and-after narrative whose central pivot was the emergence of the national. Therefore, the recent questioning of the centrality of the national affects the sense of these histories for today’s reader and is linked to the emergence of other theories and ways of seeing the past.

If, in the process of forging a sense of nationality, a certain overarching notion of place was created, acquiring a spatial dimension (associated with a territory) and a political dimension (associated with the nation-state), nevertheless the claim to unity inherent in this conceptualization was also contested. Sometimes what was sought was not a national collective consciousness but rather a regional one. As regards regionalisms in Brazil, it is interesting to remember that the very division of Brazil into “states” (and the changing of the names and territories of these “states”), or even the classification by “regions” (southeast, center-west, northeast, north and south) superimposed on those subdivisions, is recent. If today “regions” and “states” invoke their belonging to the national, whether to denote the insertion of local culture or to demand funding and responses to “regional” or “state” demands, this does not cancel out the invoking, in this process, of the specificity of the “state” or “region” in question. Neither should we forget the short historical duration of the terms in which these divisions and classifications are made—and not only in Brazil or the rest of South America. If we turn our attention to the European context, Storm (2003, 252) informs us that the division of France into *départements* dates from the French Revolution, while many German regions were created during the Napoleonic period. Therefore, the corresponding regional identities are, like those of the nation-states, essentially a modern creation—this even applies to the oldest regions, like Catalonia, Brittany, and Saxony.

Storm observes that in Europe the very character of regionalism—a movement that promoted the study and strengthening of regional identity—underwent profound changes around 1890. For most of the nineteenth century, the study of one’s own region was almost exclusively the work of members of learned societies or associations. The main themes of research and debate were the historical, archaeological, and geographical features of the region, and its significance within the national context. Although these societies generally professed to have a pedagogical vocation, the texts they produced and the lectures they organized were basically aimed at their members, who were recruited from a small elite of local notables.

Storm thus calls into question whether regionalism was the focus of these associations, because *the region was considered from a national perspective*. In general it was the historical contribution that each region made to the greatness of the motherland that was important, not the particular identity that distinguished the region from the whole. This was only to change at the end of the nineteenth

century, when a group of young and well-educated members of the provincial elite wanted to reach a wider public, an objective that demanded other forms of expression and social interaction. Instead of promoting scholarly studies, the new associations tried to mobilize the middle and lower classes, encouraging them to participate in essentially recreational activities. They organized excursions and festivals, creating local museums and celebrating a shared identity that did not draw on a mythical past but principally on a contemporary popular culture (folklore, handicrafts, and architecture). This awakening of the provinces, Storm argues, occurred at more or less the same time in the whole of Europe, transforming regionalism into a mass movement (Storm 2003, 253–54).

In nineteenth-century Brazil, we know that acquiring knowledge about a given region could result from wider national concerns. The proposal for the establishment of the Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Nacional (IHGB—National Historical and Geographical Institute), in the first half of the nineteenth century, was justified by the lack of an institution “responsible for centralizing vast numbers of precious documents, now spread around the provinces, and which can be of service to the history and geography of the empire” (*Revista do IHGB* 1839, 5–6).

The reference to the empire reminds us that, in the Brazilian case, the monarchy was an important element in the consolidation of the postcolonial state. Since the court was situated in the city of Rio de Janeiro, the “centralization” called for in the proposal for the establishment of the IHGB in the imperial period would effectively mean centralizing activities in that city. However, even afterward, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the interview given to João do Rio by Sílvio Romero, by then an esteemed historian and critic, continues to advocate centralizing in the capital city even discussions from and about the regions: “The function of the provinces, as I prefer to call them, from the north, south, center and east, is to produce variety within unity and to provide the capital with its greatest talents” (cited in João do Rio, 1907).

Of course, that idea of unity formed part of the movement to assert the national in a postindependence context, and various strategies were adopted that today we can examine with a more distanced and critical eye.

National Assertion, Imitation, and Autonomy

As regards the strategies for the assertion of a national identity in postcolonial Brazil, to begin with, as there was no memory of greatness or vision of national

destiny, any construct that legitimized itself as an extension of a traditional history was impossible. Since the long-standing memory was that of the colonial power, after independence the need arose to emphasize difference and autonomy, to produce another form of postcolonial historicity, starting from a point of view presented as national, which would even reinterpret the past in order to look for the origins of the present-day nation. However, the other side of the coin could not be ignored, namely that Brazil's colonial situation was unique because, in the history of European colonialism, there was no other case of the central power being relocated to the colony, with the latter being transformed into the heart of the empire. The Brazilian court itself, after independence, was successively presided over by monarchs from the Portuguese royal family, who were also responsible, to a certain extent, for the maintenance of territorial integrity in the emerging country, in marked contrast with the fragmentation of Hispanic America. Daniel Parish Kidder (1815–1892), an American Methodist Episcopal theologian and writer who published a book about his stay in Brazil in the nineteenth century, writes: “While the Spanish American republics have been rent asunder with internal strife and while blood, carnage, and revolution have not ceased to be the order of the day within them, Brazil has remained united, and, with comparatively slight exceptions, has pursued her onward course with increasing prosperity.” But he also thought that “elements of disorder exist in Brazil, which have the terrible capacity, unless effectually restrained, of starting into action, and, by their ruinous progress, throwing her fairest prospects into gloom, if not crushing forever the power of her now flourishing and almost idolized dynasty” (Kidder 1845, 403).

The formulation of new ideas about the emerging sense of nationality creatively appropriated certain European concepts and ideas, although at the precise moment when nationalist conceptions were being elaborated, in the nineteenth century, this was not clear to those participating in the process. The language and the circumstances in which these ideas and concepts were processed, being shaped by local particularities and interests, gave rise to a distinct direction for the postcolonial nation-state.

Although European post-Enlightenment and universalist ideas marked the national project (not only in Brazil), these “imported” concepts did not have the same meaning in Brazil as in their original context—that is to say, they were transformed in relation to local interests that emphasized certain aspects and chose to eliminate others, thus giving rise to a distinct configuration. In

general, the Europe that the colonies and ex-colonies constructed in their imaginary and in relation to which they positioned themselves, whether as heirs or deniers, is also a non-European construction, in which the supposed "original" concepts and ideas of the Old World could be used both to justify colonialism and to serve as the basis for emancipatory movements.

In the specific case of literature, the postcolonial perspective, aimed at contesting that of the former colonial power, also spawned the view that a supposed literary "imitation" of the latter should be overcome in order to achieve a presumed state of "autonomy." To some extent, this perspective also resulted in attributing to the former colonial power an absolute identity that supposedly gave rise to "imitations" in other colonized territories.

It is common, moreover, for an ex-colony to attribute an absolute identity to the former colonial power, from which, it is presumed, the colony derived its identity in the past, an identity that should be rejected in postcolonial states. But no identity is absolute, impervious to other cultures, complete on its own. Indeed, even the colonial powers (in fact, principally such entities) are melting pots that contain contributions from the colonies. If a certain colonial perspective signified culturally valuing the contribution of the colonial power and devaluing that of the colony, it must be remembered that, beginning with the economy, a continuing relationship of connection and interdependence characterized the two.

In this sense, there are echoes of a line of thinking, even present among Brazilian literary historians in the twentieth century, that is based on the following basic premise: in the colonial period, Brazilian literature allegedly first "imitated" Portuguese literature; then, with independence and the emergence of Romanticism, it began to develop its own voice, "autonomous," "individual," and so on.

Of course, this kind of opinion flourished in different areas of thinking, giving rise, for example, to the notion that there were universally determined and determinable stages that societies must reach in order to become "developed." Societies that did not pass through these stages and thus still had not attained a level of "progress" were accordingly thought to be comparatively less "modern" and to require a period of preparation, transformation, and patience before they could be recognized.¹

There are, of course, some ingenious variations on this theme, such as that of Roger Bastide, who argued that imitation was a political means to indicate

the presence, in the colony, of competent writers capable of creating works in the style of the colonial power:

To fully understand seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Brazilian literature and the influence that Portuguese literature had upon it, we must begin with the "colonial situation." It is not sufficient to show that the Portuguese "styles," like those of Arcadia, were passed on to the colony from the colonial power, despite the differences between the two societies, the former based on the particularist family, the latter on the patriarchal family. It is necessary to understand that the "internal environment" explains this phenomenon of [cultural] diffusion and that this diffusion is, above all, a political protest. In reality, it takes the form of a "servile copy" mostly when nativism is developing, when economic oppression becomes more difficult to bear, when in every city, in the main square, the governor's palace and the prison are erected. It is therefore a case of showing that the creoles can produce aesthetic works that are as good as or even better than their metropolitan equivalents, that the "natives" are not "barbarians" who must be ruled from outside, but rather have achieved aesthetic maturity and can govern themselves. It is thus not paradoxical that the Tiradentes conspiracy against Portugal recruited its members among the writers who most imitated Portuguese literary styles. We will find in present-day "colonial" literatures, in the English or French languages, the same phenomenon repeating itself both today and in the past. (Bastide, [1957] 2006, 266)

There are some problems inherent in this reading, beginning with the idea of the unique affiliation of Arcadism with Portugal, as the following text will show, but we should remember the larger framework of references to which it belongs (a framework that includes the thesis that, in Brazil, writers moved from the "imitation" phase, in the colonial period, to the "creative" phase, in the post-independence period, beginning with Romanticism). This framework is taken up again by the Brazilian writers of the modernist movement themselves, but from a perspective in which the former colonial power is no longer considered the primordial reference. In 1924, Mário de Andrade writes in a letter to Carlos Drummond de Andrade:

"We, by imitating or repeating French or German civilization, are primitives, because we are still in the mimetic phase. Our ideals cannot be those of France because our needs are entirely different, our people are different, our land is dif-

ferent, and so on. We will only be civilized in relation to civilizations the day that we create the ideal, the Brazilian point of reference. Then we will move from the mimetic phase to the creative one. Then we will be universal, because we will be national" (2002 [1924], 70).

In this way, moving from the "mimetic phase" to the "creative phase" becomes relevant without anyone realizing how much a series of ways of thinking, drawn from previous stages in the history of Brazilian culture and literature, is being reproduced. After Romanticism began to combat the poetics of imitation and emulation (a trend that prevailed not only in the Iberian Peninsula), a poetics that predominated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and viewed negatively the tradition of choosing a certain group of authors and works as models to be followed (concomitant with an emphasis on the need to create works that reflected not a previous textual paradigm but rather the supposed unique and original personality of the writer and the country to which s/he belonged), there also emerged a regulatory parameter for literary production. Judged according to this parameter, the poems of Arcadism, for example, came to be seen as lacking in creativity, and emphasis was placed on the implicit "mimeticism" in the accommodation of the texts to neoclassical models of writing, from which the rules for producing Arcadian poetry were said to be derived and in the light of which they were approved or rejected in the eighteenth century.

Antonio Candido clearly points out the ambiguity in the attitude of the Romantics in relation to the Arcadians, at the same time condemning them for their subservience to literary models seen as imitations of the colonial power's models to prove the existence of literary activity in Brazil before independence:

When we consider our Arcadism, we must remember that for the Romantics it was to a large extent a case of subservience in relation to the literature of the colonial power, and the latter was something that immediately following independence it seemed necessary to reject in all fields. But, at the same time, it was taken as proof of the continuation of intellectual life in Brazil, as well as a justification and source for the literary manifestations of the Romantics themselves, awakening in them, contradictorily, a great deal of pride of the genealogical kind. Thus, it functioned in the immediate aftermath, if not as an aesthetic model (except as regards the Indianism of the two epics), then certainly as a positive factor in the sense of autonomy, which then informed the cultural project of the generations contemporary with independence or which immediately followed it. (Candido, 1995, XII)

The concept of mimeticism also serves to create the idea that the former colonies always produced a posteriori, in accordance with models imported from the colonial power, ignoring the fact that a certain synchrony existed in literary production, not only between former colonies and former colonial powers but also between the latter as a whole and other nations in different historical moments.

In any event, moving forward in time, if we examine the thinking of the literary vanguards of the early twentieth century, we can observe that they often recycled and radicalized elements already present in Romanticism.

When dealing with literary movements or periods, it is interesting to note how the context for a writer's poetics projects itself onto his or her very discourse. By invoking or justifying the reasons for producing their art in such and such a way, writers frequently look to referents in relation to which the meaning of what they are producing delineates itself. Consequently, if, on the one hand, in the poetics of imitation and emulation a canon of authors and works clearly served as a model, on the other, principally after Romanticism, a very different notion of artistic production emerged. Whereas the previous poetics gave value to the past, where it looked for an example and model, the Romantics valued the aesthetics of the expression of the authorial "I," the presence of this authorial "I" in the origin of the work, the "presence" of the writer in opposition to the past of his art. This valorization would continue into the following century.

Modernists and Vanguardists

The fight against the neoclassical norms of the Romantic period is waged, among other means, by alleging that the very presupposition of producing a new classicism—with its notions of exemplarity and the use of the classics as a model—was not appropriate, since a new age demanded a new poetics. A poetics of *today* would be "better" than that of *yesterday*, by very definition. This is also a common trait of twentieth-century vanguards, which declare as obsolete all previous literary production and propose a "new" literature—their own—as the only one of value.

To a certain extent, what the artistic vanguards of the early twentieth century did was to produce a certain "description" of aspects of the past in order to deny them. On creating this image of the past, a relationship was also constructed, which could be disputed, first by questioning what was chosen to constitute the "past," then by analyzing the interests that presided over the choices that were

made, and finally by establishing the terms of a contrast with or rejection of the artistic production of the past. In some way the vanguards thus also echoed the voice that they disagreed with. Why? Because, when you attribute to any literary paradigm the function of *model*, the latter can be positive or negative. *Negative models* are those that we wish to avoid, oppose ourselves to, or be different from. However, they do not cease to be models. In other words, if you want to show your difference in relation to a negative model, it continues to be your referent, even if only so that you avoid it, confront it, or fail to repeat it.

If we wanted to find another key to unlock the relationship of early twentieth-century vanguards with the literature that had gone before, perhaps we could, instead of trying to ignore the links between the two, reconsider in this way. In fact, many groups from the early twentieth century still had as their point of reference authors and literary works from the past, but not as examples or models to be followed. Since the self-image of the vanguardist is strongly marked by the idea of his or her alleged autonomy and brilliant individuality, he or she presumably does not feel self-conscious about treating inherited paradigms with respect.

If we wanted to hazard a generalization, we could argue that a large group of twentieth-century artists appropriates "tradition" in a playful and arbitrary way, in accordance with the most momentary interests of the artistic structures they create. In this way, it seems that in replacing what was proposed in Western artistic practice until at least the first half of the eighteenth century—in other words, replacing regularity and the iterative nature of emulation, of the practices of imitation that successively appeared, but brought with them a certain comforting sense of return to an already familiar sphere—a new agenda emerges, in which even the integration of the already familiar aspires to include something of the unforeseen, the random, and the contingent. Can we say that this art of the present, without the guarantee of a regular and stable relationship with the past, loses entirely any pretension to regularity, iterability, or recursiveness? Perhaps it is more appropriate to argue that the incorporation of new elements into the artistic process itself can also constitute a form of regularity, reiteration, recursiveness, or "tradition," even if only for a short duration.

In the Brazilian case, instead of continuing to look to European "origins" for the elements that would later be "imitated," perhaps it would be more productive to study the reception of these elements in Brazil. In other words, if the cultural product configured in the supposed "origins" is not predominantly determined

by an export preoccupation in its very “place of origin” (Portugal, France, and so on) but by the reasoning, interests, and motivations of the cultural producers who choose what suits, adjusts, or harmonizes with the product’s needs and interests in the context of cultural reception in the (ex-)colonies, then greater attention must be given to the latter.

This context of reception is in some way made up of public networks of meaning, in which symbolically mediated interpretations emerge, including interpretations about what the “place of origin” in question signifies. We know that neither the real Portugal nor the real France nor the real Europe corresponds to either the image of the *colonial power* or that of the *absolute origin of emancipatory thought* that served as a basis for the decolonization movements. But it is not a question of Portugal, France, or Europe as such but rather of the meanings attributed to these places in the reception contexts, in the different historical moments in which the appropriation and circulation of cultural elements from abroad took place. Thus, the interests that affected the importation of these elements can be studied. The very context in relation to which writers and readers in Brazil interpret their experiences (and the texts they read), as well as direct their actions, is always in some way derived from locally rooted preconceptions that contribute to the choices made.

To conclude, we can consider yet another alternative, already put forward by Machado de Assis in chapter XXXVII of *Esaú e Jacó* and significantly entitled “About an Inopportune Thought”: “Ideas themselves do not always keep the name of their father. Many appear as orphans, born of nothing and of no one. Each one takes them from the next, makes of them what they can, and carries them to the marketplace, where all take them for their own” (Machado de Assis, 81).

NOTE

1. For Asian examples illustrating this point, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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