Iracema: The Tupinization of Portuguese

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> The mixture of races of the Old with the ones of the New World did not take place only in the blood; it is also in the intelligence, morality, language, religion, entertainment and everyday food.
> Couto de Magalhães (152)

When José de Alencar published *Iracema* in 1865, forty-three years had already passed since Brazil liberated itself from Portugal's long colonial rule, and in the literature that was being written, it had been nearly three decades since the formal rupture with the neoclassical canon. Given that for more than three hundred previous years the linguistic and aesthetic norms had been determined mainly by the colonizing metropolis, political emancipation and literary rupture were closely related. But despite the fact that they were motivated by the project of constructing an independent nation, the romantics faced much resistance, conflict and trauma as they tried to create a new literary canon, which was linked with the political moment from its very birth. Brazilian Romanticism undertook the task of establishing a language standard that would speak the soul of the nascent country, a language bursting with exalted rhetoric through which the young nation sought to define the features of its own physiognomy, to recognize and identify itself. Tepid at first, the movement grew quickly in both size and vigor, soon becoming the locus for the conception and dissemination of the national imaginary. Thus, following the well-intentioned but conventionally anachronistic early manifestations in the 1830s, came two decades of abundant production of innovative poems and novels, a creative burst

stimulated by voices of support and encouragement from the Old World. More polemical reactions, however, some of which Alencar was personally involved in, temper the effervescence of those years in interesting ways.

Joining in this same nationalist sentiment, poets and prose writers were committed to the formation of a literature that would openly distinguish itself from the Portuguese tradition that had bound it throughout the colonial period. For this, it sought inspiration in local themes, such as the exuberant nature of the tropics, the tribal, nomadic and independent life of the land's first inhabitants, and the culture shock provoked by the first indigenous contact with foreign invaders. The movement defined itself by a conscious return to origins, to the regeneration of the primary source responsible for the formation of the body and soul of the nation. With these goals in mind, the romantics rummaged through ancient documents and wills and passionately reread the chronicles of European historians and visitors to Brazil from the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially valorizing the records of the first contacts of the white man with the Native Brazilian. It was in this initial contact that they situated the inaugural moment, the day of creation of the New World to which they sought to give poetic form. And, in the interest of an even more radical originality, they went back further still, idealizing a mythic pre-history in which the native, free and independent, in permanent contact with a nature uncontaminated by any foreign substance, represented the privileged subject. According to the sentiment of the epoch, this was the genesis of the new civilization. As a result, the indigenous legends and traditions, the contact of the Native with the Portuguese, the struggles between them, and the assimilation of one by the other, were all considered an original source of inspiration, since they represented the initial formation of a national identity, as José Aderaldo Castello observes in *Polemic on the Confederation of the Tamoios and Romantic Indianism* (Castello xxvii). Alongside the attempt to elaborate a language that would apprehend and give form to this literarily unknown world, we also find attempts to construct a theoretical-ideological paradigm that would encourage and sustain the emergence of works committed to the program described above. In "Outline of the History of Brazilian Poetry" (1840) and "General Considerations on Brazilian Literature" (1844), the writer Joaquim Norberto Sousa Silva, from Rio de Janeiro, attempted to recuperate links with a pre-Cabraline poetic tradition. The mission of these essays is clearly the affirmation of the autochthonous

origin of the poetic impulse. The author identifies, in the native songs of the *nheengaçaras* (indigenous bards), the "ardent imagination and spontaneity of improvisation with which the indigenous peoples manifested their poetic tendencies, which would reflect their ways, their customs and their myths, as do the songs of all peoples given over to nature who live in the most complete independence" (Silva 1859, 1860). In counterpoint to the Portuguese literary tradition which, at the apogee of its golden age, shone with the brilliance of Camões, Sá de Miranda, Antônio Ferreira, Gil Vicente, João de Barros and many others—a brilliance so extraordinary that it could have extinguished the desire to create a native poetry—Sousa Silva joined his voice to those of European authors like Alexandre Herculano and Ferdinand Denis, who stimulated the new poets to work with American themes and timbres. Antônio Gonçalves Dias, a poet from Maranhão who was of mixed Native and Portuguese blood, was the first to respond competently to these challenges. Under the label "American Poetry," which appeared in his book *Primeiros Cantos* in 1846, the poet began inventing the rules of a new discourse, synthesized with the nationalist anxieties of the moment. Taking up the eighteenth-century Indianist theme once again, Gonçalves Dias was able to fashion it to the contemporary climate, and his contribution was decisive in making Indianism the emblem of a literature engaged in the project of national formation.[1] The Native of the "American Poems," in rhythms punctuated like martial cadences, highlights the heroic figure of the valiant warrior, even as he laments in a minor key the solitude of the *mestiço*, abandoned and discriminated against within his own tribe. The most lasting poetic feat of Gonçalves Dias was that, as a poet of native blood, he knew the language, customs and tradition of the Tupi-Guarani tribes; he was thus able to inaugurate a standard of poetic language whose melodies and idealizing projections would become a model of the proper diction for Brazilian poetry. If we add to this accomplishment, extraordinary in itself, the serialized novels of Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and Manuel Antônio de Almeida, and the hilarious comedies of manners of the playwright Martins Pena, we will have laid the scene for the entrance of José de Alencar onto the stage of Brazilian letters.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, as it is well-known, the city of Rio de Janeiro was the only South American metropolis whose demographic density and cultural apparatus was sufficient to support a vigorous burst in fictional production marked with its own unique characteristics. It is in this

context that, in 1857, *O Guarani* explodes onto the scene, a novel adapted to the tropical heat, seasoned with local color, and with a lively plot that moves through space and time in a fantastical manner, narrating the romantic passions and chivalrous adventures of a Native hero. Alongside the placement of a patriarchal family in a noble and solemn framework, Alencar presents a paradisiacal scenery for the emergence of the heroic figure of Peri, the model of the "good savage," patterned after the types provided by Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand and Cooper. And just as Gonçalves Dias had refined his poetic diction through the diapason of a musical composition, cadenced by the pulse of fiery epics and lyrical confessions, so José de Alencar gave his prose the easy fluency of a melodic prosody. Thanks to these resources, it is as if the rudenesses of agrarian life and the cruel shocks between nomadic primitivism and a patriarchy walled up in its conventional self-sufficiency are dissolved in a froth of gentle language. Tempered in the arduous polemic against Gonçalves Magalhães—an academic poet favored by the court of Emperor Dom Pedro II—and trained in the art of spinning novelistic plots and weaving involving fables, Alencar prepares for the great leap forward in quality that would come with the publication of *Iracema*. He is fascinated by the "vigor of the language" and the "colorful images unique to the children of nature," as he writes in the seventh letter of *The Confederation of Tamoios* (50-58). With *Iracema*, Alencar perfects the art of the word, becoming the founder of a fictional prose with Brazilian accent, so to speak. While *O Guarani* was the first sign of this new movement, *Iracema* epitomizes its diction. A mixture of poetry and prose, song and declamation, exhausting every resource of poetic efficacy and compactness of language, the text brings together an historical plot with the legend of a primitive imaginary full of epic-lyrical fantasy, complete with details from nature and documentary notes. *Iracema*'s prose is the offspring of the marriage between Brazilian Portuguese spoken with Lusitanian erudition and elements of the Tupi-Guarani language.

The Tupinization of the Portuguese language, attested to by the appearance in the text of numerous words of Indigenous origin, is an indication of the general process of miscegenation. This is the great theme that cuts across the work at every level: historical plot, fable, mythical projections, ideological implication, discourse and narrative. In fact, the meeting and crossing of two cultures is the axis of articulation for the entire work, a center of gravity that is the site of convergence for a variety of

fictional components. The episode with the white warrior from far-off who lands (Martim) in order to dominate his milieu and overcome those hostile to his colonizing intentions, and who must combat adverse forces and ally himself with those favorable to him, represents, on the one hand, the schema of domination of the strongest, of the white man with all the tricks on his side. On the other hand, the facility with which this adventurer falls prey to the charm, grace and seduction of nature and of the Native woman of this new welcoming land attests to his vulnerability to local emblematic values. Thus, he lets himself be impregnated with Indigenous ways, customs and traditions. The generic portrait of the conqueror takes on the specific face of a peculiar cultural hero, the initiator of the foundation of a new civilization. The Native woman, for her part, proves extremely receptive and permeable to the alien settler. At first hostile and aggressive, Iracema, the guardian of the sacred traditions of the Tabajara tribe, hesitates for only a few minutes before approaching the foreigner; she immediately falls madly in love with the white warrior, who has no sooner arrived than finds himself the target of the most generous hospitality of the "great Tabajara nation." Only a little time passes and the Native woman is wholly committed to the foreigner; she will not hesitate to enter into conflict with the emerging leader of her tribe and the sacred duty that ties her to them in votive dedication. Iracema gives herself to Martim and is immediately abandoned by the *jandaia*, the bird symbolizing the ethnic purity of the Tabajaras, for having violated the tribal commandments. Solely her passion, weakness or courage cannot explain the heroine's transgression. It can be seen in her behavior from the very beginning, like a plan conceived beyond the main characters' actions. Like some inexorable command, instinct or destiny seems to impel these heroes forward so that, apparently casually, one collides with the other, and both suddenly find themselves imprisoned in indissoluble chains. Circumstances seem to conspire in favor of some destiny that operates above the level of the individual. Nothing can stand in its way—neither cultural distance, nor a war among rival Native peoples, nor the precepts of Tupã. Even the old witch doctor (*"pajé"*) becomes an accomplice in this betrayal, as, in the sacred name of hospitality, he protects the foreigner from the brutal fury of Irapuã, the warrior's rival, who has been chosen to be Iracema's companion. In Alencar's fable-making, in which history, myth and legend interlace, Martim and Iracema play the role of protagonists in the first miscegenation, that of the meeting of white man and the Native woman. Their embrace thus assumes

all the implications of the founding myth of miscegenation as the ethnic and cultural prototype of nationality. The conversion of the Indigenous Poti to the Christian religion in the last chapter of the book, when Martim's friend and ally is baptized with the name of Antônio Felipe Camarão, stands in symmetrical counterpoint to the Indigenous ritual of Chapter XXIV, when Martim's body is painted with the colors of the Potiguara nation and the "young warrior of strange race, from far-off lands" becomes "a red warrior, son of Tupã," taking on the name of Coatiabo ("painted warrior") (53). Despite the observation of Silviano Santiago that "[t]he ceremony is purely epidermic and superficial, as there is no basic change in either the gestures or the customs of Martim, nor even in his way of thinking" (46), the symbolism of this scene is very powerful, and deserves to be compared with that of the baptism of Poti. The parallel correspondences signaled between the two scenes create a chiasmatic crossing of two cultural currents: on the one side, the traditions rooted in the atavistic memory of "savage" tribes; on the other, the beliefs inherited from an expansionist civilization. The mediation, operated through language, which is itself the chessboard on which the contradictions and dissonances of this interethnic dialogue play themselves out, makes the transfusions and transformations that result from this crossing all the more transparent. The best analysts of *Iracema* develop this topic at considerable length, assisted by Alencar himself, who, despite the thirty-three philological notes he adds to the text, nonetheless entered into linguistic controversies with famous philologists. Responding to the critiques of Antônio Henriques Leal, who had denounced "the monomania of creating a Brazilian idiom" (217), Alencar shows himself superior to the philologist in both linguistic knowledge and aesthetic sensibility. Contrasting the freedom of the writer with the inertia of routine and the rigidity of dogma, Alencar reaffirms the differences between American Portuguese and that of Europe, an opinion he bases on the analogous situations of English and Spanish in the New World, whose difference from their mother tongues in Europe "becomes more salient with each passing day" (239). And, rejecting the imitation of metropolitan models, he concludes that, "the truly national writer finds in the civilization of his country, and in the history already created by its people, the elements not only of his idea, but of the language that should express it" (240).

Iracema is a harmonious marriage of subject and expression, incorporating the fluency of a melodious Portuguese with the singsong sonorities of a Tupi-Guarani aesthetically adjusted to the rhythms of orality. Departing from

Alencar's ingenious notes, M. Cavalcanti Proença has exhaustively studied the poetics of the text, giving special attention to the recurrent figures of simile and apposition as rhetorical procedures that place in relief the appearance of Tupi terms. The agglutinative nature of the Tupi-Guarani language, attested to by Tupi scholars, is evident in the very title *Iracema*, a name composed from two roots—*ira* ("honey") + *tembe* ("lips"), altered to *ceme* in the formation of the composite—translated by the author in the expression *the virgin with lips of honey.* By incorporating his translation into the text, rather than explaining it in a footnote, Alencar sets up a standard of literary language that is notable for its straddling of heteroclite elements, its simultaneous undoing of two culturally differentiated semantic fields. It would be easy to suppose that both the form of Indigenous phonemes and their division into semantic units undergo violent transformations in the process of transposition into the fictional text, whether through contagion from the phonic and semantic spectrum of the Portuguese language or through the necessity of making them conform to the author's aesthetic project. When the exacting scruples of modern linguists attempted to "correct" the novelist, upbraiding him for his "simple and ingenuous technique" or his "etymological fantasy," they opened up what Haroldo de Campos rightly called "an abyss of incomprehension between the prudence of Tupinological research, necessary and respectable in the scientific realm where it belongs, and the freely inventive poetics of the amateur Tupinologist Alencar" (69). The novelist, who neither made claims to being a philologist nor aspired to scientific rigor, worked on his poetic project with a clear consciousness of the differences and virtualities that emerge in the contact and friction between two languages, of which the translator must make the best. The justification he presents as to the choice of a Portuguese term most suited to the Tupi word *piguara* gives a good measure of his aesthetic sense and of the semantic nuances he pursued.

> A guide, the Indigenous peoples called the lord of the way, *piguara.* The beauty of this savage expression in its literal and etymological translation seems quite salient to me. They do not say 'knowledgeable one,' although that term exists, *couab*, because that phrase would not express the energy of their thought. The 'road' does not exist in the savage state; it is not an object of knowledge; this expression is used on the occasion of a walk through the forest or the field in a certain direction; he who has or gives the way at that time, is truly the lord of the way. (142)

Antonio Machado's verses—*Caminante no hay camino / se hace camino al andar*—might be evoked to confirm Alencar's poetic intuition here. But intuition aside, this note reveals the novelist's preoccupation with the faithful translation of "savage" thought into "educated" language. Alencar's prose is more than a simple and superficial lexical contamination operated through the assimilation of words referring to geographical features, Brazilian flora and fauna, and Indigenous tools, garments, acts and rituals. The novelist also succeeds in transfusing modes of perception and expression that are foreign to the linguistic habits of educated speakers. This effect of estrangement, produced everywhere in his work, is largely based on the agglutinative nature of Tupi-Guarani. By combining semes that, separately, have their own use and meaning, agglutinative word formation makes the sign both semantically transparent and systematically motivated. "Each name," attests Couto de Magalhães, "gives the description of the object it represents." This affirmation can be duly proven by the ethnographer with examples like that of the well-known fruit, the *acaju* or *caju*, which can be broken down thus: *a*, "fruit;" *ju*, "yellow;" *aca*, "with horns;" or "the yellow fruit with horns;" and there, he concludes, is the description of the *caju*. (Magalhães 154). Long before the researcher/linguist/indigenist Magalhães, Alencar had already studied a vast repertory of cases that brilliantly illustrates the same thesis, as can be seen in his documentary notes reproduced in the centennial critical edition (145-160). Alencar translates practically all of the anthroponyms and toponyms of Tupi-Guarani origin that appear in his text through the apposition of analytic expressions which translate their respective meanings, thereby constructing a semantic atmosphere that allows heteroclite elements to coexist in harmony. After a few pages, this procedure ceases to seem strange and becomes familiar to the reader. This naturalization of hybridism gives certain fluency to the transit of words from one language to another, as if cultural frontiers had been abolished. Rather than linguistic assimilation, this transcultural dialogue favors a communion of sentiments between the Native and the white man, as can be seen in this conversation between Poti and Martim:

> "Why are you called Mocoripe of the great hill of sands?"
> "The fisherman on the beach, who sails in a *jangada* out where the *ati* bird flies, grows sad, far from land and from his hut, where sleep the sons of his blood. When he looks back and his eyes first see the hill of sands, pleasure returns to his heart. So he says that the hill of sands brings joy."

> "The fisherman speaks well; for your brother, like him, grew happy when he saw the mountain of sands." (104)

Here the text functions as a vehicle of mediation between different languages and cultures, annulling the hierarchy between the colonizer and the colonized and eliding cultural distances. In this discursive space, each understands the other as a brother, and they share a common feeling. The translation of the peculiarities of one language into the other becomes a dialogical understanding, and the narrator no longer intrudes so obviously on the scene. Mediating between Tupi and Portuguese, Alencar seeks a moment of equilibrium, a stasis in which alterities can combine harmonically. It is a complex process in which Tupinisms, explained on the surface of the text, indicate the verticality of the dialogic action. M. Cavalcanti Proença, in what is perhaps the most complete study of *Iracema*, analyzes in detail Alencar's position as interpreter and translator of the primitive imagination and of distinct narrative models. I will transcribe here the passage in which Proença introduces synthetically the idea he will develop throughout his essay:

> The Indigenous terms translated by appositives: "*tabajaras*, lords of the villages;" images drawn from flora and fauna: "the cut of the palm tree"; "faster than a wild emu"—are reinforced by the ornate way in which the language is presented: using paraphrase to avoid repetition, to take the place of the reduced vocabulary that the indigenous people must have; the use of simile, in search of precision for a primitive language; the use of the third person, even as the subject is speaking, a trace of the language of children and, by analogy, of the Indigenous people; even the use of classical language, to accentuate the move backwards in time, the age of the legend. (282)

Here again is Alencar, in the letter cited above, describing his own role as he defines the Brazilian poet as a translator:

> Without a doubt, the Brazilian poet must translate into his own language the ideas of the Natives, rough and coarse as they may be; but in this translation lies great difficulty; civilized language must mold itself as best it can to the primitive singularity of the barbarous one; and represent Indigenous images and thoughts only by terms and phrases which will seem natural to the reader in the mouth of a savage. (141)

Here we can clearly see the reach of Haroldo de Campos' essay, where he develops the idea of Alencar as a pioneer who made daring advances in the conception and execution of translation and of the place of the translator in transcultural dialogue. The translator is able to expose himself to "the violent impulse that comes from a foreign language" (Walter Benjamin qtd. by Campos 69). He not only operates "a heteroglossic grafting onto Portuguese, but also, in order to capture the "savage mind," brings together, on the one hand, the need to 'barbarize' (read 'Tupinize') Portuguese in order to submit it to Indigenous 'modes of thought,' and, on the other, 'that sense of rejection of an exhausted form' through the critique of 'classical language'" (Campos 73). The contamination between Tupi and Portuguese, two distinct and distant languages and cultures, happens, as it were, on the negotiating table, in a space of mutual concessions and reciprocal assent. While Portuguese "barbarizes" or Tupinizes itself according to the ways of the "savage," Tupi is "civilized," becoming Lusitanian as it meets up with the melodic phraseology of José de Alencar's literary Portuguese. Couto de Magalhães speaks of a "true crossing, which happens when one language is placed in contact with another." And, considering such a phenomenon both progressive and inevitable, he assures us that Brazilian Portuguese has been irremediably modified by Tupi and that this modification will become ever more noticeable, the heterogeneous elements being apparent only in its first, crude productions. Little by little, however, these elements will blend together; their characteristic signs will disappear, giving way to a homogenous product (Magalhães 89). Like a good evolutionist, the phases that the author of *The Savage* saw as distinct stages in a continuous process, may be found synchronically present in Alencar's text. There, the heteroclite moment provoked by the shock of first contact appears alongside the homogenous result of the moment of synthesis. Taking care to model his discourse after the Natives' speech, the author of *Iracema* forms a chain of images to translate the energy and vivacity of impressions, once more foreseeing the propositions of Magalhães in *The Savage* when he describes some features of the language of primitive peoples: "much more laconic and less analytic than those of educated peoples, the rapid flow of images suppressing and sometimes replacing the use of extended reasoning" (64). This means that, beyond questions of lexicon and of grammatical syntax, the author has "barbarized" (read "Tupinized") the syntax of thought as well by referring to figures of language that not only describe and valorize local color, but also seek ways to

make literary discourse adequate to a primitive mentality, presented in a simple and direct but at the same time imaginative style. Cavalcanti Proença develops in his own way this Alencarian impregnation of Tupi syntax.

By fictionalizing "the historic ideal of harmonious fusion of the Portuguese colonizer with the Indigenous people" (Castello xxvii), Alencar took advantage of motifs drawn from historiographic sources going back to the earliest days of national formation, which stressed the plasticity of the colonial dweller, whether in adapting to the adversities of the physical environment or in taking on new cultural habits. The mating of the Portuguese with the Native, resulting in the first Brazilian miscegenation, seems to have been a rather common practice in the first decades of colonization. In *The Territorial Formation of Brazil*, Raposo Tavares affirms: "The colonizer, for whom there was no shortage of tribes into which he could insert himself, freely chose to be Tupinized through polygamy. And not only through polygamy, but also taking on, along with the Tupi language, many other customs and cultural acquisitions" (See Caldeira 31). Capistrano de Abreu, an historian from Ceará who did extensive research into colonial history, writes:

> On the part of the Natives, miscegenation can be explained by the ambition to have children belonging to a superior race [sic], for according to ideas widely held among them, only the paternal lineage counted. Furthermore, it was not easy to resist millionaires who possessed fabulous treasures like fishing poles, combs, knives, coins, and mirrors. On the part of the foreigners, a major influence must have been the scarcity, if not the absence, of women of their own blood. This is a fact that can be observed in all maritime migrations, and which survives even after the invention of the steam engine, with the accompanying change in the speed and safety of ocean crossings. (32-33)

While they may have helped to stimulate the literary genesis of *Iracema*, none of these reasons are explicitly introduced in the union of Martim with the "Tabajara virgin." The novelist's imagination reelaborates historical information according to its sublimation by the sense of nobility with which he endows his poetic invention. And just as he ennobles the love of the Indian for the white warrior, purifying it of any pragmatic interest, so he also purifies the character and lineage of Martim. It is Capistrano who follows the trail of the Portuguese Martim Soares Moreno through the Brazilian Northeast. He informs us that, having arrived from Portugal in 1602, to

"learn the language of the land and familiarize himself with its customs," he joins the first Eastward expedition of Pedro Coelho at the age of eighteen. Since he had gotten along so well with the Natives, Jacaúna, the Potiguar chief, attaches himself to Martim with a father's love. After several visits to his friend, Martim has dissipated so many rancors and prejudices that the Native allows him to settle in Ceará territory with two soldiers. Thus, he manages to start a fort on the Ceará river, where he will resist the attacks of Natives not under Jacaúna's rule. With Jacaúna's help, he takes two foreign ships, "bare and painted with the juice of genipapo fruit, in the style of his helpers" (Abreu 69). These historical references to the Portuguese colonizer are enough to provide an historical plot interest for *Iracema.*

Juxtaposed with the fable woven by Alencar, such references reveal the sense of the transformations he puts in place. First, Alencar naturalizes the foreigner, having him be born in Brazilian territory without denying him Latin blood and a Latin name. Second, he replaces the opaque Jacaúna with Poti, an Indigenous hero nationally known for his participation in the struggles that followed in the wake of the expulsion of the Dutch from Brazilian shores. Finally, he magnifies the foundation of a small fortification, transforming it into the founding act of a new civilization. In the meantime, he takes advantage of historical givens like the learning of Native languages and the submission to the ritual of body painting, since these details, like the Brazilianization of the colonizer, serve to eliminate foreign elements and to root his poem in the ground that will make it grow. Affirming that a European would be incapable of writing this book, Araripe Júnior finds in "the love of country," the "sense of the land, which exudes from every page," sufficient reason to call *Iracema* "the most Brazilian of our books" (252). And, ever since Afrânio Peixoto, textbooks on Brazilian literature have been accustomed to read in the title of *Iracema* the anagram of America. Alencar himself once confided to a friend: "This book, then, is an essay, or rather, a sample. You will find actualized in it my ideas about national literature, and you will find there poetry that is entirely Brazilian, drawn from the language of savages" (143). A work of imagination nourished by history, *Iracema* is a poetic synthesis of literary nationalism at its inventive apex in the nineteenth-century Brazilian Romanticism. It has become an enduring work by efficiently consummating the ideas of that time. It is a classic of Brazilian letters that has continued to inspire avant-garde authors of the twentieth century such as Mário de Andrade and Guimarães Rosa.

In a burst of iconoclastic humor typical of his radical poetics, Oswald de Andrade makes a joke out of what he calls an error of the Portuguese: "When the Portuguese arrived / Under a brutal rain / He dressed the Native / What a shame! / If it had been a sunny morning / The Native would have stripped / The Portuguese" (161). In the inspired poetry of *Iracema*, José de Alencar, with historical documentation and in all seriousness, has the Native strip the Portuguese! Historians like Capistrano de Abreu, tracing the advance of the colonizer into Brazilian territory, had already shown that, in certain situations, the Portuguese had allowed themelves to be stripped by the Natives. The body-painting ritual practiced on Martim Soares Moreno proves it. Hypnotized by the inebriating effects of the *jurema* plant, Martim, a fictional character, is literally stripped by Iracema. Meanwhile, on the literary level, Alencar strips his hero of civilized habits, of the stereotypes and conventions of the colonizer, in order to clothe him in legendary ideality, transmuting him into the mythic founder of a civilization based on the principle of miscegenation. The birth of Moacir, the fruit of the union of a foreign man with an Indigenous woman, successfully crowns the heroic acts of the protagonist, who, having violated and tamed ethnic and cultural boundaries, "barbarizes" himself in order to "civilize." The apparent contradiction and conflicts resulting from this culture shock are resolved in the combination of heteroclite terms that come together in the fluency of a melodic and harmonizing discourse. Drenched in lyricism and plasticity, the narrative anchors itself in a regional space that is the cradle of the writer, from which the historical and fictional material proceeds. In this way, *Iracema* metabolizes personal reminiscence into collective memory, operating a synthesis between the local, the regional and the national. The fable that its author subtitled *Legend of Ceará* projects itself, in turn, beyond the limited moment of literary nationalism in which it was written, inscribing itself in the trans-historical time of those masterpieces which, by inquiring into the genesis of the past, provoke the emergence of new beginnings.

Notes

[1] Since the Native Brazilian is called in Portuguese "*índio*," the romantic movement grounded on the celebration of the Indigenous heritage was given the name "*Indianismo*."

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