

## Gonçalves Dias

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The Brazilian postcolonial period began in 1822, and an entire generation of writers was responsible for creating a national literature. Gonçalves Dias (1823-1864) belongs to this generation, together with some other important writers, including Joaquim Manuel de Macedo (1820-1882), Bernardo Guimarães (1825-1884) and José de Alencar (1829-1877). Their primary aim was to evidence the difference between the old metropolis and the emerging nation. Thus, they chose to focus on Brazilian themes—nature, the Natives, the way of doing things, etc.—and highlighted the differences between Portuguese and Brazilian ways of writing and speaking Portuguese.

Born in a small town in northeastern Brazil, Gonçalves Dias was the son of a Portuguese shopkeeper and a mestizo woman. During his childhood he worked in his father's shop, but later he was sent to study Law at Coimbra University, then the most prestigious higher education institution in Portugal. After graduating in 1844, he returned to Brazil and, after a short stay in Maranhão, settled down in Rio de Janeiro, then Brazil's most important city. There, he made a career as a public servant, first as a teacher, later as an expert in ethnography and education, appointed to scientific missions in his own country and abroad.

*Primeiros Cantos* (1847), his first book, brought him early recognition, and he was praised as an example of what the literature of the new nation should be. Even the well-known Portuguese writer Alexandre Herculano said: "*Primeiros Cantos* is a beautiful book, it is the inspiration of a great poet" (Dias, *Poesia* 99). It is little wonder that Gonçalves Dias would in later editions publish Herculano's review as a preface to his *Primeiros Cantos*.

His subsequent publications further confirmed his reputation and made him one of the most distinguished Brazilian poets of his time. Nevertheless, although he had a successful career, his personal life was chaotic. He fell in love with the cousin of his best friend, Ana Amélia Ferreira do Vale and wanted to marry her, but her mother would not accept him. He then married another woman, Olímpia Coriolana da Costa, but they were not happy together; as a result, he made himself available for traveling all over the country and abroad on scientific missions, which kept him away from home for long periods at a time. In 1864, while he was returning from one of these missions in Europe, there was a shipwreck. Everyone survived, except for Gonçalves Dias.

### Gonçalves Dias' Poetry

Although Gonçalves Dias was the author of a number of ethnographic essays, literary criticism and plays, he is mostly known today for his poetry. As a poet, he managed to achieve a special blend of nationalism and personal inflection. Very early in his career, he claims in the introduction to *Primeiros Cantos* that he had written the poems for himself, not for other people. If his work happened to please others, it would please him, but if not, he would be satisfied with just having written them.

Because he did not want to follow conventional rules, he also said it was his personal preference to have no symmetrical stanzas in his poems. Instead of following the traditional norms, he decided to take advantage of whatever rhythmical resources seemed to suit his objectives (*Poesia* 103). In fact, he had a deep knowledge of Portuguese poetic conventions and a talent to explore new ways of writing. He was thus able to produce some of the most original poems in Brazilian literature in terms of rhythmic and musical texture. This is also why his poems are so difficult to translate without losing this original quality. Therefore, I will only provide literal translations of the lines that I specifically will analyze; otherwise I will quote the poems in Portuguese.

Perhaps his most famous poem is "Canção do exílio," a perfect example of this blend of nationalism and personal inflection, and also of the poet's musical skills:

#### Canção do Exílio

Kennst du das Land, wo die Citronen blühen,  
Im dunkeln Laub die Gold-Orangen glühen,

Kennst du es wohl?—Dahin, dahin!  
 Möcht' ich...ziehn.  
 Goethe<sup>1</sup>

Minha terra tem palmeiras,  
 Onde canta o Sabiá;  
 As aves, que aqui gorjeiam,  
 Não gorjeiam como lá.

Nosso céu tem mais estrelas,  
 Nossas várzeas têm mais flores,  
 Nossos bosques têm mais vida,  
 Nossa vida mais amores.

Em cismar, sozinho à noite,  
 Mais prazer encontro eu lá;  
 Minha terra tem palmeiras,  
 Onde canta o Sabiá.

Minha terra tem primores,  
 Que tais não encontro eu cá;  
 Em cismar—sozinho, à noite—  
 Mais prazer encontro eu lá;  
 Minha terra tem palmeiras,  
 Onde canta o Sabiá.

Não permita Deus que eu morra,  
 Sem que eu volte para lá;  
 Sem que desfrute os primores  
 Que não encontro por cá;  
 Sem qu'inda aviste as palmeiras,  
 Onde canta o sabiá. (*Poesia* 105)

Coimbra - Julho 1843

This poem is one of the single most influential pieces of writing in Brazilian literature and has been repeated, quoted or re-written by many important authors since then. Let me provide a selection of these instances.

**Casimiro de Abreu**

Se eu tenho de morrer na flor dos anos,  
 Meu Deus! Não seja já;  
 Eu quero ouvir na laranjeira, à tarde,  
 Cantar o sabiá! (Abreu 51)

**Oswald de Andrade**

Mínha terra tem palmares  
 onde gorjeia o mar  
 os passarinhos daqui  
 não cantam como os de lá. (Andrade 82)

**Murilo Mendes**

Mínha terra tem macieiras da Califórnia  
 onde cantam gaturamos de Veneza. (Mendes 31)

**Carlos Drummond de Andrade**

Meus olhos brasileiros se fecham saudosos,  
 Mínha boca procura a “Canção do exílio”,  
 Como era mesmo a “Canção do exílio”?  
 Eu tão esquecido de minha terra...  
 Ai terra que tem palmeiras  
 onde canta o sabiá! (Andrade 6)

Um sabiá  
 na palmeira, longe.  
 Estas aves cantam  
 um outro canto. (Andrade 94-5)

Although the title “Canção do Exílio” may suggest a period of imposed exile, Gonçalves Dias had not been banished from his own country when he wrote it. In fact, he was in Portugal of his own free will, studying at Coimbra University. When he uses the words “*aqui*” / “*cá*” (“here”) he is, of course, referring to Portugal, while “*lá*” (“there”) refers to Brazil. So, the word *exile* in the title expresses the feelings of separation from one’s country, and the desire to return there someday: “Não permita Deus que eu morra, / Sem que eu volte para lá” (“Oh God, don’t let me die / without going back there”).

The epigraph is taken from the first stanza of Goethe's "Mignon" and refers to a paradisiacal place where lemon and orange trees grow abundantly offering their fruits. Of course, in Dias' poem, this idyllic place shares many qualities with his homeland.

The poem is structured on a comparison between what can be found *here* (in Portugal) and *there* (in Brazil). But the result of this comparison is the obvious valorization of the qualities of Dias' own country. Notice the use of the word "mais" ("more"): "Nosso céu tem mais estrelas, ("Our sky has more stars") / Nossas várzeas têm mais flores ("Our meadows have more flowers") / Nossos bosques têm mais vida, ("Our forests have more vitality") / Nossa vida mais amores ("Our life more affection"). In short, Dias' country has a perfection that he cannot find in Portugal.

It is also interesting to note the use of first person pronouns either in the singular ("eu", "minha") or in the plural "nossa" ("our"). The singular forms "eu" ("I") and "minha" ("my") highlight the subjectivity of the assertions and their relation to the individual who declares that he feels better at night in his homeland and does not want to die in Portugal. But the plural form "nossa" ("our") emphasizes a national "imagined community," as described in Benedict Anderson well-known book *Imagined Communities*, which also encompasses the virtual addressee of the poem. Perhaps we could say that this plural form is addressed to an intended unitary subject that is to be recognized as the Brazilian people, which is perhaps why the poem became a sort of national anthem.

Nevertheless, whenever one speaks of nationalism in Gonçalves Dias' work, one of the first things to be mentioned are his poems inspired by the Native Brazilians. It is necessary, therefore, to say something about Dias' participation in the literary movement known as *Indianismo* that sought to make the Native Brazilian the prototype of a national hero.

### Gonçalves Dias' *Indianismo*<sup>2</sup>

The first Portuguese document describing their arrival in Brazil is a letter from Pero Vaz de Caminha to his king, in which he reports that the Natives were "colored naked men, without anything to cover their genitals."<sup>3</sup> But he also said they meant no evil in walking around naked, because they showed their bodies as naturally as their face. He credited this to their innocence.<sup>4</sup>

Caminha's expedition sent two Native Brazilians to Europe, and Gonçalves Dias interpreted this as a sign of what the Portuguese conquest

would be. He said the vessel assigned to inform the king about the New World had taken those Natives to Portugal against their will; ever since then, taking possession of Brazilian territory would imply a continuous attack on the Natives, performed by “colonos degredados.” In other words, criminals recruited in Portuguese prisons to board the vessels and to settle down in the conquered land, or by men of vicious character who came to Brazil only to unfold their perverted nature.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Gonçalves Dias became part of a group of writers (Gonçalves de Magalhães, José de Alencar and others) who decided to adopt the Native as a national hero. These writers generally try to represent the Native as the authentic offspring of Brazil—that is, as the one who has always lived on the land and fought heroically against the Portuguese.

Of course, the first thing these writers had to do was to react against an inherited tradition of Portuguese and European documents that represent the Native as inferior. Gonçalves de Magalhães (1860) had claimed that when a study of the history of a conquered people is restricted to documents expressing the point of view of the conqueror, who is always interested in justifying his course of action, the true story of the victims can never be adequately known.<sup>6</sup> Magalhães thus argues that “the documents written about Native Brazilians must not be accepted as they are, but must be critically read.”<sup>7</sup>

Gonçalves Dias’ most well-known poem about the Portuguese conquest, written from the point of view of the Natives, is probably *O Canto do Piaga*. Piaga is the word that designates a priest whose function, among other things, is to give advice to the tribe concerning the course of future actions to be taken. He is supposed to have magic powers to speak in the name of gods. He is also supposed to receive messages from the gods in his dreams and to interpret the signs of nature.

In the poem, a ghost comes to the the *Piaga’s* cavern and tells him that *Anhangá*, the evil spirit, will not allow him to see the signs of nature anymore and will also obstruct his dreams:

Tu não viste nos céus um negrume  
Toda a face do sol ofuscar;  
Não ouviste a coruja, de dia,  
Sons estrídulos torva soltar?

Tu não viste dos bosque a coma  
 Sem aragem—vergar-se e gemer,  
 Nem a lua de fogo entre nuvens,  
 Qual em vestes de sangue, nascer?

E tu dormes, ó Piaga divino!  
 E Anhangá te proíbe sonhar!  
 E tu dormes, ó Piaga, e não sabes,  
 E não podes augúrios cantar?! (*Poesia* 109-110)

If the *Piaga* had not been under the influence of *Anhangá* he would certainly have paid attention to the darkness on a sunny day, the shrill of an owl in broad daylight and the trees bending when there was no wind. But the evil spirit did not even allow him to dream. *Anhangá* is a devil associated with the Portuguese. In *Piaga's* dreams, the conqueror is shown as coming from the sea to kill the Native warriors and take away their wives and daughters.<sup>8</sup> He will bring slavery to the tribe, and even the *Piaga* will become their slave:

Vem trazer-vos algemas pesadas,  
 Com que a tribo Tupi vai gemer;  
 Hão de os velhos servirem de escravos,  
 Mesmo o Piaga inda escravo há de ser! (*Poesia* 111)

In the nineteenth century, Europeans justified the annihilation of Native groups in the name of “progress,” rather than in the name of religious salvation, as they had previously done. Dias seems to predict the destiny of the Natives in their encounter with European civilization. In his unfinished poem *Os Timbiras*, he claims to be the voice of an extinct people, whose grave encompasses all of South America, from the Andes Mountains to the Prata and the Amazon Rivers:

. . . —Chame-lhe progresso  
 Quem do extermínio secular se ufana;  
 Eu modesto cantor do povo extinto  
 Chorarei nos vastíssimos sepulcros,  
 Que vão do mar ao Andes, e do Prata  
 Ao largo e doce mar das Amazonas (Dias, *Os Timbiras* 5).



In his opinion, the continent was better off before the sea and the wind brought the chains and the evil men from Europe:

América infeliz, já tão ditosa  
 Antes que o mar e os ventos não trouxessem  
 A nós o ferro e os cascavéis da Europa?! (*Poesia* 530)

Of course, in Dias' time, mostly owing to the movement of Independence from Portugal (1822), there seems to have been a renewed interest not only in the identity of Brazil, but also in rethinking the colonial past through new approaches that differentiate it from the former metropolis. Gonçalves Dias' poetry could not escape from being influenced by the issues of his time. Indeed it is exactly this fascinating aspect that he represents, namely, that of the indisputably great *national* poet who tries to articulate the experiences, feelings and aspirations of his people.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ramos has provided the following translation of Goethe's poem: "Conheces a região onde florescem os limoeiros? / Laranjas de ouro ardem no verde-escuro da folhagem? / ... Conheces bem? Lá, lá / Eu quisera estar." (Ramos 64)

<sup>2</sup> 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*."

<sup>3</sup> "... homens pardos todos nus sem nenhuma coisa que lhes cobrisse suas vergonhas" (Caminha 87).

<sup>4</sup> "Andam nus sem nenhuma cobertura, nem estimam nenhuma coisa cobrir nem mostrar suas vergonhas, e estão acerca disso com tanta inocência como têm em mostrar o rosto" (Caminha 88).

<sup>5</sup> "O primeiro navio destacado da conserva para levar a Portugal a notícia do descobrimento do Brasil, e com instâncias ao rei de Portugal para que por amor da religião se apoderasse d'esta descoberta, cometera a violência de arrancar de suas terras, e sem que a sua vontade fosse consultada, a dois índios, ato contra o qual se tinham pronunciado os capitães da frota de Pedro Álvares. Fizera-se o índice primeiro do que a história da colônia: era a cobiça disfarçada com pretextos da religião, era o ataque aos senhores da terra, à liberdade dos índios; eram colonos degradados, condenados à morte, ou espíritos baixos e viciados que procuravam as florestas para darem largas às depravações do instinto bruto" (Dias, "Brasil e Oceania" 274).

<sup>6</sup> "Quando no estudo da história, religião, usos e costumes de um povo vencido e subjogado outros documentos não temos além das crônicas e relações dos conquistadores, sempre empenhados em todos os tempos a glorificar seus atos com aparências de justiça, e a denegrir as suas vítimas com imputações de todos os gêneros; engano fora se cuidássemos achar a verdade e os fatos expostos com sincera imparcialidade, e devidamente interpretados" (Magalhães 3).

<sup>7</sup> "Os documentos escritos sobre os indígenas do Brasil devem ser julgados pela crítica, e não aceitos cegamente" (Magalhães 3).



<sup>8</sup> O colonizador aparece nos sonhos do piaga—o feiticeiro da tribo—saindo das “entranhas das águas” num “marinho arcabouço” (a caravela), e vem “matar vossos bravos guerreiros, / Vem roubar-vos a filha, a mulher!” (Dias, *Poesia* 110)

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