

Ferdinand Denis and Brazilian Literature: A Successful Tutelary Relationship

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Although in his own time, in France, he was no more than a reasonably well-known librarian, Ferdinand Denis (1798-1890) played a central role in the process of formation of a national literature in Brazil after Independence (1822)—at least, such is the opinion of the vast majority of those who have studied this issue, from the nineteenth century to the present.

Having lived in colonial Brazil for three years and—so it seems—learned the Portuguese language, Denis returned to France in 1818 as just another nineteenth-century European traveler who had made the journey to America. Soon, however, the Independence of the Portuguese colony provided him with an excellent opportunity to act as a privileged mediator between Brazil and Europe, in both the creation and the consumption of cultural products. At first he simply disseminated texts about Brazil, such as Pero Vaz de Caminha's *Letter*; nevertheless, he soon began to publish his own works, and in a few years he had consolidated his position as a specialist: he was an "Americanist," the term used at the time.

Denis' role in the history of Brazilian literature has always been emphasized, and he has been the object of many studies. Nevertheless, his work deserves further analysis, not so much with regards to the reasons why he was canonized, but rather in terms of the mechanism by means of which intercultural relations are able to create realities for the groups involved in the process, and how alterity operates in the constitution of cultural identity.

Much more noteworthy than his condition as a specialist, which made him the most suitable person to inform nineteenth-century Europe about Brazil, is Denis' project of establishing a "good" national literature, a goal that

was to be reached through the incorporation of what he thought of as “tropical reality.” This project, originally addressed to his fellow countrymen, later took on other proportions, probably as an effect of Sainte-Beuve’s review of Denis’ *Scènes de la Nature sous les Tropiques et de leur Influence sur la Poésie* (1824). In this article, Saint-Beuve, one of the most important names in French literary criticism of the day, not only pointed out the qualities of the young travel writer’s work but also raised serious objections to the actualization of the proposal he had outlined in it. The critic warned Denis of “the danger... of talking to the nation about a nature of which it is ignorant, of alluding to memories that exist only for the writer himself, so that the average reader will be forced to refer to his Buffon or his Cuvier in order to understand a line of a poem” (*Scènes* 66).¹

Two years later, Ferdinand Denis published his *Résumé de l’Histoire Littéraire du Portugal, Suivi du Résumé de l’Histoire Littéraire du Brésil*, this time with the Brazilian public in mind. It was the publication of this text that made the author a core around which an entire conception of Brazil and Brazilian culture took shape, in a process of retrospective reading that reached back to Caminha’s *Carta do Achamento do Brasil*, a work that, not coincidentally, Denis translated and published in 1821.

The part of the work dedicated to Brazil is divided into eight sections of unequal length. The first is an introduction entitled “General Considerations on the Character that Poetry Ought to Assume in the New World.” Then comes a “Summary Overview of Some Poets of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” including references to works by Bento Teixeira Pinto, Botelho de Oliveira and the playwright Antônio José, among others. A longer section follows, exclusively concerned with “José de Santa Rita Durão, *Caramuru*, Epic Poem,” containing Denis’ own critical observations and more than ten stanzas of the poem. The fourth and fifth sections of the work are titled respectively, “Basílio da Gama, *O Uruguai*, Epic Poem; *Quitúbia*. Cardoso, *Trípoli*, Latin Poem” and “*Marília de Dirceu*, Elegiac Lyrics by Tomás Antônio Gonzaga—*Metamorfoses do Brasil*, by Diniz da Cruz; Caldas, Alvarenga, Poems by M. B., etc.” The book closes with three sections of a more generic nature, concerning “Brazilians’ Propensity to Music,” “Brazilian Orators and Historians: Manuel de Moraes, Rocha Pita, Azeredo” and “Geography, Travels, etc.”

The first point that should be stressed is the massive presence, among the authors mentioned by Denis, of names later to be canonized in the history of

Brazilian literature under the label “Nativists” as the creators of the prehistory of Brazil’s *national* literature. Even more important, however, is the fact that Denis’ *Résumé* was the first work ever published to separate the literature produced in Brazil from that originating in Portugal. This was of such importance to Brazilians that, in many works, mention of Denis’ book omits the first part of the title. One might say that with a mere comma and the adjective *suivi* Ferdinand Denis achieved, on the plane of literature, what Dom Pedro I had earlier in the sphere of politics: the proclamation of Brazilian Independence. Curiously, both proclamations were verbal events.

If the separate treatment of Brazilian literature is an important feature of the *Résumé*, the formulation proposed in the book’s introduction is doubtless what made Denis such a major figure. When he stated that “*L’Amérique enfin doit être libre dans sa poésie comme dans son gouvernement*,”² Denis presented to Brazilians the possibility of an *effectively* Brazilian literature, “free” and “independent” for having freed itself from what was produced in Portugal.

It should be underscored, however, that “*doit*”—not only in this passage but throughout the book—takes on a clearly ethical connotation. To Ferdinand Denis, as he himself makes clear, political independence required that Brazilians be ever on the alert, an imperative that will be a constant presence in Brazilian thought from then on. Since the new nation, only recently freed from the colonial yoke, spoke the same language as its former mother country, some distinguishing factor should differentiate the cultural production of the two countries. According to Denis, this factor should be the inclusion, in every work produced in Brazil, of those elements seen as intrinsically Brazilian. In other words, the stamp of the tropics—and here we find once again the proposal he had made earlier in *Scènes de la Nature*—was the sole factor capable of setting off Brazil from Portugal, or, more generally, Brazil as an American nation separate from the European continent.

In another passage, Ferdinand Denis leaves no doubt about the didactic intention of his work. “Americans,” he writes, “have not always made plain in their writings the influence of nature that has inspired them; before Independence they seemed to even forget their own land in order to borrow from Europe a share of its glory. *Now that they need to found their own literature, I repeat, it must have an original character*” (*Résumé* 47, emphasis added).

Another review of *Scènes*, published in France in the still Romantic climate of the 1820s, helps us to understand not only exactly what Denis

meant by “original character” but also the major opportunity his book offered to Brazilians of his time. In his *Mercure de France* article, Ader enthusiastically endorses Denis’ proposal:

... the Guaycurú, the Maxakalí are Romantic... And this school [Romanticism], before it was established on the banks of the Seine, had flourished for centuries on those of the Mucuri. There one may hear, under the branches of the huge sapucaia trees, the plaintive notes of the *maracas*, which will perhaps someday replace Apollo’s lyre. (66)

The history of literature has borne out Ader’s prophecy: indeed, the *maraca* took the place of the classical lyre in so-called Indianism, the Romantic tendency that established the definite shape of a conception of Brazilian literature that survives to this day, even if it is no longer dominant. To depict Brazilian nature and treat Brazilian themes is still seen as the fundamental function of literature—and of art in general—by part of the wider public, though no longer by specialists. And this is not just Brazilians’ view of their own country’s cultural production, but also that of almost every foreign observer.

All of these issues have been studied in depth by a number of scholars. Although this panorama may be considered a historically proven “fact,” it points to a highly questionable conception that has rarely been interrogated, perhaps precisely because it is seen as a fact. It involves a naturalization of perceptions that are themselves culturally shaped, and it consequently renders absolute a viewpoint that, however incongruous it may seem, makes Brazilians see themselves as *exotic*.

I have no intention of once again reopening the well-known and pointless discussion concerning the supposed nationality of Brazilian culture as opposed to the importation of more or less acclimated foreign ideas, a discussion that leads nowhere except to a hardening of polarities. The important point is that, in the sort of asymmetrical intercultural relations exemplified by the role of individuals like Ferdinand Denis, distortions are inevitable: the parameters dictated by a dominant culture are almost always assimilated by the dominated culture without any degree of critical reflection. Let us compare two apparently widely divergent texts in order to shed further light on this question.

In the “Preface to the First Edition” of his *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*, Antonio Candido proposes a differentiated treatment for the

various literatures, arguing that some of them amount to such a major heritage that “a man need not go beyond their limits in order to cultivate himself and enrich his sensibility,” while others require constant interchange so that they may reach the status of the former (9). According to him, Brazilian literature must be seen as belonging to the latter group, since it is “a secondary branch of Portuguese literature, itself a minor shrub in the garden of the Muses” (9).

Such a position, however, was roundly attacked 450 years ago by Joachim du Bellay in his *La Deffence et Illustration de la Langue Francoyse*, addressed to those scholars who believed that Greek and Latin were the only languages fit to be printed. To refute this contention, du Bellay, like Candido, develops his argument by means of botanical metaphors: languages, he writes, are not to be likened to “grasses, roots and trees,” some of which are born “sickly and feeble,” while others are “wholesome and robust” (12). And if in time some of them become “richer than others,” such a “felicity” should be attributed exclusively to “the skill and industry of men” (13).

What the two authors have in common is the fact that both represent cultures considered “minor” in confrontation with “major” cultures; and though the positions they stand for are different, they are on opposite poles of the same axis. It is on the axis that we must focus: the naturalization of cultural phenomena—and the use of botanical imagery is exemplary here—makes it difficult to perceive them as products of “skill” and “industry” and disguises the relativity that is inherent to the very situation of confrontation.

It thus makes little difference whether one assumes the view of the dominant culture and sees a culture such as the Brazilian as “fated... to depend on the experience of other literatures” (Candido 10) or whether one accuses the dominant culture of “arrogance” for claiming the “privilege of legitimating... its nation and abasing the others,” as du Bellay writes of the Greeks (17). The important thing is to realize that every culture is a *construct*, and that the attitude of valuing some at the expense of others is directly linked to the viewpoint one adopts in order to consider them.

Notes

¹For further analysis of the specifics of this issue, see Chapter 4 of my *Eternamente em Berço Esplêndido*.

²I quote this passage—one of Denis’ most widely quoted observations—in the original French, though others will be translated, because the many translations that have been proposed for it are widely divergent.

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