

Between Two Histories: From Sílvio Romero to José Veríssimo

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Sílvio Romero (1851-1914) has often been given the title of forefather in the history of Brazilian literature. From the title of the 1888 publication, *História da Literatura Brasileira*, that presented his literary history, Romero proposed to narrate a trajectory of literary production in Brazil, from its beginnings to the contemporary world of the author. José Veríssimo (1857-1916) arrived in Rio some years later and worked as a member of the capital city press from 1891 onwards. Veríssimo's *História da Literatura Brasileira* appeared in 1916, after his death. These two intellectuals were contemporaries, and yet the 25 years that separated their most important works mark an important, though not always sufficiently well-known, era of Brazilian literary life.

The circumstances that brought them together appear fortuitous. They were both born far from Rio de Janeiro and migrated to the capital, where they engaged in similar activities. Each wrote a history of Brazilian literature and died around 1915. However, it is their disagreements that are most noteworthy, since they argued for opposing and irreconcilable points of view. These differences reached a head when, in 1910, Romero published his *Zeveiríssimas Ineptas da Crítica*, thus deliberately offending his opponent. The era in which they were active—if bracketed by the dates of their respective “Histories,” namely from 1888 to 1916—is one of the most fertile of Brazilian literature. Paradoxically, however, it has been undervalued either as “society’s smile”¹ by Lúcia Miguel-Pereira (253), or as “Pre-Modernism” by Alceu Amoroso Lima and Alfredo Bosi—indeed, an inadequate label that incorporates a wide range of diverse and sometimes incompatible factors. An

examination of the works written by Romero and Veríssimo may help to understand the reasons for the lack of prestige that characterizes the era of which they were part.

The first historian of Brazilian literature, the title given to Sílvio Romero, took the rough trail opened up by the Brazilian Romantics: Gonçalves de Magalhães, Pereira da Silva, Joaquim Norberto, and Varnhagen. They had indeed gathered the fundamental data needed to systematize the past, not only setting in order knowledge already established, but also creating facts through the discovery of unknown authors and their works. Without this preparatory work, which Romero recognized, albeit unenthusiastically, his historical efforts could not have been successful. Nevertheless, his aim was both to verify his intuitions by using collected material and to evaluate the evolution of these according to the theoretical scientific principles developed at his time.

Romero's concern to create a history of Brazilian literature was already clear in his 1880 publication, *A Literatura Brasileira e a Crítica Moderna*. Based on Taine's notions of race, setting and time, he attempted "a systematic formulation of his critical theory" (Candido xv). In *Introdução à História da Literatura Brasileira*, published in 1881, he developed deterministic principles, proposing that racial elements had been predominant in the formation of Brazilian culture and emphasizing the role of the process of miscegenation.

In stressing race as a formative factor, Romero agrees with relevant aspects of Taine's methodology. However, this was only partially the case, for Romero also had in mind the distinct ethnic origins that played a part in the construction of Brazilian nationality: the African, the Amerindian, and the Caucasian. In contrast, the French scholar touched upon no more than European artistic expressions, which he distinguished according to nations, then also known as races. In addition, Taine, probably following Mme. de Staël, emphasized the setting as the preeminent factor. Romero refused to accept this idea. It had been a central concern to the romantic generation, for which Brazilian literature was exemplary, once poets and intellectuals had ceased to resist the influence of the fertile nature of the Americas, which was translated into texts full of "local color"—a key concept in Romanticism. To replace the role of setting, Romero proposed "race" as the decisive factor. In this methodological and ideological innovation, he underlined the contribution of the "Africans," thus positioning himself in open opposition against the *partido indianista* ("Native Party"), which had been the most

influential and fashionable movement. In emphasizing "miscegenation," he developed the concept of "a national history from the standpoint of the fight and fusion of races" (Ventura 90).

The publication of *História da Literatura Brasileira* began in 1888 and was completed in 1902; this is the edition referred to in this essay. However, there is a contemporary edition of five volumes, the result of a praiseworthy compilation carried out by Nelson Romero; it incorporates, along with the original text, a variety of diverse materials from different eras.² The prologue of the first edition makes explicit allusions to the precise moment when the book was published, namely, after the emancipation of the slaves in Brazil (1888), but before the founding of the Republic, a movement which counted on the support of the author. Dated ostensibly on the 18th and 19th of May, 1888, Romero declares his politics as being in agreement with "*autonomous and popular emancipation*" and states that he is a "sectarian of a single, free, autonomous republic, compatible with a thorough and wide administrative and economic decentralization, and also compatible with the political, spiritual and ethnic unity of the country" (xviii-xx). The production of *História da Literatura Brasileira* was integrated within these principles by avoiding the dissociation of politics from literary criticism: "The idea of an autonomous Brazil, independent in politics and even more so in literature has always inspired me. This is the initial thought underlining all my forays into the field of letters" (xxiv).

This affirmation exemplifies his actions as literary critic, literary historian and active party member. His fusion of literary history with a political framework made his work controversial, a result that he not only aimed for but achieved. The interpretations he offers are not always acceptable, the choices of certain authors reveal questionable taste, the rebuffs seem rather offensive. All of this, however, is a result of the original purpose of the publication itself, written as it was with the passion described in the prologue and which contaminates each chapter of the book. It was destined to force Brazilian intellectuals to reflect on the past and the present of Brazilian literature and culture.

Book I, focusing on the "Factors of Brazilian Literature," is devoted to theoretical and methodological questions. He expounds the fundamental hypothesis that guides his interpretation of Brazilian national life and miscegenation: "Every Brazilian is a mestizo, if not in the blood, then in his ideas" (4). The mestizo creates the "genuine Brazilian historic development"

(54), for the mestizo is “a physiological product, ethnically and historically within Brazil; this is the new form of our national differentiation” (75). It is miscegenation that is the distinguishing factor privileged by Romero, a choice that contradicted the traditional selection of nature as the most specific manifestation of being Brazilian. However, Romero included certain race-oriented concepts, in that he considered racial fusion to be a kind of degradation that should be overcome through a process of natural selection in which the strongest race, namely the whites of European descent, would prove to be the fittest.

The originality of the differentiating factor adopted by Romero did not exempt it from incorporating ethnic prejudices that were common at the end of the nineteenth century. Nor did those of his contemporaries, including Euclides da Cunha, who interpreted the massacre at Canudos as a victory of white, European civilization over “sertanejo” barbarism, since the latter consisted of inferior beings, the result of intercourse between different biological groups that had affected the genetic development of the population. However, Romero introduced new data, including the racial and mestizo factors, in his interpretation of Brazilian national life. Scholars of Brazilian culture were slow to absorb these ideas—they had to wait until the modernist explosion of the 1920s before accepting miscegenation as a positive force.

Based on positivist sociology, Romero included in “Book I” a chapter describing economic relations, in which he analyzed the political and social institutions of Brazil as a colony and as an empire. For Romero, the “state of wealth or poverty of a nation has a direct influence on the development of its literature” (94). This certainly was the case for Brazil, whose economy was characterized by foreign domination and a powerful land-owning class. Thus, in his view, the literary movements throughout the first four hundred years of Brazilian history could be reduced to Bahia’s school of the seventeenth century, led by Gregório de Matos, the school of Minas Gerais of the eighteenth century, dominated by the authors Gonzaga and Durão, and the “Fluminense” School from Rio in the first half of the nineteenth century, in which Gonçalves de Magalhães and Gonçalves Dias were prominent. According to Romero “all these isolated movements, from one or another province, were examples of a great national upheaval... a torrent still scarcely defined, defending all sorts of projects, but having a single aim, i.e., social change” (12).

His portrait of the present is melancholic, given the “complete indifference for what is a Brazilian intellectual product” (97). Romero concludes from this that “the widespread poverty of the popular classes, the lack of education, and all the abuses of a problematic civil and social system, should be included among the stumbling blocks of the development of our literature” (98). But his edicts are no less energetic. He considered that “every national writer of the present day is burdened by the overwhelming duty to tell the whole truth to our nation, even if its harshness displeases most” (99). He also proposes that “We must take up all the duties that the centuries have bequeathed us and make sure to meet them” (100).

Romero subsequently examines the four eras of Brazilian letters: the founding moment (1500 to 1750), the autonomous development (1750 to 1830), the romantic transformation (1830 to 1870) and the critical reaction (after 1870). In the 1888 edition, Romero focuses on the first two periods; Romanticism was analyzed in the 1902 edition. The final period of “critical reaction,” in which he played a role, was never written. From the 1890s on, Romero was involved in politics and distanced himself from the systematic study of literary history. His subsequent work appears in *Evolução da Literatura Brasileira* and in *Evolução do Lirismo Brasileiro* (1905); in *Compêndio da Literatura Brasileira* (1906), with João Ribeiro; and in *Quadro Sintético da Evolução dos Gêneros da Literatura Brasileira* (1909). None of these works diverge from the panorama offered by *História da Literatura Brasileira*; however, they are more didactic and less controversial. The voice of Sílvio Romero, *par excellence* the vehement polarizing force, is found in the 1902 publication, whose sociological methodology, when purged of its racist and dysphonic components, remains valid in Brazilian literary studies.

In common with Romero, José Veríssimo wrote *História da Literatura Brasileira* after he had served as a literary critic and teacher. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, to which he migrated during the first years of the Republic, he worked mainly for newspapers. He also edited *Revista Brasileira*, a culturally oriented periodical, published from 1895 to 1899. Preceded by six volumes of the *Estudos de Literatura Brasileira*, which were published between 1901 and 1907, his *História* was released in 1916, after his death, as the crowning glory of his career. Thus, while Romero’s *História da Literatura Brasileira* was an extension of his theoretical and methodological concerns, Veríssimo’s *História* is an outcome of his previous work as a literary critic, his full-time occupation. The book represents the arrival point of a journey that began

with the study of contemporary literature; it led the author to understand both the origins and the course that, from an evolutionary perspective, finally and coherently led to the present from which he began, and served also the most complete moment of representation for the entire grouping.

His introduction, dated 4 December 1912, illustrates the notion that the *História da Literatura Brasileira* functions as the final touch to his critical itinerary, complementing it. It also reveals the author's main conceptions regarding Brazilian literature—both its historical trajectory and the contemporary situation. In this sense, it occupies the same role as that of the prologue of Romero's *História*. In other words, it is the platform from which Veríssimo clarifies the hypotheses which ground the book. In the introduction, Veríssimo provides his stance concerning the question of cultural emancipation. He affirms that literature "written in Brazil" is "already the expression of a thought and feeling which should no longer be confused with that of the Portuguese" (3). He thus immediately eliminates the theme of dependence which had tormented the romantics, who had fought to guarantee the autonomy of national poetry in relation to Portuguese literature.

His belief in the self-sufficiency of Brazilian literature resulted in an approach via historical cycles. Veríssimo recognized only two periods: the colonial and the national, as equivalent to the divisions "of our history as a nation" (6). He refuted the hypothesis that subdivided the colonial era, arguing that the production achieved during this period is "entirely and strictly linked to that of Portugal" (6). This is a perspective which also placed him in conflict with Romanticism. The Romantic historians had attempted to find evidence of nativism during the colonial period, improbable given the political and cultural constraints of the time, but that they thought possible because of the influence of nature. Veríssimo is straightforward as far as this is concerned, and concludes that it is "meaningless," the result of contrived efforts "to discern examples of autonomous literary feeling" (6) in the literary expressions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The "national period," in turn, is born with Romanticism, which continued until 1870, when the exhaustion of romantic poetry led him to a discussion of contemporary elements, lingering on scientism, which he did not admire. Although his approach was radically different from Romero's, he was equally disenchanted with what he observed in the Brazilian art and culture of his own time.

A third hypothesis proposed by Veríssimo may be summed up in the following statement: "literature is literary art" (12). This view informed the

main outline of his work, which was “to systematically exclude from the history of Brazilian literature what, in this light, ought not to be considered literature” (12). This concept—similar to the aestheticism developed since the eighteenth century and which, in the twentieth century, has guaranteed literature a specific theoretical field—contradicted the dominant approaches of Veríssimo’s lifetime. Romantics collected each and every possible literary fact from the past in order to incorporate them within the Brazilian artistic tradition. Romero, on the contrary, analyzed certain paths and evaluated various tendencies, as he saw literature as a means or instrument for contemplating culture. Veríssimo operated with cuts and incisions, isolating literature because, on the one hand, he considered it sufficiently independent not to be seen as a branch of Portuguese literature; on the other, he believed that it was capable of sustaining itself without the crutches of social studies.

The chosen tripartite foundation—the autonomy of Brazilian literature following political independence, the historical division between colonial and national literature, and the concept of literature as an expression of nationalism—determines the historical route inaugurated by Bento Teixeira. From that onwards, isolated and to a certain degree discontinuous manifestations are followed, represented either by individual efforts, such as that of Gregório de Matos, or by small groups, such as that of Minas Gerais. Above all, Veríssimo is interested in national literature, which he mapped out carefully, despite the fact that he gave special emphasis to those groups that were active in the city of Rio de Janeiro. He rarely distanced himself from the perspective of the Federal Capital, the site of the previous Court, which had centralized Brazilian cultural life and in which he found his place. Perhaps because regional artistic expression had no real impact on the heart of Brazil, Veríssimo adhered to the principle of reading put forward in his introduction: “a literature... exists in so far as there are living works, books of a positive and permanent, rather than momentary and contingent value” (14). In addition, perhaps because he was more interested in quickly reaching the climax, he opens the chapter devoted to Machado de Assis in an exalted fashion: “We have now come to a writer who is the highest expression of our literary genius, the most eminent figure of our literature, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis” (304).

The end of his *História* coincides with the arrival at the peak of a trajectory identifiable by the oscillations between aesthetic autonomy and the expression of nationalism, between poetic modernization and the

indiscriminate imitation of fashionable foreigners. The latter accusation is made by Veríssimo above all of his contemporaries, whom he considered duped by their own “intellectual petulance,” “improvisation and falsehood, the thoughtless acceptance of contradictory inspirations and the ease of rash enthusiasms for new aesthetics, philosophies or literatures” (12). Machado de Assis is the opposite of these inclinations, an expression of excellence, but also, consequently, a singular and isolated figure.

Veríssimo's *História* ends in a paradoxical manner. On the one hand, it presents the work of the greatest Brazilian writer, suggesting that the course of history coincides with an ascending path that leads to the present day, setting it above all the other previous periods, thanks to the appearance of the greatest exponent of national art. On the other hand, Machado de Assis refuses the collective tendencies of the time. It is here that the critic sides with the novelist. The majority of Brazilian intellectuals have taken one path, whereas Machado de Assis and Veríssimo took another, leading to the isolation of both, especially Veríssimo, after Machado's death in 1908.

For various, even contradictory, reasons Romero and Veríssimo were disenchanted with their own time, between 1888 and 1916. One denounced the backwardness and ignorance of the day; the other expressed his disillusion. Thus, they contradicted a cliché of literary historiography, later restored by the modernists of the 1920s, namely, that the account should culminate at the present day, praised as the pinnacle of a process, both the effect and the synthesis. The two historians saw ruin and failure in the contemporary period, even though they—especially Romero—were a product of their time, which included these evolutionary ideas. Future literary history would eventually absorb the two diagnoses: one that narrates a chronological trajectory, the other that judges the present period as decadent. Modern historiography would also blend the prescribed medicine with the identified symptom, perceiving itself and its era as salvational. The historiography of Brazilian literature produced after Modernism salvaged the natural inclination of the genre to describe the present as the culminating historical moment, the outcome of a continuing evolutionary progress. For their part, Romero and Veríssimo remained imprisoned by the diagnosis that they had formulated, and that had enveloped and fixed them in the past—a silent snapshot of an era in need of revitalization.

Notes

¹ The expression "society's smile" was first used by Peixoto, *Panorama da Literatura Brasileira* 5.

² In the third edition of volume I, Nelson Romero has added "New Contributions for the Study of Brazilian Folklore," composed of three parts: 1. "Social Brazil and the Elements from which It Was Molded;" 2. "General Conclusions," (taken from the *Compêndio de Literatura Brasileira* [2nd edition, 1909]) and containing "I. The Setting; II. The Race; III. The Foreign Influx; IV. The Theoretical Paths of Brazilian Literature; V. The Evolutionary Phases of Brazilian Literature;" 3. "On Criticism and its Precise Definition." Nelson Romero begins volume II in this way: 1. "The Third Era or Period of Romantic Transformation—Theater and Novel," which consists of, "Martins Pena," "Macedo," "Alencar, Agrário, Manuel de Almeida, Pinheiro Guimarães, Franklin Távora, Taunay," "Machado de Assis;" 2. "Various Manifestations in Prose—History," consisting of a study of Martius and the "Historians;" 3. "Various Manifestations in Prose—Public Speakers and Orators;" 4. "A Literary Retrospective" (consisting of "A Literary Retrospective," 1888, and "Confrontation in Retrospect," 1904); 5. "Anti-Romantic Reactions in Poetry—Evolution of Lyricism;" 6. "Diverse Articles" on João Ribeiro, Lopes Trovão, Tito Lívio de Castro, José do Patrocínio, Barão do Rio Branco, Joaquim Nabuco, Farias Brito, Nestor Vitor and Euclides da Cunha; and 6. "Synthesis of the Evolution of Genres in Brazilian Literature," which incorporates the book with the same title of 1909.

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