A Sea Full of Waves: Ambiguity and Modernity in Brazilian Culture

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The present text is a discussion of some aspects of Gilberto Freyre's work, concentrating in particular on his first book, *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, published in 1933 [English translation: *The Masters and the Slaves*, 1946, henceforward abbreviated *MS*], which even today raises issues of major relevance for an understanding of Brazilian history.

From the outset, it should be observed that Freyre's book came out at a time when intellectual debate on Brazil's destiny greatly emphasized the issue of *mestiçagem*—miscegenation. But sex across ethnic boundaries was always seen as a problem, one that either implied biological and cultural sterility, thus hindering development, or delayed the complete domination of the white race, in this way making it more difficult for Brazil to have access to the values of Western civilization. The past was thus seen as above all a burden; because of it, Brazil could attain (to) its destiny, if at all, only in the future.

The tremendous impact of *MS* helped bring about a dramatic change in this view: there was not only a positive reevaluation of Native Brazilian and African influences but also an affirmation of the dignity of the hybrid, malleable melding of traditions that was seen as characteristic of Portuguese colonization. This argument, which gave Brazil a chance to overcome the handicap of the temporary or definitive "incompleteness" that characterized it, would not have been possible—according to Freyre himself, who got his master's degree from Columbia University in 1922—if he had not had contact with US anthropology and Franz Boas' relativistic orientation, which allowed him to separate the notion of culture from that of race and to attribute to the category of culture absolute primacy in the analysis of social life.

So it was that Freyre, swimming against the stream, redefined miscegenation and, in a way, reinvented Brazil.

This redefinition, indeed, begins with the fact that the first group to be classified as racially mixed in *MS* is the Portuguese people. Emphasizing the position of the Iberian Peninsula as a crossroads between Africa and Europe, a locus of ethnic and particularly of cultural exchange, Freyre treats the Portuguese people as a hybrid, as the product of a combination of Arabs, Romans, Gauls, and Jews, among others, a process of miscegenation that began long before they came to America.

But why is the notion of miscegenation used to account for the Portuguese people? It is one, I believe, that implies a process wherein the unique traits of each people are never entirely dissolved, so that the memory of the differences present at the process of miscegenation is indelibly preserved.

Syncretic but never synthetic, this notion allows Freyre to define the Portuguese—and, later, Brazilians—as a "wealth of contradictions" (*MS* 7) that, though balanced and brought closer together, stubbornly refuse to blend into a new, separate identity, indivisible and original. It is precisely this refusal that causes colonial Brazilian society to be seen in *MS* from the angle of polyphony and ambiguity, as

> . . . existing indeterminately between Europe and Africa and belonging uncompromisingly to neither one nor the other of the two continents; with the African influence seething beneath the European and giving a sharp relish to sexual life, to alimentation, and to religion; with Moorish or Negro blood running throughout a great light-skinned mulatto population, when it is not the predominant strain, in regions that to this day are inhabited by a dark-skinned people; and with the hot and oleous air of Africa mitigating the Germanic harshness of institutions and cultural forms, corrupting the doctrinal and moral rigidity of the medieval Church, drawing the bones from Christianity, feudalism, Gothic architecture, canonic discipline, Visigoth law, the Latin tongue, and the very character of the people. (4-5)

This "bi-continentalism," which "in a population so vague and ill-defined corresponds to bisexuality in the individual" (7), deeply affected the spiritual make up of the Portuguese, who became a people whose

> . . . character gives us, above all, the impression of being 'vague, unprecise'... and it is this lack of preciseness that permits the Portuguese to unite within himself so

many contrasts that are impossible of adjustment in the hard and angular Castilian, whose aspect is more definitely Gothic and European. (8)

This indefiniteness has the effect of making the Portuguese eminently porous, permeable, capable of adapting malleably to the most diverse cultural experiences. It is precisely for this reason that, in contrast with, say, the English, "who with gloved hand, so to speak, and preserved from more intimate contact with the natives by [rubber prophylactics],[1] direct[ed] the commercial and political affairs of India" (19), the Portuguese were able to conquer an empire not by imposing a single rule, but by adapting to all sorts of local traditions.

The Portuguese colonial tradition was therefore based on a quite specific view of the racially mixed person: not the necessary and mechanical result of a series of natural determinations, he was rather an essentially ambiguous, indefinite and ultimately unpredictable being. This unpredictability, however, was not at all to be seen as a fault: it was precisely what allowed Brazilian culture—at least since the publication of *MS*—to be perceived as endowed with a creativity all its own and to surprise the post-sixteenth-century world with the originality of the solutions it was able to devise. Because it could accommodate the most contradictory influences, this cultural experience might develop a tendency toward anarchy, but a benignant sort of anarchy, in which the concern with identity tolerated a degree of differentiation, contingency and disorder in the very matrix of social life.

Indeed, the emphasis on what Freyre calls "balancing antagonisms"—antagonisms that were, of course, intensified by the divisions and the despotism typical of colonial slaveholding—is so strong that the question arises whether there was any value or institution capable of at least alleviating them, so that the balance was maintained.

Consideration of this issue will also allow us to examine the second trait that defines Brazilian society in *MS*: the enormous importance of the role played by passions, particularly those of a sexual nature, in the creation of an atmosphere of intimacy and warmth that, while it did not resolve the antagonisms, at least made their coexistence possible.

But it must not be thought that Freyre does no more than extol the passions; indeed, he points out a number of excesses that took place inside the Big House (*casa-grande*) and condemns them in no uncertain terms. Thus, for instance, he writes that "the advantage of miscegenation in Brazil ran parallel to the tremendous disadvantage of syphilis" (70-71), "which was, *par excellence*, the

disease of the Big Houses and the *senzalas* [slave quarters]" (70). He sees the introduction of syphilis in Brazil as fundamentally a consequence of the European conquerors' obsession with "physical love."

Moreover, Portuguese sexual voracity, associated with disease, as we have seen, used slavery as an outlet, since

> . . . sexual intercourse between the European conqueror and the Native woman... took place—as later would occur in relations between masters and their female Negro slaves—under circumstances[2] unfavorable to women. [Thus t]he furious passions of the Portuguese must have been vented upon victims who did not always share his sexual tastes. (74-75)

But if this is true, then how could "patriarchal eroticism" give rise to what Freyre calls "zones of fraternization," which brought together the cultural heritages of the different—even antagonistic—groups that made up colonial society?

To answer this question, a short digression is in order. If we turn our attention to the body or—more exactly, to excrements—we may find a relevant clue. Consider the following passage, in which Freyre discusses the preoccupation with obscenity that he finds in the Luso-Brazilian tradition:

> Only in Portugal could such drawing-room foolery take place as that which a distinguished friend described for me. [He was in one of the noblest houses in Lisbon, in extremely fashionable mixed company.][3] At the supper hour it was announced that there was a surprise in store for the guests. This surprise was nothing other than the substitution of toilet paper for plates at table, and upon each bit of paper there lay a slender dark-brown sweet, cut up into small portions. Imagine such a thing among English or North American guests! They would have died of shame. But in Portugal and in Brazil it is common to jest about this and similar subjects, for we are endowed with a crude naturalness that contrasts with the excessive reticence characteristic of Anglo-Saxons. (261)

This prank, it should be said, seems to have the purpose of reminding us that everything that is degrading can also be regenerating. After all, the allusion to feces in this case may well have been intended to bring the guests together, reminding them, in a way that is quite compatible with Christian

tradition, that all are made of the same clay and subject to the same contingencies and needs.[4]

Like this curious lesson in humility, all the violence and excess associated with the sexual practices of the Big House also seem to be imbued with an essential ambiguity, pointing both to the vulgar and the sublime, death and resurrection. With its double meaning, stressing the differences even to the point of perversity, but also encouraging some fecundity and fraternization, the rule of passion necessarily allows these antagonisms to coexist in amazing closeness. This endows the experience of the Big House with an ethos of its own.

This experience, however, seems to have become a thing of the past with the reforms that, since the mid-nineteenth century, have attempted to force Brazil to catch up with the civilizing process typical of the modern West. As Freyre observes in another book of the 1930s, *Sobrados e Mucambos* (1936), there was a sort of re-Europeanization of Brazil. It happened through the fast and massive introduction of an all-encompassing, systematic frame of reference that extended its domain over all spheres of social life and proved completely incapable of coexisting with the differences, the passions, the colorful diversity typical of the colonial tradition.

Indeed, this aversion to colorfulness should be taken quite literally. According to Freyre in *Sobrados e Mucambos*,

> . . . the re-Europeanization of Brazil began by removing from our life the Asian, African or Native element that had become most conspicuous in the landscape, clothing and customs in general: all the excesses of color. The color of the houses. The color of the *sobrados* [mansions], nearly always red like cow's blood, or purple, or yellow, many of them covered with *azulejos* [glazed tiles]... The color of women's shawls and men's ponchos;... of the ribbons men wore in their hats, of the vests they sported; of the flowers girls pinned to their hair. The color of church interiors—purple, gold, bright scarlet (in Minas Gerais there were even churches—one church, anyway—with frankly Oriental ornamentation). (260-61)

Thus the variety and excess of the Big House were also manifested in an impressive array of bright, vivid colors, a profusion that

> . . . began to pale in contact with the new Europe, gradually grayed and took on a mark of exceptionalness—the colorfulness of holidays and feast days, of processions and carnival [. . . because] the black frock coat, the black boots, the

> black top hats, the black carriages blackened our lives almost of a sudden; in the cities of the Empire clothes expressed deep mourning [... a perpetual mourning,] as that of a father or mother. (262-63)

What seems to me most striking about the passage just quoted is not the austere, rigorous atmosphere that began to prevail, but the notion of mourning as "deep" and "perpetual," which stresses the obsessively consistent and all-embracing character of this European influence.

This is apparently the reason why Freyre's evaluation of this Westernizing process is often marked by irony and disapproval. Surely he would not be critical of this European reconquest simply because it was foreign, for openness to external influences was precisely one of the basic traits of the porous, flexible and tolerant environment analyzed in *MS*.

What Freyre dislikes is the fact that European values are no longer just one element among others: now they are presented as a uniform, inflexible and exclusionary model, aiming to impose a thoroughgoing order that, displacing the ambiguous and excessive colonial traditions, is reproduced, tautologically, in every sphere of Brazilian society.[5]

If this was the course taken by the civilizing process in Brazil, it seems clear—from the vantage point of a time when, save for the problem of miscegenation, the civilizing process has achieved total victory—that Freyre was, in a way, writing against the prevailing trend of his day. He clearly did not reject modernity wholesale, for he admired both the aesthetic achievements of international modernism and the advances of medicine and engineering; he was simply questioning the narrow, linear, aestheticizing form modernity had assumed in Brazil.

In fact, I believe that it is in this way that we can explain Freyre's attitude toward history, which he takes great pains to dissociate from what he again and again refers to, with marked scorn, as "mere necrophilia." Necrophilia here clearly means the study of the past for its own sake, the adoption of an antiquarian stance, the delight in dwelling among the dead while neglecting the urgent intellectual responsibilities of the day.[6]

How to knock a few holes in this consistent and linear pattern that had pervaded the entire country, so that at least some of the spirit of the past could be revived in order to coexist with modernity and temper it? To tackle this problem, Freyre engaged in a long series of activities from 1922, when he arrived from the US—he was 22 then—to 1933, when *MS* was published:

he lectured, organized congresses and was active both in journalism and in the political life of his native state, Pernambuco.

What should be stressed, however, is that Freyre's effort to revive some values of the past leaves its mark on the very way he presents his case in *MS*, his first sociological work. Freyre rejects the rhetorical conventions imposed on academic writing by the Westernizing regulation of customs and produces a markedly oral text, characterized by an irregularity, a carelessness, an imprecision even, that make it sound much more like an informal conversation than a scientific work.

One of the various characteristics of oral language in *MS* is precisely the unfinished nature of the text, Freyre's complete disregard for the need to arrive at a conclusion, to bring his argument to anything like an adequate ending. The book is made up of five chapters, taking up 517 pages in the original edition, in which the relations between the different groups that settled the country are discussed ceaselessly, and arrives at no conclusion whatsoever: it simply stops, breaks off, with no narrative sequence or even the establishment of a chronological limit for the period under study.

This point becomes even more relevant when one observes that the book's lack of an ending is in counterpoint with the enormous importance of its beginning. The first chapter is a sort of summary of the general argument of the work; the passages quoted above, about balancing antagonisms as the most prominent value in the colonial tradition, are all taken from the first few pages of the opening chapter.

These values, spelled out in the beginning of the book, are naturally reiterated throughout the other chapters; and not only this repetitiveness is much more than a mere reproduction of the issues raised in the book's opening, but above all the points established are never entirely contradicted. From this derives what seems to be the most important consequence of the use of a markedly oral tone in *MS*: since the main values of the colonial period are repeated throughout the book until the end, which contains no real conclusion, they seem to gain a sort of afterlife. In other words, it is as if they take on a certain aura of infinitude, of immortality, so that the reader is left with a suggestion that they perhaps maintained at least part of their influence and vitality well into the 1930s.

This possibility seems even more plausible if we consider the question of the work's oral nature from a different viewpoint: this is not only among the most distinctive aspects of *MS* but also one of the most stimulating objects

of study in it. Examined in a number of ways, the oral language of the text, when it assumes the careless, enthralling conversational tone mentioned earlier, directly evokes the influence exerted by slaves and the African element on Brazilian culture. After all, "[t]he Negro nurse did very often with words what she did with food: she mashed them, removed the bones, took away their hardness, and left them as soft and pleasing syllables in the mouth of the white child" (343).

Thus, writing as if he were talking, and adopting an easy, leisurely, irregular tone, Freyre wants to make clear that the popular aspects of Brazilian speech and society remain present in his own text. But his reflection could hardly be reduced to this, since he always lays claim—with much greater emphasis and virtually throughout the entire work—to aristocratic origins.

This claim, present as it is in all of Freyre's writings, is visible in *MS* particularly in a passage of the preface in which the author reproduces the following observation by the Modernist architect Lúcio Costa concerning the old Big Houses of the state of Minas Gerais: "'How one meets oneself here... And one remembers things one never knew but which were there inside one all the while; I do not know how to put it—it would take a Proust to explain it.'" Freyre takes up Costa's argument and reinforces it, adding: "In studying the domestic life of our ancestors we feel that we are completing ourselves: it is another method of searching for the '*temps perdu*,' another means of finding ourselves in others, in those who lived before us and whose life anticipates our own" (xxxvii-xxxviii).

Writing in a style that evokes the way slaves spoke even as he celebrates his ancestors, who belonged to the sugar-mill gentry—balancing antagonisms, once again—Freyre seems to assert the possibility of the survival of colonial values by presenting himself as an intellectual half-breed: a man defined by that ineluctable coexistence of different cultural traditions in his own person, in his own thought.

Freyre's links with Boas and US anthropology clearly remain quite strong. In addition, however, he also seems to imply that his analysis relies fundamentally on memory, being as it is largely founded on an intense, intimate, authentic relation with the objects he discusses.

In this way, Freyre turns into a sort of herald, or rather oracle, of national tradition, and he gives the impression that the values he analyzes are kept alive and influential through his own text—that is, to the extent

that they influenced the writing of his text. *The Masters and the Slaves* is thus not just a scholarly work but a sort of miniature Big House, a voice both remote and genuine, a legitimate representative of the experience discussed in its pages; and the author, of course, turns himself into a character in his own book.

Thus author and book are in perfect harmony and authenticate each other's validity. This is precisely the reason why Freyre's stance in *MS*, always on the verge of adopting a tone of celebration or nostalgic, even sentimental, wistfulness, ultimately comes close to what we might call a second innocence.

It is as though Freyre, in the very act of writing, experienced the very same sensations his colonial forebears did, or at least sensations that had been prefigured by them, that need not necessarily be preserved in a continuous, uninterrupted tradition, but that are preserved as a cultural alternative, as "things one never knew but which were there inside one all the while"—things "it would take a Proust to explain."

Notes

[1] I have corrected the text of the English translation. (Translator's note)

[2] I have corrected the text of the English translation. (Translator's note)

[3] This sentence does not appear in the English translation. (Translator's note)

[4] This paragraph was suggested by Bakhtin's (1987) comments on Rabelais.

[5] The tautological and aestheticizing dimension of modernity is discussed by De Man (1984). Observations by Goldman (chap. 5) and Berman (chaps. 5 and 7) are also extremely stimulating.

[6] Nietzsche's classic "On the Uses & Disadvantages of History for Life" is the basic reference for Freyre's reflection.

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