

TRADITION, TRANSLATION, TRANSCULTURATION: THE EX-CENTRIC'S VIEWPOINT¹

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Brazilian literature – and this may also be true for other Latin-American literatures (leaving aside the problem of the great pre-Columbian cultures, to be considered from a special angle) – was born under the sign of the Baroque. The idea of “birth” here is just metaphorical. It cannot be understood from an ontological – substantialist – metaphysical point of view. It cannot be understood in the sense of a quest for “identity” or “national character”, in turn seen as an entified, total presence, *terminus ad quem* to be reached after a linear, biological evolution process, based on an “immanent teleology”, according to the model proposed by last century’s “organicist” historiography.

Baroque, paradoxically, means non-infancy. The idea of “origin” here will only fit if it does not imply the idea of “genesis.” If it is understood as “leap” and “transformation”, as Walter Benjamin uses it in his book about the German *Trauerspiel* from the same period, when he emphasises the word *Ursprung* in its etymological sense.

Likewise, Brazilian literature has had no origin, in the genetic, embryony-evolutional sense of the term, as it had no **infancy**. The word *infans* (‘child’) means: “one who does not speak”. The Baroque is, therefore, a non-origin. A non-infancy. Our literatures, emerging with the Baroque, have never been aphasic, they have never developed from an aphasic-infantile limbo into the fullness of discourse. There were already born as adults (like certain mythological heroes) and speaking and extremely elaborate universal code – the Baroque rhetorical code – in a self-assured manner. Brazilian literature was already influenced by the mannerism of Camões, a poet who had in turn influenced Gongora and Quevedo, the two great names of Spanish Baroque.

(1) Translated by Stella E. O. Tagnin

Brazilian literary “nationalism” cannot be considered from a closed, monologic point of view. It cannot be explained as the projection or emanation of a national “spirit”, that would gradually unveil and reveal itself as such, until it became a full presence, in a moment of “logophonic” completeness, which would coincide with a kind of national “classicism” (Machado de Assis, at the end of our Romanticism formation period, would be, by definition, the exponent of this moment of apogee).

Ever since the Baroque, that is, since ever, we cannot think of ourselves as a closed and finished identity, but rather as *difference*, as an *opening*, as a dialogic movement of the difference, against a backgroup of the universal. Entering the literary stage is a vertiginous leap onto the Baroque scene, that is, a differential articulation with a highly sophisticated universal code. Gregório de Matos (a636-1695), a.k.a. “Hell’s Mouth”, the first great Brazilian poet, recombines Camões, Gongora and Quevedo, incorporates Africanisms and Indianisms into his language, resorts to parody and satire in a “carnivalized” intertextual game, where local elements mingle with universal “stylemes”, in a continuous hybridisation process (the hybrid Portuguese in which Gregório de Matos writes is, in turn, sprinkled with Spanish...). Like Mexican Sor Juana, Peruvian Caviedes, Colombian Hernando Dominguez Camargo, Brazilian Gregório de Matos produces a differential Baroque that cannot be reduced to its European model. After mastering the rules of the game, he explores, in a personal and even subversive way, the combinatory possibilities of the common code: an ever-moving and changing code, in its individual reconfigurations. Thus, Lezama Lima is right in speaking of the Latin-American Baroque as the art of “counterconquest”, “a great creative leprosy”. An opinion which can be compared to Brazilian Oswald de Andrade’s, who sees in the Baroque the style “of discoveries”, which rescued Europe “from its Ptolemaic egocentrism”.

This differential practice articulated with a universal code is also, by definition, a translation practice. Gregório de Matos has been accused of “plagiarism” for having recombined and synthesised two sonnets by Gongora (“Mientras por competir com

tu cabelo” and “Ilustre y hermosissima Maria”) into a third one (“Discreta e formosissima Maria”). These critics did not realise that Gregório de Matos acted toward Gongora as a creative translator (like Ungaretti in this century), while carrying out the ironical “deconstruction” of the Baroque playful machine, metalinguistically baring the combinatory engine that made it work. (and we should not forget that Gongora, to draw up his sonnets, those worked over by Gregório de Matos, had, in turn, elements extracted from Garcilaso de la Vega, Camões and from the *carpe diem* Latin poetry, in accordance with the general practice of the “imitation”, typical of that period).

Baroque, in Brazilian literature as well as in several Latin-American literatures, means at the same time hybridism and creative translation. Translation as transgressive appropriation and hybridism (or cross-breeding) as the dialogic practice of expressing the other and expressing oneself through the other, under the sign of difference. In this sense, Walter Benjamin’s thinking on “allegory” have a special meaning for the Ibero-American Baroque: “allegory” in its etymological sense of an “alternate saying”, a “saying something else”, a style in which, at its limit, anything can symbolise anything else.

The poet who best stated the view of an “ex-centric” (that is, out of centre, de-centred) literature of a Latin-American country – Brazilian literature, which in this case serves me as an example – as a transformational process of creative and transgressive translation was, I believe, Oswald de Andrade (1890-1954), during our Modernism in the twenties. Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto Antropófago” (“Anthropophagous Manifesto”) (1928), resumed by the author at the end of his life, in the fifties, in an essay reviewing the Marxist dogmatism *The Crisis of Messianic Philosophy*, is nothing but the expression of the need for a dialogic and dialectic relationship between what is national and what is universal. His motto, not by any accident, is a phonic usurpation, a mistranslation by homophony, of Shakespeare’s famous dilemmatic verse “To be or not to be, that is the question”. Oswald de Andrade reformulates this verse replacing the verb “to be” by the word “tupi” (the name of the general language spoken by Brazilian Indians at the time of Brazil’s discovery) and

proclaims, "Tupi or not tupi, that is the question..." Anthropophagy, the answer to the ironic equation of the problem of the origin is a type of brutalist *deconstruction*: the critical devouring of the universal cultural legacy, carried out not from a submissive and reconciled perspective of the "good savage", but from a brazen point of view of the "bad savage", devourer of white people, anthropophagus. "I am only interested in what is not mine," states Oswald de Andrade in his "Manifesto," proposing to change "the taboo into a totem".

This anthropophagous swallowing does not involve submission (a catechism), but a "transculturation", rather a "transvaluation", a critical view of History as "negative function" (in Nietzsche's sense). The whole alien past deserves to be denied. It deserves to be eaten up, devoured, – Oswald de Andrade would say. This is a non-reverential attitude toward tradition: it implies expropriation, reversion, de-hierarchisation. It is not by sheer coincidence that Lezama Lima can be remembered once again for trying, as it were, to read the past (the history) somehow "devouringly" as a "succession of imaginary eras", liable to be thought over by a "spermatic memory", capable of replacing the logical links by surprising analogic connections.

Thus, it seems that the remarks made by Czech Structuralist Jan Mukarovsky in a 1946 essay (reformulated and confirmed by himself in 1963, during his Marxist period) on the influence of "preferential" literatures over so-called "minor" literatures apply both to Brazilian literature and to the remaining Latin-American literatures. This matter had been approached in an *a priori* and unilateral way by traditional literary science. For Mukarovsky, this view of traditional comparative literature – responsible for the "small people complex" in Czech literature – would be a non-dialectic, mechanistic view. The image of a "passive literature", with an evolution guided by the "causal intervention of external influences", looks false to him. Influences do not act on their own in the environment in which they intervene, without presuppositions: they combine with the local context, to whose needs they subordinate. They are the result of selection and of rearticulation, they change their inflection. Hence, Mukarovsky's conclusion, "Influxes are not expressions

of the essential superiority and subordination of one culture in relation to another; their fundamental aspect is reciprocity”.

In Brazilian literature, Machado de Assis (1839-1908) is not simply the harmonious culmination of a gradual literary evolution, which had been supposedly unfolding since our nativist-coloured pre-Romanticism. His appearance can neither be explained nor foreseen as a fully mature result of a homogeneous process of “genealogical construction”, a “rectilinear process of Brazilianization”. Machado de Assis does not represent a moment of *aboutissement*, but a moment of rupture. His nationalism is not anymore the naive nationalism of certain Romantic writers with ontological aspirations, but a “critical” nationalism, “in a crisis”, torn to pieces, in constant dialogue with what is universal. He is national because is not exactly national, like Ulysses, the mythological founder of Lisbon, in Fernando Pessoa’s poem, who “was for not having existed”, and, only in this sense, has he “created us...” It was Machado de Assis (as Augusto Meyer points out) who created the metaphor of the head as a “ruminant’s stomach”, where “all suggestions, after being mixed and ground, are ready for renewed mastication, a complicated chemistry in which it is no longer possible to distinguish the assimilating organism from the matter assimilated”. This Machado de Assis, “devourer” of Laurence Sterne and countless other influences, was regarded as not very Brazilian, as an “Anglophile”, by the most important literary critic of his time, Silvio Romero, who characterised his way of writing in a depreciating way as “the style of a stutterer”...

Nevertheless, it is Machado de Assis, for his universalist atypicality, for his uncharacteristic character, i.e., for his selective and critical reading of the universal literary code from within a Brazilian context, as well as from an extremely personal standpoint within this context (suffice it to consider Silvio Romero’s reaction), who is the most representative of our writers of the past. In a way, he is for Brazilian literature, with all the implications of the idea, our nineteenth century Borges ... It is “not by sheer accident that contemporary writers like John Barth or Cabrera Infantes are his readers and admirers today. And why not think of Macedonio Fernandez, the master of the “unfinished”, as the “missing link” between Machado and Borges?

To conclude, I would like to offer a personal testimony. I belong to the group of Brazilian poets who, in the fifties, launched the national and international movement of concrete poetry. A movement which, in the Brazilian environment, took its own course. It resumed the dialogue with the Modernism of the twenties (especially with Oswald de Andrade). While sustaining radical avant-garde proposals on the language level, in an attempt to develop an antidiscursive, synthetic-ideogrammic poetry, it never left aside its concern with tradition, with a polemical review of tradition, from a critical and creative look-out. In this sense, we rethought the Baroque: Gregório de Matos was defined by Augusto de Campos as "the first experimental anthropophagus in our poetry"; my own book *Galáxias (Galaxies)* is an essay for the abolition of the boundaries between poetry and prose, in an attempt to combine constructivist rigor with neobaroque proliferation. In our Romantic period we discovered the forgotten poet Sousandrade (1832-1902), author of *O Inferno de Wall Street (Wall Street Hell)* (part of the long poem *Guesa Errante*, a kind of anticolonialist *Walpurgisnacht*, with the New York Stock Exchange around 1870 for its setting, written in a kaleidoscopic and polylingual style, anticipating film editing techniques of contemporary poetry). The fact that this same group of poets turned creative translation (or "transcreation") into a constant practice, taking their inspiration from Ezra Pound's example of the "make it new" and from Walter Benjamin's theories on the task of the translator, is something extremely coherent. We have programmatically endeavoured to "transcreate" into Portuguese Ezra Pound's *Cantos*; e. e. cummings' visual poems; fragments from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*; Mallarmé's constellation poem *Un Coup de Des*; Goethe, Hölderlin and Brecht, as well as Dadaists and German avant-garde poets; Dante and Guida Cavalcanti, as well as Ungaretti; the Provençal poets, Arnaut Daniel, in particular; ashō and Japanese "haikaiists"; Russian poets ranging from Blok's and Biely's symbolism, through Khlebnikov, Maiakovski, Pasternak, Mandelshtam, up to little known Guenadi Aigui at the time (1968), and so forth. My last work in the field was the recreation of *Blanco*, the great reflexive and erotic poem by Octavio Paz, in book *Transblanco*, published in 1986. On the

literatures, as seen from a semiological point of view, may be a pseudo-problem, as J. Mukarovsky managed to demonstrate. If each literature is an articulation of differences in the infinite text – “signs in rotation” – of universal literature, each innovative contribution is measured as such: it is a “monadological”, irreducible moment, at the same time singular and interdependent in this combinatory game. Gongora’s glowing *Soledades* do not abolish the splendid difference of Sor Juana’s *Primero Sueño*, a critical and reflexive poem that leaps over diachrony to fraternise with Mallarmé’s *Coup de Dés*, as Octavio Paz pointed out in his striking book on the Mexican poetess. Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* does not cancel out the differential trait of Machado de Assis’ *Dom Casmurro*, a work which, in turn, prefigures Borges’ elusive-ironical style (Borges who, apparently, had never read Machado de Assis...).

The polytopic polyphonic planetary civilisation is, I believe, under the devouring sign of translation *lato sensu*. Creative translation – “transcreation” – is the most fruitful manner of rethinking Aristotelian *mimesis*, which has made such a profound mark on Western poetics. Rethinking it not as a passivizing theory of copy or reflection, but as an usurping impulse in the sense of a dialectic production of differences out of sameness. Old Goethe (whose idea of a *Weltliteratur* resounds in Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* of 1848, in the passage proclaiming the overcoming of “local narrowness and exclusiveness”) already warned: “All literature, locked up in itself, will eventually droop into tedium, if it does not allow itself, again and again, to liven up by means of foreign contribution”. To face alterity is, above all, a necessary exercise in self-criticism, as well as a vertiginous experience in breaking boundaries.