The Local and the Universal Dialectic in Brazilian Modernism

By Isabela Chaves Silva

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The Local and the Universal Dialectic in Brazilian Modernism

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INTRODUCTION

This article seeks, from Antonio Candido’s2 texts, to make notes about the local and the universal dialectic, more specifically in the period of Modernism. In his text “Literature and Culture from 1900 to 1945”, Antonio Candido3 explains that it is possible to say that the dialectic of localism and cosmopolitanism is the law that drives the entire development of Brazilian cultural life, presenting itself in various ways. However, while this dialectic takes different forms in different periods and artists, it is certain that what has been best produced in the country in terms of art points to the balance between these two trends, the local and the universal.

This dialectic indicates a tension between the local matter, which appears as content, and the forms of expression inherited from Europe, given our colonial condition. The confrontation of the mismatch between the singularities of our environment, customs and history, and the European cultural models was present among us since Gregório de Matos4, in the seventeenth century, until Mário de Andrade5, in the twentieth century.

One of the expressions of the dialectic of localism and cosmopolitanism concerns our dependence on Portugal. At first we did not differ spiritually from the metropolis and, as we became aware of our peculiarities, we began to counteract them for self-definition. The highlight of this rebellion was the political independence and the romantic literary nationalism, in which the Portuguese values were strongly denied.

Candido emphasizes the two periods in which the literary particular is mreaches its peak: Romanticism, between 1836 and 1870, and Modernism, between 1922 and 1945.6 The particular is m of the romantics turned against the influence of Portugal, by defending what was our specificity.

The modernists, on the other hand, did not have to wage this war against Portugal because its influx into Brazil no long erexisted, causing the former rebel liousness to weaken.

The particularism of the modernists stood against the academism established in the first quarter of the century. Between 1900 and 1922, there is a “literature of permanence” that, in relation to the post-romantic phase, which goes from 1880 to 1900, did not advance at all, just formulating and maintaining what was produced in this previous period. Its writers sought, through copying, to achieve balance, harmony, and a literature that seemed European. Among them there was no concern with the artistic form or the desire for literary renewal: they were fine with the idea of not developing in

1 Master in Literary Theory and Literatures by the University of Brasilia, Brazil, in there search line “Dialectic Literary Criticism”. Email address: belinha_ch@hotmail.com.
2 Dilva Frazão highlights that “Antonio Candido (1918-2017) was a Brazilian sociologist, literary critic, essayist and teacher, central figure of literary studies in Brazil. Author of “Formation of Brazilian Literature”, fundamental book for those who want to understand Brazilian literature.” FRAZÃO, Dilva. Antonio Candido: sociólogo e crítico literário brasileiro. EBiografia. 2019. Own translation. Available at: https://www.ebiografia.com/antonio_candido/.
3 The version of the text by Candido that was read to write this article was the original one, in Portuguese, whose data are as follows: Literatura e cultura de 1900 a 1945. Literatura e sociedade. 9 ed. Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre azul, 2006, p. 117-144. The book was translated into English by Howard Becker with the following title: Antonio Candido: OnLiteratureandSociety.
4 As Frazão points out, “Gregório de Matos (1636-1695) was the greatest poet of the Brazilian Baroque. He developed a loving and religious poetry, but stood out for his satirical poetry, criticizing the society of the time, receiving the nick name ‘Boca do Inferno’ (in English: Hell’s Mouth).” FRAZÃO, Dilva. Gregório de Matos: poeta brasileiro. EBiografia. 2019. Own translation. Available at: https://www.ebiografia.com/gregorio_matos/.
5 Still according to Frazão, “Mario de Andrade (1893-1945) was a Brazilian writer. He published ‘Pauliceia Desvairada’, the first book of poems of the first phase of Modernism. He studied music at the São Paulo Conservatory. He was an art critic in newspapers and magazines. He had an important role in the implantation of Modernism in Brazil. His novel ‘Macunaima’ was his maximum creation, taken to the cinema. Ibid. Available at: https://www.ebiografia.com/mario_andrade/.
anything the literature made so far. Grammatical purism, empty rhetoric, attachment to form, and superficiality set
the tone of this phase.

The modernists of 1922 found two strands, the symbolist idealism and the academic naturalism, and broke with both, especially the first. Regarding the first
strand of thought, Candido states that:

> Como vimos, este era sobretudo uma conservação de formas cada vez mais vazias de conteúdo, uma tendência a repisar soluções plásticas que, na sua
superficialidade, conquistaram por tal forma o gosto médio, que até hoje representam para ele a boa norma literária. Uma literatura para a qual o mundo exterior
existia no sentido mais banal da palavra, e que por isso mesmo se instalou num certo oficionalismo graças, em
parte, à ação estabilizadora da Academia Brasileira [...] As letras, o público burguês e o mundo oficial se
entrosavam numa harmoniosa mediania. 7

Modernism breaks the separadigms and
initiates a new phase of the local and the universal
dialectic. The Europeanization of the Indian, the
idealization of the caboclo, the affectation with which
nature was described, the alienation in relation to them
is cegation under go a process of resignification.
Also, “historical, social and ethnic repressions” 8 are
freed and acquire their own literary expression. The
black and the mulatto were now subjects of study and
sources of inspiration, the obstacles and risks of the
tropical natural environment were valued, and
primitivism was no longer seen as a problem but as
enchanting.

In theareof formal inquiry, the modernists of
1922 were partly inspired by the French and Italian
literary vanguards. They endeavored to devise a vigorous
national literary expression (particular tendency) through
foreign formulas initially (universal tendency).

The issues that impelled the European avant-
gardes could already be found in part here as well,
which distinguished the character of the foreign
borrowing now made from the preceding ones: the
industrial outbreak between 1914 and 1918 that altered
the pace of the big cities, the strikes between 1917 and
1920 in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the creation of
the Communist Party in 1922, and the revolution of
1924. In addition, Brazil was closer to the West after
World War I due to its greater role in the social and
economic problems of the moment and there was a
smaller cultural gap compared to Europe. The European
avant-garde was also very interested in primitive culture,
which was something very strong in Brazil. Thus, Candido emphasizes that “our modernists [...] have shaped both a local and universal type of
expression, rediscovering European influence through a
dip in the Brazilian debate”. 9

Another major trait of this generation of
modernists is their desire to research and interpret
Brazil. The iconoclasm of the 1920s paved the way for
the vogue of the Northeast novel in the 1930s and a
large production of historical and sociological essays,
such as Gilberto Freyre’s Casa-Grandesenzala, Sergio
Buarque de Holanda’s Roots of Brazil, and Political
Evolution of Brazil, by Caio Prado Júnior.

With Modernism and the period of greatest
consolidation of its achievements, the 1930s, it is
concluded that:

fundiram-se a libertação do academismo, dos recalques
históricos, do oficialismo literário; as tendências de
educação política e reforma social; o ardor de conhecer o
país. A sua expansão coincidiu com a radicalização
posterior à crise de 1929, que marcou em todo o mundo
civilizado uma fase nova de inquietação social e
ideológica. Em consequência, manifestou-se uma “ida ao
povo”, um V Narod, por toda parte e também aqui, onde
foi o coroamento natural da pesquisa localista, da
redefinição cultural desencadeada em 1922. 10

Therefore, we saw that, in the 1920s and 1930s,
there was a commitment of the writers in the
construction in Brazil, of a universal literature,
participating in the world problems of its time, but on the
basis of the local matter.

Already in the 1940s, an inversion occurs and the
local matter is rejected, investing in formal and interior
research. “Regionalist, folkloric, libertine, populist
modernism” 11 slows down, and the representatives of
the previous decades also reveal greater formal concern
and an “antisectarian” yearning. Some of which publish
some of their best books in this 1940s: José Lins do
Rego, with Fogo Morto (Dead Fire), and Jorge Amado,
with Terras do sem-fim (The Violent Land), both from
1943, and Carlos Drummond de Andrade with
Sentimento do mundo (Sentiment of the World) and
Rosa do Povo (Rose of the People), from 1940 and
1946, respectively.

The literary production intensified until 1945 due
to the editorial boom of the 1930s, publishing the new

7 Ibid., p. 126. “As we have seen, this was above all a preservation of
increasingly empty forms, a tendency to repeat plastic solutions that,
in their superficiality, have thus conquered the average taste,
representing the good literary norm to it to this day. A literature for
which the outside world existed in the most banal sense of the word,
and that is why it even settled in a certain official is m thanks, partly, to
the stabilizing action of the Brazilian Academy [...] The letters, the
bourgeois public and the official world merged into a harmonious
averagerness.” (Own translation)
8 Ibid., p. 127.
9 Ibid., p. 128-129. Own translation.
10 Ibid., p. 132. “The liberation of academic is m, of historical
repression, of literary officialism; the trends of political education and
social reform; the ardor to know the country weremeraged. Its
expansion coincided with the radicalization after the 1929 crisis, which
marked a new phase of social and ideological unrest throughout the
civilized world. As a result, a "trip to the people", a V Narod, manifested
everywhere and also here, where it was the natural crowning of the
localist research, of the cultural redefinition unleashed in 1922.” (Own
translation)
11 Ibid., p. 134.
and the old authors. The preponderance of the willingness of the former to deny the "ideological" literature has led to a loss of quality in novels and a spread of the formal and psychological research into lyricism. As a result, there was a fragmentation that placed "social" literature on one side and literature with more aesthetic concerns on the other, largely dissolving the concomittance that existed in the 1930s. Politically uneasy writers began to produce in propagandistic form and writers who denied an interested art isolated themselves from social reality.

From this perspective, the 1930s were characterized by "a moment of balance between local research and cosmopolitan aspirations" disconnected again in the 1940s, with "the narrow sectarianism jostling with formalism".  

These changes in the literary patterns must be understood historically within the context in which they occurred. Candido shows the circumstances that led to this passage from a literature of interest in the 1920s and 1930s to a literature that separated aesthetic concerns and social concerns in the 1940s: on the one hand the sectarians who produced in a pamphletary sense and, on the other, writers who distanced themselves from social reality.

Given the impossibility of developing the natural and human sciences in Brazil until the 1930s, literature long occupied a central role in national spiritual evolution, filling the gaps in the elementary demands of knowledge about the country and giving shape to thought. Modernism, as a broad cultural movement, favored the broad production of the historical-sociological essay, which sought to know and interpret the country in the 1930s, and the development of educational theory, politics, ethnographic and folkloric studies. Modernism created the conditions for a greater specification of the attribution so each spiritual activity. Thus, from the decade of 1940, the literature was losing its main position. Added to this, the new communicative media emerged, such as radio, cinema, comics.

Faced with this new condition of intellectual life, the writers reacted in two ways: or by emphasizing the uniqueness of their field, the artistic, by producing a literature focused only on formal issues, thus addressing a restricted audience; or producing narratives that approached journalistic or radio reporting, which enabled them to compete with the new expressive media.  

Still, in the 1940s, innovative writers such as Clarice Lispector appeared, whose debut was in 1943, Guimarães Rosa in 1946, and Murilo Rubião in 1947.

As for the writers of the 1950s, Candido points out that they made the "consolidation of the average", that is, stabilized the achievements of the 1920s even more, making them the language proper to literature. According to the critic, if, on the one hand, "there were fewer eruptions of high creativity," on the other, "there were more good books than at any other time in our fiction." Some of the writers who debuted or matured in these years were: Dalton Trevisan (1959), Osman Lins (1955), Fernando Sabino (1956), Otto Lara Resende (1963), Ligia Fagundes Teles (maturity reached in 1954) and Bernardo Ellis (1956).

According to Candido, from the list above, only Ellis is regionalist, while the others move through the urban universe, "relatively disconnected from a more lively interest in the place, the moment, the customs, which in their books enter in filigree so to speak." He further points out that none of them seem concerned for ideological issues, which changes a little after 1964, making it difficult to classify them as "left or right, personal or social romance, popular or scholarly writing," positions that, if previously problematic, are no longer grounded in "relation to a comprehensive experience, whereby siding or denunciation is replaced by the mode of being and existing, from the angle of the person or group".

Candido's course on the presence of the local and universal dialectic in our spiritual life is fundamental because, just as the integration - not always harmonious - between the two poles was and is part of our evolution as a nation, it also guided the formation and development of Brazilian literature. Understanding the dialectic of the particular and the cosmopolitan is key to understanding the formation of the country and most of the dilemmas experienced by authors at different times and in different ways, as well as the solution some of them found to this impasse.

Bibliographic References


13 Ibid., p. 137-145.
15 Ibid., p. 249. Own translation.
16 Ibid., p. 249. Own translation.