



The Language of Brazilian Modernism: a comparative perspective*

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ABSTRACT

The Brazilian Modernists did not constitute a unified movement at the beginning of the 20th century, nor did they have a consolidated agenda of themes to be dealt with or widely shared techniques to deal with them or even a unified vision about language. Throughout the first decades of that century, the Modernists formed different groups (some of which defined themselves through manifestos) and sought, in different ways, to contrast what they were doing with what previous literary generations had done, sometimes rejecting and at other times acknowledging their relationship with the previous literary tradition. As far as the issue of language is concerned, it is not usual to bring a comparatist dimension to discussions of language in Brazilian Modernism, maybe because we should always bear in mind that looking comparatively at literary periods brings with it a series of problems. But our goal here is exactly to discuss the language of Brazilian Modernism in a comparative perspective.

KEYWORDS: Brazilian Modernism; Language; Comparative perspective

A língua do Modernismo brasileiro: uma perspectiva comparada

RESUMO

O Modernismo brasileiro não constituiu um movimento unificado no início do século XX, nem teve uma agenda consolidada de temas tratados ou técnicas amplamente compartilhadas, nem mesmo uma visão unificada sobre língua. Ao longo da primeira década daquele século, os modernistas formaram grupos diferentes (alguns dos quais se definiram através de manifestos) e procuraram, de maneiras diversas, contrastar o que faziam com o que gerações prévias tinham feito, algumas vezes rejeitando, outras admitindo sua relação com a tradição literária anterior. No que diz respeito à língua, não é comum trazer uma dimensão comparatista a discussões de língua no Modernismo brasileiro, talvez porque deveríamos sempre considerar que lançar um olhar comparativo sobre períodos literários implica uma série de problemas. No entanto, nosso objetivo aqui é exatamente discutir a língua do Modernismo brasileiro em perspectiva comparada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Modernismo brasileiro; Língua; Perspectiva comparada.

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The Brazilian Modernists did not constitute a unified movement at the beginning of the 20th century, nor did they have a consolidated agenda of themes to be dealt with or widely shared techniques to deal with them. Throughout the first decades of that century, the Modernists formed different groups (some of which defined themselves through manifestos) and sought, in different ways, to contrast what they were doing with what previous literary generations had done, sometimes rejecting and at other times acknowledging their relationship with the previous literary tradition.

Even the adjective “modernist”, today applied generically to authors and works, was not used back then in the overarching sense that it has today. As we know, Mário de Andrade was initially referred to as a “futurist” and had to explain in the “Prefácio interessantíssimo” [Extremely Interesting Preface to his poetry collection *Pauliceia desvairada* [Hallucinated City]: “Não sou futurista (de Marinetti). Disse e repito-o. Tenho pontos de contato com o futurismo. Oswald de Andrade, chamando-me de futurista, errou (ANDRADE, [1922] 1987, p. 61).” [I am not a futurist (of Marinetti). I have said it and I will say it again. I have points in common with futurism. Oswald de Andrade, calling me a futurist, was wrong.] In fact, Marinetti’s futurist manifesto of 1909 advocated the destruction of museums, libraries and academies of all kinds, and considered a motor car more beautiful than the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, whereas Mário de Andrade was heading in the opposite direction, in his “Extremely Interesting Preface”. He believed that “seria hipócrita si (sic) pretendesse representar orientação moderna que ainda não compreende bem (ANDRADE, [1922] 1987, p. 60).” [it would be hypocritical to seek to represent a modern orientation that I still do not understand well].

As far as the issue of language is concerned, it could be interesting to bring a comparatist dimension to discussions of Modernism in Brazil, but always bearing in mind that looking comparatively at literary periods brings with it a series of problems, such as those identified by Emir Rodríguez Monegal (1978, p. 14) when he attempted to establish a comparative dialogue between Jorge Luís Borges and Mário de Andrade. This Uruguayan critic stated that, whereas in Brazil the term *Modernismo* was used, in 1920s’ Argentina another term was used to describe what Jorge Luís Borges was doing: *ultraísmo* [ultraism]. Monegal therefore created an explanatory note:

O *modernismo* hispano-americano corresponde, cronologicamente, ao que na literatura brasileira se chama “Realismo” e “Simbolismo”. (...) Para simplificar a nomenclatura e unir ambos os movimentos de vanguarda, talvez seria conveniente pedir emprestado o termo “modernidade”, que hoje tem uso tão frequente. Deste modo se unificaria um movimento geral que é tão importante também nos países anglo-saxões. (MONEGAL, 1978, p. 13)

[Hispano-American *modernism* chronologically corresponds to what is called “Realism” and “Symbolism” in Brazilian literature. (...) To simplify the nomenclature and bring together both these avant-garde movements, it is perhaps helpful to borrow the term “modernity”, which is so often used today. This unites an overall movement that is equally so important in Anglophone countries.] (MONEGAL, 1978, p. 13)

In Anglophone Modernism, referred to here by Monegal, the situation was no longer the same as in the 19th century. John Cleary reminds us that the Modernist poet Ezra Pound said in 1929 that “*We speak a language that was English*”. In other words, the language brought by the

British colonizers had ceased to belong exclusively to them, it was no longer just English, but belonged to all the speakers and writers who were using it in different parts of the world. In some way this came to be true of other languages brought by (former) colonial powers, such as France, Portugal or Spain, throughout the 20th century. Obviously, this does not mean that there was no reaction on the part of the former colonizers, eager to maintain control over “their” languages.

In the view of John Cleary, Anglophone Modernism at the start of the 20th century was the result of a revolt in the peripheries of the English-speaking literary world against the previous domination by the metropole:

In its early stages at least, that revolt came primarily from Ireland and the United States; later, and in some similar, some different ways, literary and political movements in the Caribbean and other parts of the Anglophone world triggered further significant changes to the wider Anglophone literary system. (CLEARY, 2021, p. 2.)

Just as England had lost its absolute hegemony as a model for (former) colonies in the first decades of the 20th century, the literature of Portugal was not the exclusive referent for Brazilian Modernism. Furthermore, although France (Paris, to be more precise) enjoyed a privileged position in the chosen readings of the Modernists, it was not the only point of reference, and there were antecedents to this in the previous century.

From the 19th century, after Brazilian independence, there were many explicit records of colonialist arguments about the nature and the use of language – see, for example, the cases of Pinheiro Chagas and Gama e Castro (JOBIM, 2020). As we know, a supposed lack of correctness in the use of the Portuguese language was deemed by Pinheiro Chagas to be a “defect” of Brazilian writers. In addition, José da Gama e Castro, 20 years after Brazilian independence, published in the *Jornal do Comércio* an article that had far-reaching impact, in which he argued that literatures should bear the name of the language they are written in and not of the country where they are produced. In his view this meant that literature produced in Brazil would only be an “ornament” to Portuguese literature: “A literatura não toma o nome da terra, toma o nome da língua: sempre assim foi desde o princípio do mundo, e sempre há de ser enquanto ele durar. (GAMA e CASTRO, 1978, p. 124-126) [Literature does not take the name of the land, it takes the name of the language: it has always been this way since the world was created, and it will always be thus while the world exists].

Pinheiro Chagas’s critique elicited a serious response from José de Alencar in his postface to *Iracema*, and later a humorous one from the Modernist Oswald de Andrade. One of the “defects” relating to the use of the Portuguese language in Brazil most frequently identified by purists like Chagas was “pronoun placement”, since grammarians insisted that the use of pronouns should be governed by the rules applied in Portugal. Rather than coming up with “serious” arguments, Oswald not only positioned pronouns in the Brazilian way in his own writing, but he also mocked the purists who considered “old Portuguese” as the standard, as defended by Pinheiro Chagas. In his own way Oswald takes a stand in legitimizing as valid the way that the Portuguese language is used every day by most of its speakers in Brazil. In 1924, Oswald criticizes purist grammarians and the pompous use of language, in his *Manifesto da*

poesia pau-brasil; he asks for a “language without archaisms, without high-brow terms; natural and neological. The millionaire contribution of all errors. How we talk. How we are [A língua sem arcaísmos, sem erudição. Natural e neológica. A contribuição milionária de todos os erros. Como falamos. Como somos]. And his poem *Pronominais* is part of his criticism:

Pronominais

Dê-me um cigarro
 Diz a gramática
 Do professor e do aluno
 E do mulato sabido
 Mas o bom negro e o bom branco
 Da Nação Brasileira
 Dizem todos os dias
 Deixa disso camarada
 Me dá um cigarro. (ANDRADE, 2003, p. 167)
 [“Give me a cigarette,”
 say the teacher, the student
 and the learned mixed-raced people
 but every day
 the genuine Brazilian black and white men
 say to their mate,
 “Gimme a cigarette”.]

The position of the pronoun ‘*me*’ (me/to me) comes directly after the verb in European Portuguese but in Brazil, in spoken Portuguese, it comes before the verb. So *dê-me* becomes *me dá*. The more formal imperative form (*dê*), also becomes the informal ‘*dá*’ in spoken language in Brazil. According to the purists it would also be incorrect to begin a phrase with the pronoun *me*.

Mário de Andrade also referred to the question of pronouns in his “Extremely Interesting Preface” to *Pauliceia desvairada*: “Pronomes? Escrevo brasileiro (ANDRADE, 1987, p. 74).” [Pronouns? I write Brazilian].

The idea that there is a language spoken by the population in general and that this language should be respected did not first emerge in the early 20th century. In fact, much earlier, Dante Alighieri, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Vernacular Eloquence), a work written between 1302 and 1305, had already produced a justification for using the vernacular language (according to him, the one that children acquired when they were first starting to distinguish sounds; or that people learned without any formal education). Dante considered vernacular language to be the most noble, since everyone used it, although with different pronunciations and using different words. Of course, Dante wrote this at a time when vernaculars were beginning to gain legitimacy in the face of the supposed universality of Latin, but Oswald found himself in a different situation. The Modernists were not fighting against another language, one seen as universal in relation to their own. Furthermore, many Brazilian philologists and grammarians were still in what we could perhaps call a pre-Dante phase. For example, the editorial of the first number of the *Revista de*

Filologia e História, published in 1931, still contained arguments legitimizing Latin as a kind of mother tongue, which it was believed the Portuguese language was “subordinated” to and “dependent” on¹.

In fact, the Modernists were continuing a battle waged by 19th-century writers to give legitimacy to the linguistic differences of Brazilians in relation to certain Portuguese usages that were seen as “correct”. To put it another way, the Modernist movement was seeking to justify Brazilian usages as *different* but not *incorrect*.

The emblematic case of a clash over the issue of linguistic correctness in the 19th century, as previously stated, involved the Portuguese critic Pinheiro Chagas and José de Alencar. It arose from the review of *Iracema* that Pinheiro Chagas published and to which Alencar responded. (Incidentally, in 1931 the *Revista de Filologia e História* still cited this confrontation, completely ignoring the Modernists.)

In his review, Pinheiro Chagas grouped together all of Brazil’s literary production, which, in his opinion, had one defect: “(...) é a falta de correção na linguagem portuguesa, ou antes a mania de tornar o brasileiro uma língua diferente do velho português, por meio de neologismos arrojados e injustificáveis, e de insubordinações gramaticais (...)” (CHAGAS, 1867, p. 221). [(...) it is the lack of correctness in the Portuguese language, or rather the obsession with making Brazilian a different language from old Portuguese, by means of brash, unjustifiable neologisms and grammatical insubordinations.] Alencar, in turn, replied:

Que a tendência, não para a formação de uma nova língua, mas para a transformação profunda do idioma de Portugal, existe no Brasil, é fato incontestável. Mas, em vez de atribuir-nos a nós escritores essa revolução filológica, devia o Sr. Pinheiro Chagas, para ser coerente com sua teoria, buscar o gérmen dela e seu fomento no espírito popular; no falar do povo, esse “ignorante sublime”, como lhe chamou.

[It is an undeniable fact that the tendency exists in Brazil not to form a new language, but to dramatically transform the language of Portugal. But instead of attributing this philological revolution to us writers, Mr. Pinheiro Chagas, to be coherent with his theory, should look for the seed of it and its fostering in the spirit of the people; in how the people, this “sublime ignoramus”, as he put it, speak].

Taking up arguments already put forward by Dante, Alencar states that this “revolução é irresistível e fatal” [revolution is fated and cannot be resisted], like “o romano em francês, italiano, etc.” [Roman into French, Italian etc.]– the latter, the transformation that Dante was referring to. In addition, it is interesting to recall here that Mário de Andrade was accused at the time of wanting to be the Brazilian Dante:

¹ The editorial in this publication’s first number stated: “É impossível, por exemplo, estudar a língua nacional com método a que se possa chamar científico, desde que de todo se ignorem os idiomas afins ou se perca de vista a íntima dependência que subordina a nossa língua ao latim, de que é, sem solução de continuidade, evolução paulatina e progressiva: o nosso idioma explica-se pelo que falaram nossos remotos antepassados, que o receberam, há mais de vinte séculos, de Roma conquistadora.” (p. 2. I have updated the orthography.) [It is impossible, for example, to study the national language using any method we could deem scientific, once one doesn’t know related languages or loses sight of the close dependency that our language has on Latin, from which it is, without interruption, a gradual and progressive evolution: our language can be explained by what our distant forebearers spoke, those who received it over twenty centuries ago, from the conquering Rome].

(...) muita gente, até meus amigos, andaram falando que eu queria bancar o Dante e criar a língua brasileira. Graças a Deus não sou tão iguignorante [sic] nem tão vaidoso. A minha intenção única foi dar a minha colaboração a um movimento prático de libertação importante necessária. (PINTO, 1990, p. 316)

[(...) many people, even my friends, have been saying that I wanted to be like Dante and create a Brazilian language. Thank God I am not so *iguignorant* [sic] or so vain. My sole intention was to collaborate with a practical movement to introduce important, necessary freedom.]

If we care to look further back in time, we can recall that Fernão de Oliveira, although often cited as representing a type of subaltern colonialism – because he wrote in his *Gramática da língua portuguesa* (Grammar of the Portuguese Language, 1536) that it was better for the Portuguese to teach Guinea rather than learn from Rome –, also in this same volume urged his compatriots to legitimize the use of their vernacular language: “E não desconfiemos de nossa língua [portuguesa], porque os homens fazem a língua, e não a língua os homens” (Oliveira, 1536) [Let us not distrust our [Portuguese] language, because man makes language, language does not make man]. Unlike Fernão de Oliveira, in the case of Oswald de Andrade, the issue is no longer to give legitimacy to the vernacular in relation to another language, seen as noble and universal (Latin); not even to the language of the former colonial power in relation to the colony. During the Modernist movement, the Portuguese language was already the non-native national language (like English was in the USA) so the issue was to give Brazilians the right to speak “their” language, as it existed in the Americas and not in Europe. In other words, it was about calling into question the claim to universality of Portugal’s standard language, internalized by grammarians (including Brazilian ones) and by the education system in Brazil. Oswald seeks to legitimize the everyday linguistic usages of Brazilians, that contrasted with Portugal’s view of what was “correct”, in relation to which Brazilian differences had been interpreted as a “lack of correctness” since the 19th century. This notion of “correctness” appears to have persisted in the early 20th century, as reflected in the obituary written by the Brazilian grammarian and philologist Sousa da Silveira for his colleague Mário Barreto, in 1931²:

A mentalidade linguística de Mário Barreto formou-se numa época em que florescia o respeito ao padrão clássico do idioma, numa espécie de reação contra as liberdades deliberadamente praticadas pelo insigne José de Alencar, e creio que inconscientemente por alguns dos elementos do romantismo, principalmente os poetas que não chegaram à maturidade. (SILVEIRA, 1931, p. 538)

[Mário Barreto’s mentality in relation to language was formed in an age when respect for the classic linguistic standard was flourishing, as a kind of reaction to the liberties deliberately taken by the notable José de Alencar, and I believe unconsciously by some of the exponents of Romanticism, chiefly the poets who did not reach maturity.]

In fact, the “classic standard” and its equivalents were a kind of ideal or idealized norm, the origins of which were attributed to Europe, that ended up giving rise to a comparatist movement

² Incidentally, according to Edith Pimentel Pinto [1990, p. 77], Mário de Andrade produced reader’s notes for *Novíssimos estudos de língua portuguesa* (1914) and *Através do dicionário e da gramática* (1927) by Mário Barreto.

in which this “standard” was compared to usages in the former colony. This movement was perfectly comprehensible in the 19th century, when linguistic comparatism between Europe and its current or former colonies was flourishing, and the differences between the current or former metropolises and their colonies were interpreted to the detriment of the latter. Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (p. 75), precursor of Comparative Literature in the English language, stated in 1886 that the emergence of European nationalities was creating new points of view, new materials to be compared in modern institutions. According to him, since the 18th century, and the work of the philologist William Jones (1746-1794) – who was also a civil servant in the British empire – comparatism had succeeded in showing the connection between European and Indo-European languages: “Since those days the method of comparison has been applied to many subjects besides language; and many new influences have combined to make the mind of Europe more ready to compare and to contrast than it ever was before.” (POSNETT, 1886, p. 75).

The New World entered Posnett’s reasoning like the introduction of a radically different *other*, much more different than the *others* that Europeans had already come across, and as was to be expected, more “primitive”³. In the case of Brazilian Modernism, one of the strategies used to respond to the accusation of “primitivism” was to avoid remaining on the defensive, trying to deny or overcome the European image of the *primitive*, the *savage*, the *uncivilized*. As we know, the Modernists incorporated this image but for different ends to those proposed in European metropolises. The *Manifesto antropófago* (*Cannibalist Manifesto*) is a good example of this, and even before it appeared Mário de Andrade had already written in his “Extremely Interesting Preface” to *Pauliceia desvairada* (*Hallucinated City*): “O nosso primitivismo representa uma nova fase construtiva. A nós compete esquematizar metodizar as lições do passado (ANDRADE, 1987, p. 74)⁴.” [Our primitivism represents a new constructive phase. It is our role to schematize, systematize the lessons of the past.]

As far as the question of language is concerned, we also know that Mário de Andrade came up with serious arguments about and even planned a grammar of the Portuguese of Brazil, fragments of which were published in a pioneering work by Edith Pimentel Pinto⁵.

³ “The discovery of the New World brought this new European civilization face to face with primitive life, and awakened men to contrasts with their own associations more striking than Byzantine or even Saracen could offer” (POSNETT, 1886).

⁴ According to Telê Porto Ancona Lopez, Mário would later seek theoretical support about “primitivism” in Lévy-Bruhl: “Como se sabe, Lévy-Bruhl era o antropólogo francês mais difundido na Europa na década de 20, e sua teoria exerceu influência no Modernismo brasileiro, sendo as suas ideias usadas em 1928 como sustentáculo do conceito de primitivismo, esboçado em 1924 no manifesto Pau-Brasil. Naquele ano, aparece como chave teórica no ‘Manifesto Antropófago’, onde Oswald de Andrade cita a ‘Mentalidade pré-lógica.’” (LOPEZ, 1972, p. 92) [As we know, Lévy-Bruhl was the most widely known French anthropologist in Europe in the 1920s, and his theory had an influence on Brazilian Modernism, with his ideas being used in 1928 to support the concept of primitivismo, sketched out in 1924 in the ‘Brazilwood Manifesto’. In that year, it emerged as the theoretical key to the ‘Cannibalist Manifesto’, where Oswald de Andrade quotes the ‘Pre-logic Mentality’.]

⁵ Cf. this professor’s comment: “A julgar pelo conjunto de rascunhos a ela destinados, a *Gramatiquinha* se configura, em linhas gerais, como uma plataforma das ideias de Mário de Andrade sobre gramática, *lato sensu*; sobre a variedade brasileira da língua portuguesa, psicológica e sociologicamente considerada; e sobre a expressão literária modernista.” (p. 60-61) [Judging from the collection of notes created for it, the *Little Grammar* in general took the form of a platform of Mário de Andrade’s ideas about grammar in the broad sense; about the Brazilian variety of the Portuguese language, considered from a psychological and sociological point of view; and about Modernist literary expression.]

As regards the 19th century, and the confrontation between Alencar and Pinheiro Chagas, Mário represents a shift of the axis, because he does not want to be seen either as a rebel against the former colonial power, or as a defender of the linguistic norm from Portugal. Avoiding both these positions, he can more comfortably incorporate sentiments and customs, expressions and actions that at that moment in time belonged both to Brazilians and the Portuguese:

Não se trata de nacionalismo reivindicador, minha gente. Isto é ridículo. Se trata de ser brasileiro e nada mais. E prá [sic] gente ser brasileiro não carece agora de estar se revoltando contra Portugal e se afastando dele. A gente deve ser brasileiro não para se diferenciar de Portugal porém porque somos brasileiros. Brasileiros sem mais nada. Brasileiros. (...) Nós descendemos em muito de nós de Portugal. Temos é natural por hereditariedade muitos costumes, expressões, jeitos, ações evolucionadas do portuga. (...) Ora, aplicando o caso à língua o que a gente tem de fazer é isso: ter a coragem de falar brasileiro sem si [sic] amolar com a gramática de Lisboa. (PINTO, 1990, p. 332-333)

[It is not a question of demanding nationalism, my people. That is ridiculous. It is about being Brazilian and nothing more. And to be Brazilian there is no need now to be rising up against Portugal and distancing ourselves. We must be Brazilian not to differentiate ourselves from Portugal but because we are Brazilian. Brazilians and nothing more. Brazilians. (...) Many of us are descended from Portugal. Naturally through heredity we have many customs, expressions, manners, actions evolved from the Portuguese. (...) So, with regard to language what we have to do is this: have the courage to speak Brazilian without getting het up about the grammar of Lisbon.]

In the view of Brazilian Modernists, as we said before, Portugal lost its position as a privileged reference but although we could say that Paris became their strongest reference, it can be stated that it was not the only reference either.

The search for elements with Brazilian roots in the Modernist arts and literature also links to previous times in the western tradition. The relationship between Modernism and Romanticism has been widely documented, even though some aspects deserve greater attention. In 1905, João Ribeiro advocated that critics focused on “uma literatura orgânica, popular, espontânea” [an organic, popular, spontaneous literature] “...que lhe traçassem as fronteiras e [lhe] dissessem em que proporção dela se afasta essa outra literatura nossa, erudita, refletida, artificial, tardiamente criada, sobreposta e dobrada sobre a grande arte popular.” (p. 135) [that they defined its boundaries and said how distanced from it our other literature was, the erudite, *recherché*, artificial, belatedly created one, superimposed upon and overlapping our great popular art]. Mário de Andrade, in turn, emphasized his attachment to supposed popular roots in his art and expression: “Agora quero saber quem que nega o meu estilo ter raízes fundas nas expressões do meu povo, desde a pseudo-culta até a ignara popular?” (PINTO, 1990, p. 269-270) [Now I want to know who denies that my style has deep roots in the expressions of my people, from the pseudo-learned to the uneducated?]

We know that the valorization of products supposedly rooted culturally in an organic way in human communities was a very dominant feature of nationalism in the 19th century. According to Kohn (1955, p. 31), Herder (1744-1803) was the first to insist that human civilization had universal characteristics, but also distinctive national ones. The creative forces of the universal,

he argues, become individualized primarily not in the singular human being, but in the collective personalities of human communities, since men are above all else members of their national communities; in Herder's view, only as such can they be truly creative, using the language and traditions of their own people. In the 1920s it is very clear from the correspondence between Mário and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, that the former believed in a Modernist project that signified a contribution to humanity by the "Brazilian race", the presence of an original chord from Brazil in the universal orchestra:

De que maneira nós podemos concorrer pra grandeza da humanidade? É sendo franceses ou alemães? Não, porque isto já está na civilização. O nosso contingente tem de ser brasileiro. O dia em que nós formos inteiramente brasileiros e só brasileiros a humanidade estará rica de mais uma raça, rica duma nova combinação de qualidades humanas. As raças são acordes musicais. (...) Quando realizarmos o nosso acorde, então seremos usados na harmonia da civilização. (ANDRADE, 1924, p. 70) [In what way can we contribute to the greatness of humanity? Is it by being French or German? No, because this is already part of civilization. Our contingent has to be Brazilian. The day we become entirely Brazilian and only Brazilian, humanity will be richer by one more race, richer by a new combination of human qualities. Races are musical chords. (...) When we create our chord, we will then be used in the harmony of civilization.]

But there is an important difference in terms of 19th-century German thought about language. At the start of that century the idea of a common language was used as an ideological basis to justify the unification of the country, in a very different context from that of early-20th-century Brazil.

In Brazil, the valorization of "roots" art (popular songs and tales, folklore and so on), from the 19th century onwards and throughout the 20th, was related to a kind of "Herderian" thinking, that considered such art as important manifestations of the creative spirit in its "purest" form. The roots of this art supposedly lay deep in the soil of the remote past and were representative of the soul or the spirit of the people (*Volkgeist* in German) and of their origins in the long chain of national tradition, since primitive times (KOHN, 1955, p. 30-31). Susan Bassnet has already said that nations engaged in a struggle for independence were also engaged in a struggle for cultural roots, for a national culture and for a past:

The period from the mid-eighteenth century onwards saw an intense interest in the publication of folk songs, and poetry and fairy tales. Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* appeared in 1765, Johannes Ewald, the great Danish poet, published a significant collection based on ancient sagas and medieval ballads in 1771, Herder's *Stimmen der Volker in Lieder* came out in 1778, Jacob and Wilhem Grimm's *Fairy Tales* appeared in 1812-13 and Elias Lonnrot's of the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*, appeared in 1849. This fascination with the past, matched by developments in literary history, philology, archeology and political history was linked to the general European question of definition of nationhood. (BASSNET, 1993, p. 15)

In the Brazilian case, the Modernists, in terms of their proposals to study and valorize national roots, played an active role, but in terms of language, there is a difference with respect to some 19th-century European ideas.

With regard to the vernacular language, in that century, for example, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) considered it a constituent element of German nationality. In his *Reden und die Deutsche Nation*, delivered in the winter of 1807-1808 at the Academy of Sciences in Berlin, Fichte argued that wherever a separate language is found, there is a separate nation too, with the right to take charge of its affairs independently and to govern itself (FICHTE, 1979, p. 215). In the view of that philosopher, those who speak the same language are linked to each other via many invisible ties stemming from nature itself, long before the emergence of any human activity; they understand each other and have the power to continue to make themselves understood increasingly clearly; they form part of a whole and are naturally a single, inseparable entity (FICHTE, 1979, p. 224). He argues that man is molded by language, much more so than language is molded by man (FICHTE, 1979, p. 55).

In the German case the vernacular language was used as one of the elements that would justify the union of a “people” that would speak it and have shared cultural referents, common meanings that would justify unification in a single nation-state, whereas in Brazil language was not used as an element to justify independence from Portugal. In the early 20th century, perhaps we could phrase the Modernist question as follows: – How to legitimize in literature Brazilian usages of a common language, shared with the former colonial power, but that was still seen by some grammarians on either side of the Atlantic as the language of Portugal? It was a question of arguing in favor of the acceptance of Brazilian usage; if not instead of the Portuguese equivalents, at least to be used alongside them (as Mário proposes). Therefore, insubordination against grammatical rules or regulatory linguistic practices of the time can be turned into the subject matter of poetry, as Manuel Bandeira does in his poem “Poética” [Poetics]:

Estou farto do lirismo que para e vai averiguar no dicionário o cunho
vernáculo de um vocábulo
Abaixo os puristas
Todas as palavras sobretudo os barbarismos universais
Todas as construções sobretudo as sintaxes de exceção (BANDEIRA, 1958)
[I am tired of poetry that has to pause to look up in the dictionary the vernacular origin of a word.
Down with the purists
All words especially universal barbarisms
All constructions especially cases of exceptional syntax]

As I am writing this short essay during the centenary of Modern Art Week, I would like to draw my observations to a close by underlining that the formulations and practices of the first Modernists were not always heading in the same direction. Today we can see with greater clarity the need for more and better research to analyze and give credit to the complexity of their thoughts about language.

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