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Literature of
the Saõ Paulo Week of Modern Art

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LITERATURE OF THE SÃO PAULO WEEK OF MODERN ART

The Brazilian modernist movement, from its early development circa 1917 through its first creative phase ending in 1929, encompassed the fine arts as well as literature in a broad attempt to renovate artistic and intellectual life. The Week of Modern Art celebrated in the Municipal Theater of São Paulo from 11 to 18 February 1922 was a focal point for the critical spirit seeking to redefine artistic values and stood as a symbol of a new expressive and interpretive tradition that would profoundly alter Brazilian writing.

Sixty-five years later, the guiding forces of modernism and its literary program are being increasingly studied by a circle of scholars who contribute to an understanding of this complex moment of impetuous revolt and ingenious invention. Inspired by an iconoclastic insurrection against the Parnassian ideals and theoretical models of the past, with their limiting views of national reality, modernist writers initiated a poetic rediscovery of Brazil and sought a new identity through popular language set in regional and folkloric detail, rich in music and magic, dance and myth. The movement aimed to produce a literature for export to replace the dominant imported literature.

Characteristic of modernism as a whole is the promotion of a critical consciousness of national reality, accompanied by an integration or incorporation of its most diverse elements: the Indian and the Portuguese, the piano and the *berimbau*, the jungle and the school. As a mode of cultural criticism, modernist essays shaped ideas on ethnography, sociology, and economics, among other topics, beginning with Graça Aranha and Paulo Prado and extending to Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda, Gilberto Freyre, and Caio Prado, Jr. Modernism can also be viewed as an avant-garde movement that paralleled developments in European literature, its revolt against nineteenth-century norms, with particular attention to expressionism, cubism, and futurism for innovative methods of composition. While the modernists at first had no fixed aesthetic program or ideology, the Brazilian movement gained a structural referent from the European vanguard movements, through manifestoes, inventive shorter genres, critical experimentation, and literary events. One could say with some irony that the Brazilian modernists called on the European avant-garde when necessary for techniques with which they declared their independence from styles and ideas imported from Europe, at the same time that they developed national or folkloric themes that were not at all vanguardist in themselves.

An evaluation of modernist works must consider two essential directions: first, the critical nationalism resulting from a rediscovery and more comprehensive observation of Brazilian life; and, second, the modernists' search for innovative and contemporary styles of writing in which to express their new awareness of reality. The strength of this synthesis will form the basis of the movement's most innovative legacy, its serene and corrosive modernity.

What are the fundamental theoretical problems posed by modernism? The problem of form and content, previously outlined, can be integrated into a larger dialectic of what Antônio Cândido terms "local versus cosmopolitan."¹ Literary nationalism vies with universality in the treatment of themes or subjects. Concomitantly, Brazilian writers, with their European cultural heritage, were isolated from the miscegenated tropical population with its primitive, Amerindian or African roots. The urban modernist writers' debt to this second culture begins with the ironic twist that the primitivism so in vogue in the European vanguard movements to which the modernists turned for their aesthetic role models could be claimed as a natural component of their own magical environment at home. What is exoticism in Europe becomes the working clay of modernist art, at the same time retaining a certain in-house alien enchantment.

It can also be noted that modernism's definitive break with the past and proclamation of artistic independence is the work of a local elite with ties to the rural aristocracy. Although undergoing rapid change, this urban nature of modernism probably assured that the popular Brazilian traditions valued through its poetry, fiction, and folkloric research would remain the province and purview of urban, literate models of cultural diffusion. Composer Gilberto Mendes also reminds us, paradoxically, that experiments with artistic form could be considered ultimately more Brazilian than use of popular themes, some of which are strictly tied to foreign models and origins, such as the *cordel* literature or the *samba*.² Swept away in the breadth of their undertaking, modernist writers were perhaps not aware of how peculiarly theirs was the social portrait and the literary style that emerged from the Modern Art Week. It is nonetheless a tradition that has shaped both a theory of Brazil and the subsequent literature of six decades.

The assimilation of the European vanguard by aspiring modernist writers can be described through two contacts, separated by eleven years, and by two modes of experience. Oswald de Andrade's direct contact dates from his arrival in Europe as a youth of twenty-two in 1912, when he first discovered avant-garde movements in the arts, although he would wait some ten years before employing any of their techniques. In his memoirs about Paris, Oswald remembers learning of Erik Satie, Alfred Jarry, Cocteau, Picasso, along with Stravinsky and Marinetti. He read the Italian futurists in French, Apollinaire's *Cubist Painters*, and Jarry's novels, with their absurd and iconoclastic humor. During these years, Mário de Andrade was following European trends from São Paulo. His later essays mention the postsymbolist aesthetics of Paul Dermée and Apollinaire's *esprit nouveau* as influences, along with cubist and futurist practices of simultaneity and juxtaposition. Mário's insatiable reading included futurist, dadaist, and surrealist poetry, and he quoted from such figures as Breton, Cendrars, Tzara, and Maiakovsky. After returning to Brazil, Oswald tried to practice free verse and documentary or cinematographic techniques as applied to literature. His sense of geographic trends in poetry could

have been influenced by Blaise Cendrars' *Transsiberian Prose* of 1913, although Oswald's extended contact with the Swiss writer did not begin until 1923.

In the year after the Modern Art Week, Oswald, accompanied by the artist Tarsila do Amaral, renewed his contact with Europe's atmosphere of artistic rebellion. Tarsila's studio was frequented by such diverse personalities as Léger, Cocteau, and John Dos Passos. Through the intermediary of Cendrars, Oswald entered into contact with powerful stimuli: Francis Picabiá, author of his own "Cannibal Manifesto," and a wide range of provocative pamphlets, including *Nord-Sud*, *Sic*, and *391*. When Cendrars visited Brazil in 1924, his excursion into Minas Gerais accompanied by Mário, Oswald, and Tarsila, among others, was thus imbued with the ferment of the European aesthetic vanguard, via cubist theories, surrealist manifestoes, and dada humor. The modernists adapted what they knew of this impulsive and incoherent European avant-garde toward their own designs, as part of a broad tradition of modernity. In a retrospective account of modernism, Oswald attempted to place his ideas in a more traditional line of evolution in literary thought beginning with Mallarmé and passing to Apollinaire and beyond: "a new geometry/in the typographical form of the poem/A throw of the dice/Caligrammes/Futurism."³

An important contact with Portuguese futurism came through the 1922 tournée in Brazil of the young writer António Ferro, a participant with Fernando Pessoa and Mário de Sá-Carneiro in the magazine *Orpheu* (1915), author of several books of decadent aphorisms and of one influential manifesto titled *Nós*, which the modernists printed in their magazine *Klaxon*. Ferro's conference at São Paulo's Municipal Theater in July of 1922, titled "Age of the Jazz Band," was accompanied by a live jazz band that interrupted him at prearranged moments. Ferro's visit is celebrated in articles by Guilherme de Almeida, Ronald de Carvalho, and Oswald and through *Klaxon* camaraderie. Ferro himself describes the atmosphere: "Conducting raids, assaulting weak reputations, striking all the high hats that passed within reach, I spent almost four months with these good companions in a twenty-four-hour intimate comradeship, in a spiritual bohemia that I will never forget."⁴ Ferro's manifesto *Nós* celebrates the new age with a sensational and burlesque tone that constitutes a point of reference for Brazilian modernism: "A passing streetcar is an advancing century... death to the etceteras of life...let's be rebels... free men affixing billboards to the walls of the Hour."

Another source for modernist ferment can be found in the bohemian, aesthetic, and decadent atmosphere of São Paulo's premodernist years. Social nonconformity and literary theories were rehearsed through gatherings of small groups of writers and artists in salons or attic studios, art exhibitions, and bookstores. Modernist scholar Jorge Schwartz reminds us of the cosmopolitan tradition in which the vanguard developed, a literary system striving for totality and universality expressed through the urban cultural axis.⁵ In São Paulo, as in Fernando Pessoa's Lisbon,

coffeehouses served as the locale for bohemian youths to share their cultural anarchy and plan literary magazines. Oswald kept a diary titled "The Perfect Cookbook of the Souls of This World" and coined the pseudonym "João Miramar" (John Seaborne) as a literary and cultural alterego. While Pessoa was reading about Europe's decline in Max Nordau's *La Dégénérescence*, the Brazilians were discussing Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud. Graça Aranha's idealization of the new Brazilian man in his theories about the revitalization of the cosmos probably made more of an impact on the future modernists than they would have admitted on the occasion of his talk at the Modern Art Week. As early as 1912, Oswald's magazine *O Pirralho* caricatured and satirized political, social, and literary figures. Juó Bananere began a review based on São Paulo's Italian dialect, later taken over by Oswald and Antônio de Alcântara Machado. The influential *Revista do Brasil* and the magazine most closely associated with the Week, *Klaxon*, culminated in the radical *Revista de Antropofagia* of 1928.

The influences of the circus and of the cinema houses, an echo of the *belle_époque*, touched the modernists' imagination, as did the society soirées where they toasted their verses with champagne. There, novice poets rehearsed for such hosts as Paulo Prado and D. Olivia Penteadó, who actively promoted a literary revolution. Nothing so stimulated the young artists as their discovery of each other, a diversion that Mário captured in poetic verse: "in the gentle blue-green Cadillac of illusion, Oswald de Andrade passes by hunting geniuses in the midst of the throng."⁶

As important as the modernists' readings in the European *isms* were technically, the interior world of their poetry and fiction after 1922 is full of the premodernist years in São Paulo, with its ferment under the signs of festivity, youth, euphoria, and humor. "Do you want to know for sure how the Modern Art Week of '22 came about," wrote Oswald de Andrade. "I'll tell you: Anthony went to Paul's house, who took him to Joe's room, who showed him Peter's verses, who told him that John was a genius and that Carlos painted. And they all went out to discover Maricota. The only thing is, these individuals were named Mário de Andrade, Menotti del Picchia, Di Cavalcanti, Villa Lobos, Anita Malfatti."⁷

Mário de Andrade later formalized modernism's aesthetic creed as a right to aesthetic research, bringing Brazilian artistic intelligence up to date, and formation of a national creative consciousness. This program was put into practice with cosmopolitan yet unrepressed vitality. Typical of this unorthodox energy was the reading of Manuel Bandeira's poem "Os sapos" (The Toads) at the Municipal Theater, where the audience echoed the amphibian chorus of *yeses* and *nos*: "foi, não foi, foi, não foi, foi."

The enduring literary legacy of Modern Art Week, its most innovative and unique works, are those that could be called vanguardist both because of their experimental designs or techniques, initiated by the European *avant-garde*, and because of their radical cultural platform within the Brazilian movement.

A theoretical basis for this synthesis of vanguardist technique and national themes is found in Mário de Andrade's "Very Interesting Preface" to his book of poems *Hallucinated City* (1922) and continued in his essay "A Escrava que não é Isaura." Oswald de Andrade deepens the cultural context with his 1924 "Manifesto da poesia Pau Brasil" and the suggestive, metaphorical "Manifesto antropófago" of 1928. In poetry, the rebellion of *Hallucinated City* is succeeded by the documentary, cinematographic *Pau Brasil* poems published by Oswald at Au Sans Pareil in 1925, and punctuated by Manuel Bandeira's syncopated *Ritmo dissoluto* of 1924. In prose, Oswald introduces the poetic cubist novel in the *Sentimental Memoirs of John Seaborne*, which is carried to the extreme of aggressive, cannibalistic humor in the antiliterary grandfinale of 1920s society, which is the non-novel *Seraphim Grosse Pointe*.⁸ Mário de Andrade, through myth and metamorphosis, primitivism and parody, creates the novel *Macunaíma*, the hero without any character, who paradoxically symbolizes the new Brazilian identity promised by Modern Art Week. Each of these works contributes to a dynamic collage of national reality while building a Brazilian modern library.

Written in 1921, the twenty-two poems of *Hallucinated City* are an attack on the middle-class sensibilities of São Paulo and the destructive self-satisfaction of the masses, in the midst of a lyrical communion between the poet and his tumultuous city, in which he wept, sang, laughed, and bellowed "I am alive!" As poetry, *Hallucinated City* stands between the vanguardist urge to shock and insult the reader, on the one hand, and the postsymbolist fragmentation of lyrical voice, the experimentation with poetic language, on the other. Although Mário amends Dermée's formula, "Lyricism plus Art equals Poetry," by clarifying art to be "Criticism plus Words," the basis for Mário's "Hallucinism" is freedom of the lyric impulse through the unrestrained unconscious. Exaggeration and simultaneity evoke poetic polyphony, which the poet compares to a nonmelodic arpeggiated structure of tones at the service of futurist aesthetics: the suggestive, associative, symbolic, universal, and musical power of the liberated word. *Hallucinated City* initiates the modernist vanguard through its intensity and vital inventiveness. "Ode to the Bourgeois Gentlemen" epitomizes the Modern Art Week's sense of revolt: "I insult the bourgeois! The money-grubbing bourgeois! I insult the cautious aristocracies [whose] daughters speak French and play the 'Printemps' with their fingernails. Hate and rage! Away with the good bourgeois gentleman!" The poet describes himself as a "Tupi Indian strumming a lute," like a native outcast lost in cosmopolitan gray mist, whereas his poetic stroll through hallucinated São Paulo finds literary parallels in Cesário Verde's phantasmagorical excursion through Lisbon of the 1870s in the poem "Sentiments of a Westerner," or Fernando Pessoa's illusory "Lisbon Revisited" of 1921. The unique contribution of Mário's *Hallucinated City* lies in its free manipulation of poetic language and the Brazilianizing of vanguard techniques through the exploitation of the sonorous possibilities of the Portuguese language. In particular, Mário employs assonance ("um longo som redondo"), paranomasia

("entes/frementes/de mil dentes"), and astonishing rhymes ("Pacaembús/tutús/luz") for parodic effect.

The most completely vanguardist poem of early modernism is the "profane oratorio" that ends *Hallucinated City*, titled "The Moral Fibrature of the Ipiranga." In expressionist hyperbole, 550,000 voices and 5,000 instrumentalists gather in the Valley of Anhangabaú, alongside the Municipal Theater of São Paulo, to act out the city's modernist drama. Conductors are brought from abroad. Parts are distributed to assembled forces of conventional writers and mentalities, millionaires and bourgeoisie, workingmen and poor, the green-gilt modernist youth, and the poet himself as coloratura soprano soloist. The poem/libretto spells out the social, cultural, and artistic conflicts in an allegorical dialectic of old against new. Confrontation produces madness and finally catharsis, as the young native artists are magically absorbed into the Brazilian soil to be reborn under the germinating light of the Southern Cross; while from windows of the city palaces, theaters, and hotels there comes an enormous derision of whistles, catcalls, and stamping of feet. Mário's grandiose theater of madness discovers Brazilian poetic language in modernism's own birth ritual, the personification of the dialectic struggle of vanguard against tradition, renewal versus stagnation, and the artist versus the bourgeois. *Hallucinated City* also strikes innovative notes in that Mário allows the reader to participate in the creative process by filling in some blanks with his or her own obscenities and through a reflection of the act of writing itself, as evidenced in the work's dedication to Mário de Andrade, the Master, signed by Mário de Andrade, apprentice, author, and disciple. *Hallucinated City* is thus cast as a manifesto, an experiment, and a declaration of lyrical freedom.

At Mário de Andrade's house in 1923, Oswald de Andrade recited some of his brazilwood poems that were published in the *Revista do Brasil* in 1923 and as a volume in Paris in 1925. With *Pau Brasil* poems Oswald presents a different approach to poetic structure and text. His book is composed of 140 titled poems, each a fragment of a larger reality. Each poem-fragment is like a photograph in an album or a colored geometrical figure in a kaleidoscope, with which the reader may create his or her own design. These 140 units carry ironic or humorous titles, indicating an estrangement between the reader and the text, and between the levels of time and meaning inherent in the portrait of a slice of Brazilian reality. Parody and humor accompany the poet with his Kodak, in pursuit of invention and surprise, of a document or reality that will acquire poetic resonance when placed in a meaningful structure. Eleven macrounits assemble the fragments and orient our reading along the theme of a voyage through time and space, from the colonial "History of Brazil" through "Poems of Colonization" and "Carnival" to the contemporary "Light Posts of São Paulo" and cultural excursion to Minas Gerais. The finale, desanctifying the "Canção do Exílio" by romantic poet Gonçalves Dias, parodies the discovery of Brazil in a metaphor of decolonization by a traveler returning from Paris.

Oswald's experiments with form, more radical than *Hallucinated City*, are based on synthesis and a

poetic language often reduced to a process of signs given geometric, typographical meaning. In the "History of Brasil" section, Oswald reconstructs and deconstructs the literature of discovery by selecting twenty-three fragments from actual sixteenth and seventeenth-century chronicles, giving them ironic or humorous titles and interpretations and placing them chronologically under the names of their real authors, in one case using the original French of a Capuchin monk. This camera eye *bricolage* causes the reader to react to a formal and linguistic tension, a destruction of the original meaning presented as text and its substitution by a critical distance. In "country of gold," for example, the Portuguese colonizer writes, "all have a way of life/and no poor man walks by doors/begging as in our Kingdom"; or in "festival of the race," "there is a certain animal in these parts called the Sloth/that in fifteen days won't even cover the distance of a stone's throw"; or the theory of Brazil in "the prosperity of São Paulo," "around this city are four villas of friendly people/whom the fathers of the Company indoctrinate/besides many others/who daily descend from the backlands."⁹

The constructive innocence of *Pau Brasil*'s poetic flashes fulfills the precepts of Oswald's 1924 "Manifesto da poesia Pau Brasil": synthesis, equilibrium, invention, surprise. The macrosections on immigration and settlement document the developing reality of the nation. The poem "new iguaçu" is borrowed from the names of small business enterprises: "Three Nations Pastries/Import and Export/Ideal Butcher/Modern Milk/Parrot Café/Unity Grocery/In the country without sins." This last line interested Mário de Andrade, who noted in his copy the "lyrical murmur" that escapes from the final verse. Oswald, however, sought only to objectify and illuminate what passed near São Paulo's "Light Posts," as in the poem "aperitif": "Happiness goes on foot/through Antonio Prado Square/It's ten blue hours/the price of coffee is as high as the skyscraper morning/Tietê cigarettes/automobiles/the city without myths."

Echoing Oswald's "Manifesto of Brazilwood Poetry," Brazil's rich ethnic background--natural, picturesque, ingenuous--appears as an innocently discovered poetic object. The poem "pronouns" is a recipe for popular Brazilian speech: "Give me a cigarette/Says the grammar/of professor and student/and of the wise mulatto/But the good black and good white/of the Brazilian Nation/Say every day/Cut it out friend/Gimme a cigarette." More interesting poetically is the creation of a minimalist image, unifying concrete structure with thematic synthesis: "Along the line" fixes the poetic instants of a train passenger's observations of the landscape: "Coconut trees/By twos/By threes/By groups/Tall/Short." Cultural criticism becomes a matter of discovery, close reading, and participation by the reader in a poetic synthesis of reality. The reader and the strolling photographer are one: "Freezer of hearts/Underneath blouses/Autograph album/Your lens flutters-flirts/Courts/Captured smiles/You're a glory/Offering of poetry by the dozens/Tripod of public squares/Animal under a tree/The sun's silent cannon."

