

DOSSIÊ

Classical Tradition in Brazil: Translation, Rewriting, and Reception

Tradição clássica no Brasil: tradução, reescrita e recepção

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Abstract:

The essay provides an overview of the dossier as a whole and assesses its contribution to current scholarship in classical reception studies. It outlines the discursive framework in which the papers, individually and collectively, inscribe themselves and highlights the ways in which they reinforce, challenge, and expand the critical horizon.

Keywords: Classical Reception in Brazil; Classical Litteratures; Brazilian Litterature.

Resumo:

Este artigo apresenta em linhas gerais o dossiê e avalia sua relevância para a pesquisa atual na área dos estudos de recepção dos clássicos. Apresentamos o contexto discursivo em que os artigos se inscrevem, tanto individual quanto coletivamente, salientando os modos pelos quais eles reforçam, desafiam e expandem o horizonte crítico.

Palavras-chave: Recepção dos Clássicos no Brasil; Literaturas Clássicas; Literatura Brasileira.

This dossier¹ includes most papers presented on a panel organized at the 144th annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in Seattle (USA) in 2013. The panel was the first presented to an Anglophone audience that was devoted entirely to classical reception in Brazil. Following a panel organized at the same convention a year earlier under the title "Postcolonial Latin American adaptations of Greek and Roman drama," the panel sought to raise awareness among classicists in the northern hemisphere about the classical tradition in Brazil. Despite the wide presence of works from ancient Greece and Rome in Brazilian literature, classical reception in Brazil is still largely unknown outside national academic boundaries. Since then the scholarly landscape has happily changed. There has been a growing number of panels and

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¹ Konstantinos Nikoloutsos would like to thank Rodrigo Tadeu Gonçalves for the honor, and challenge, in extending the invitation to give a response to the panel from which this dossier emerged. Many thanks are due to Anastasia Bakogianni for the useful suggestions and criticism she provided when she acted as a referee for the journal *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies*, to which the papers were originally submitted.



publications on the afterlife of antiquity in Latin America, in which Brazil features steadily and prominently.²

The goal of this dossier is twofold: first, to create a bridge between Anglophone scholarship and Brazilian researchers; and second, to encourage other Brazilian scholars and students to produce further work on classical reception. The dossier, thus, aims to place research in Brazilian classical reception on the map of global classical reception studies established by such fundamental works as Martindale 1993; Hardwick and Gillespie 2006; Martindale and Thomas 2006; Hardwick and Stray 2008; and Hardwick and Harrison 2013. These works have overlooked not only scholarship on Brazilian classical receptions but also the important work that Portuguese scholars have conducted systematically on classical reception in Portugal, the colonial power that was the conduit through which the classical tradition was disseminated in Brazil.³ The papers, therefore, form a groundbreaking dossier that should be of special value to academics interested in the afterlife of antiquity from a comparative and transcultural perspective. They illustrate the overlapping features and complementarities, and at the same time expose the complexities and limitations that the geographic expansion and linguistic enrichment of the field of classical reception entails.

Written by established and emerging authorities in Brazilian classical reception studies, the papers gathered in this dossier investigate seminal works of the country's literary legacy that range widely in terms of both genre and chronology — from the early post-Independence period to modern times, with an emphasis on the reproduction and amalgamation of topoi, poetic forms, myths, and themes appropriated from classical literature. Although restricted in scope, as they do not explore the appropriation of Greek and Roman texts across an array of cultural media or in a temporal continuum, the papers contribute a great deal to our store of knowledge about the uses and abuses of antiquity in modernity. The dossier explores

² A conference at the University of Maryland with a focus on the reception of Greece and Rome in Hispanic America and an international conference at University College London dedicated to the reception of ancient drama in Latin America and the Caribbean were both organized in 2014. In May 2017, another international conference was organized at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens under the title "One Hundred Years of Dialogue: Latin American Responses to Hellenism." In October 2017, a workshop entitled "Encounters with Classical Antiquity in Latin America" was organized at Yale University. English publications on Brazilian classical receptions include: Croce (2006); Coelho (2013); the essays by Dixon, Santos, and Gemelli in the 2015 *Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Drama in the Americas*; and the essays by Kouklanakis and Gonçalves and Flores in the 2016 volume edited by Rizo and Henry, itself based on a panel organized at the 2014 annual meeting of the Society for Classical Studies.

³ Some of these volumes have been published by the Portuguese Classical Association and include: Oliveira 1999; Oliveira, Teixeira and Dias 2009; and Souza e Silva 1998, 2001, and 2004. More recently, Maria de Fátima Souza e Silva from the University of Coimbra has been coediting a four-volume collection on the reception of classical themes in Portugal and Brazil published by Brill. The first volume on Antigone's reception was published in 2017.



the ways in which Brazilian authors, translators, and intellectuals "digest" the classical Other in a typically "anthropophagic" manner (as proposed by the modernist *Anthropophagic Manifesto* of Oswald de Andrade in 1928) in order to "cannibalize" the Other and establish something new, that is, to create and to enhance Brazilian literature and culture. The authors and works analyzed by the contributors demonstrate the ubiquity of classical tradition in Brazilian literature and its catalytic role in generating and shaping our prose, poetry, and theater — a "renewed classical tradition," as the dossier seeks to illustrate. To this end, the case studies will demonstrate that Brazilian authors normally adhere to classical standards and genres, in order to insert the culturally accepted "higher" tradition into a new territory, where it is called to play different yet equally important roles.

More specifically, the dossier as a whole redefines reception as rewriting. This means either a verbatim translation of ancient works in the language of the target audience (in this case Portuguese) or the process of transcribing the source text culturally and adapting it to the sociopolitical realities of the receiving nation. To a greater or lesser extent, all the papers in the dossier touch on issues of translation, literal or metaphorical, and call attention to the role of the modern author as a mediating figure (and hence conveyor/producer of meaning) between past and present. Translating and rewriting are ways of creating new meaning from the long chain of receptions that inhabit the territory occupied by the Portuguese since the sixteenth century. The cultural and political forces that shaped Brazil are traced back to the first clashes between the Europeans and the native Brazilians, producing a mixture of pasts, origins, religions, and peoples: the Amerindian, the African, the European, all intermingled in a unique cultural melting pot.

Furthermore, the dossier as a whole illustrates that the case study is the *sine qua non*, an indispensable research tool without which we can neither historicize nor theorize classical reception in a given geographical setting. Case studies that examine rewritings in juxtaposition with the ancient texts by which they are inspired and subsequently situate them in their modern literary and sociopolitical context help us avoid overarching theses and conclusions. This method of analysis calls attention to an important parameter in the reception process: the specificity of the historical moment that prompts and shapes a modern author's interaction with, and creative transformation of, classical material. Reading a modern work both within the textual tradition from which it is drawn and in connection with the cultural conditions that inform it and to which it responds enriches our understanding of not only what is reproduced, modified, or omitted when antiquity is transplanted into modernity but also, more crucially,



how and why.

As Vieira illustrates, Machado's re-stirring of Rome's literary legacy in the early post-Independence period cannot be studied independently of the aesthetic discourses and prevailing conditions in the public sphere that generated the author's engagement with classical antiquity and inspired him to appropriate the past as a vehicle through which to articulate and communicate his views about the present. Similarly, as Vasconcellos shows, nineteenth-century hexametric translations of Homer and Virgil were produced by poets who subscribe to a school of thought that sees the past as a source, if not the sole source, of authority and artistic ideal. Motivated by this understanding, they attempt to bridge the temporal gap between their classical prototypes and their contemporary readers by reviving ancient epic in a metrical form perceived to be loyal to the genre.

Critical judgments of such modern responses must take into account an important component in the process whereby antiquity is recreated in modernity: the embeddedness of texts in their own time and over time, for writing and rewriting do not take place in a cultural vacuum. It is methodologically unorthodox to examine a given instance of reception only through comparison with the classical model precisely because the ancient source text is not the original. It is just another link in a long "chain of receptions" (Jauss 1982: 20; Schmidt 1985: 70; Martindale 1993:7, 2007: 300) and incorporates previous (dominant or counter-hegemonic) interpretations and responses to the textual tradition from which it stems. Ancient texts are themselves rereadings of previous sources adapted to a specific cultural milieu.

This hermeneutic model that espouses as its core element an emphasis on historicism has an additional advantage. A contextualized analysis of a modern rewriting of an ancient text helps cast light on what classics means to different authors at different spaces, temporal as well as geographical. Greco-Roman literature is celebrated as the foundation of the western canon, but the meaning of the texts we have inherited from these two ancient civilizations is neither fixed nor universal. As Martindale (1993: 3) has cogently argued, meaning is constituted or actualized at the point of reception.⁴ Building on this formulation, Batstone (2006: 17) has added that "The point of reception is the ephemeral interface of the text; it occurs where the text and the reader meet and is simultaneously constitutive of both." Meaning, thus, is largely subjective and depends on the reader (his/her educational background, prior familiarization with

⁴ See also the chapters in Martindale and Thomas (2006), especially those by Martindale, Batstone, Haynes, and Leonard, to which my analysis here is indebted.



the classical world, expectations, and goals in reading an ancient text). Meaning is also determined by the particular historical juncture. The aesthetic and scholarly trends, as well as the sociopolitical conditions of the time at which an ancient text is read, shape responses to it. The reader's own beliefs and values establish a hermeneutic horizon around the text. This is also true about modern authors, for authors themselves are readers of ancient literature.

As Vasconcellos demonstrates, Odorico Mendes reads Virgil through the eyes of the nineteenth-century conservative intellectual who studied at the University of Coimbra, as was the custom for the sons of the Brazilian elite, and privileges linguistics over semiotics in his verse translations of the Roman poet's oeuvre because his aim was to legitimize Portuguese as a language capable of reproducing the sound effects and preserving the semantic properties of Latin words. Whereas Mendes defends the poetic nature of ancient epic, the contemporary playwright Ariano Suassuna, as Cardoso and Santos argue, desacralizes his classical model and recreates the *Aulularia* through a play in which the characters of Roman comedy undergo a process of *transculturation* — to use a neologism coined by Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s, which has nowadays become something of a critical *topos* in Latin American studies. The Plautine comic figures are extracted from their original setting and are transplanted into a new environment in which elements of the primary culture fuse with and submit to those of the receiving culture, producing a hybrid text that promotes cultural specificity without necessarily negating a cross-cultural interpretation.

Vasconcellos' case study illustrates that, although Greek and Latin embarked on a transatlantic voyage and arrived in Brazil in the context of Portuguese imperialism and cultural superiority, in the years following the independence of the country the classical tradition was not seen as a colonial mechanism used to eradicate the indigenous consciousness. Instead, it was deployed as a tool for social criticism and artistic expression. In terms of gender, if Mendes strived to safeguard the otherness of Virgil's text by means of a foreignizing translation, Machado adopted an assimilative and domesticating approach to classical literature. This method could be perceived as an act similar to colonization. The ancient text is appropriated, acculturated, and subsequently exploited by modern writers who place it at the service of their own ideology. Simply put, modern authors do not subject themselves to the past, but the past to their goals and their own understanding of it. Of course, there is another way to look at this interaction with antiquity and argue that the classical text undergoes a "quasi postcolonial experience" (Hardwick 2005: 109). It is liberated from the ideological closure imposed on it by the European colonizers and is set free to take on new roles, meanings, and forms. The paradox



in this appropriation process is that the classical languages and literature, which were enforced by the colonial power, become the vehicles whereby a newly emancipated state seeks to gain cultural autonomy and self-expression.

Machado, as Vieira points out, writes in a milieu that was recently inserted in a postcolonial context, since 1822 is the year that marks the beginning of Brazilian Independence. Periodization is a useful tool for the study of literary history, but while the division of the past into chronological units is a device that facilitates its analysis a posteriori, this temporal systematization does not always work in the same way for those involved in the production of literature. Although it is contingent upon specific historical events (such as a nation's war for autonomy), decolonization, especially of the mind, is not a process that can be reduced to chronological terms. Decolonization is a rather relative operation. Literature, and of course thought, may already run counter to prevailing conditions while colonial domination is still a physical fact. By the same token, colonial practices, such as the recourse to the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans, may still prevail even after independence is declared. In other words, a nation subjected to foreign rule for a long period of time — Brazil's colonial subjugation lasts for more than three centuries — cannot switch the clock of history upon liberation and all of a sudden start operating on postcolonial time, erasing cultural habits of its recent past. Besides, when it is compared to its Spanish-speaking neighbors that severed ties with the colonial power radically, Brazil is an anomaly in the southern hemisphere. Before it gained its independence from Portugal, the metropolitan government moved to Brazil. "Brazil absorbed its origins, like some mythological figure who swallows its parents."⁵ Brazilian classical receptions of the pre- and post-Independence period, therefore, must be understood in this context of reversal of dynamics between metropolis and colony, for Brazil became (and still is) the metropolis of the Lusophone world.

Oliva Neto describes an interesting relation between modern translator and ancient text. Translating Greek and Roman epic poetry in Portuguese dactylic hexameters can be understood as an act similar to that of submission. The translator surrenders himself to the stylistic imperatives of the original despite the fact that, as Oliva Neto points out, Portuguese does not make the distinction between short and long syllables. At the same time, it is a liberating process, for the translator aims to salvage a fundamental stylistic feature of the source text that is lost in prose translations. Verse translations represent an act of recovery or

⁵ González Echevarría et al. (1996: 1).



resurrection in that they aspire to bring back to life an important characteristic of ancient poetic composition that is acknowledged by academics on a theoretical level, but is forgotten in poetic practice. However, in addition to the fact that they often have to sacrifice semantic fidelity for the sake of stylistic fidelity, verse translations convey the false assumption that there can be one 'true' version of the source text in the language of the host culture. As Borges notes in his essay titled *The Homeric Versions*, translations of the *Iliad* are "merely different perspectives of a mutable fact, a long experimental game of chance played with omissions and emphases."⁶ Hexametric reconstructions of Homer and Virgil are a reminder that translation is a literary act that is complete in one way but incomplete in other respects, and that there are linguistic and cultural differences between antiquity and modernity that a single translation, whether in prose or verse, cannot fully recapture.

The plurality of responses to Greek and Roman literature discussed by the papers that are included in this special issue calls for a reexamination of the term 'classical tradition' that features in the title. As opposed to Greece, Italy, and other European countries that were once included in the 'classical world,' the achievements of the ancient Greeks and Romans are not part of Brazil's own cultural heritage. Portuguese colonialism and white elitism imposed in the country what we nowadays call the 'classical tradition.'⁷ To borrow terminology from Goff (2005: 13), we can imagine the classical tradition as a plow *pushing* its way through time, marginalizing and eradicating the indigenous cultural elements. Another way to look at this process is by visualizing the source text *pulled* from its ancient context and altered to suit the needs of its new setting by artistic forces that appropriate it toward their own ends.

According to the first, *pushing* scenario, the classical model (such as the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* or the dactylic hexameter, as Vasconcellos and Olive Neto respectively discuss) is understood as taboo — as a cultural product that cannot be modified (at least externally) and whose value lies in the very fact that it remains unaffected by historical conditions, and thus carries authority and prestige. In the second, *pulling* scheme, the classical model, as Cardoso and Santos illustrate, does not determine its own trajectory, but is absorbed in, and becomes fully metamorphosed by, the process of recontextualization. In this case, the ancient text is revitalized and enriched through interaction with modern ideas and becomes the site where the autochthonous and the imported, the authentic and the syncretized, the high and low art coexist

⁶ Quoted in Bassnett (2011: 2).

⁷ See Laird (2007: 227) who describes classical tradition as an allochthonous "monument that can stand only awkwardly on [Latin] American soil."



and compete against each other as to which of the two will rise in the surface of the modern rewriting and which will be suppressed, subjugated, and eliminated. This process, thus, complicates critical assumptions about the transatlantic migration of classical culture in a horizontal and hierarchical manner.

It is precisely on account of this symbiotic yet agonistic relationship between ancient and modern themes and ideas that the argument was recently advanced that the most appropriate term to refer to appropriations of classical antiquity in Latin America is not *tradition*, but receptions (Nikoloutsos 2012: 3), for every time an ancient text is read by modern eyes new meaning is added to it; therefore, we cannot talk about a text but texts.⁸ Tradition and its variants, such as legacy or heritage, denote an uncontested transmission of classical texts across time and space. "The 'classical tradition' tends to imply canonicity, even when the post-antique engagement with the antique is anti-canonical" (Silk et al. 2014: 5). Reception, on the other hand, denotes the active participation of modern authors in giving meaning and cultural prominence to the works of Greeks and Romans (Martindale 2007: 297-303).⁹ Even when an author like Odorico Mendes declares his faithfulness to a seminal text like the Aeneid and devises ways to recreate its diction and rhythmic effects in Portuguese, he essentially mediates, and thus imposes on his reader, his own perception of the intentions of the original, thereby disconnecting it from one chain of receptions and re-inscribing it into another. Whereas tradition connotes that the process of transmission is unchallenged, reception acknowledges that, because of the number of writings and readings entailed in the process of the transmission of antiquity — and let us not forget that writers are also readers — meaning is not monolithic, but constantly constructed and renewed in response to socio-historical circumstances and artistic tendencies.

To sum up, the dossier illustrates how acculturation and amalgamation of classical forms and ideas deployed in the Brazilian literary tradition played an important role in the construction of Brazilian cultural identity, often as part of an attempt to set it free from the dominance of Greco-Roman/Portuguese tradition. The process is similar to the *aemulatio* that

⁸ Hardwick (2007: 324-326) cogently argues that postcolonial rewritings of classical texts undermine the assumption of a single tradition and could be more productively studied as the complex intersection of material that has migrated from ancient Greece and/or Rome with elements appropriated from (inter)national histories and cultures.

⁹ As Bakogianni (2013: 2-3) has eloquently put it, "The difference between reception and the study of the classical tradition is that reception offers more of an all-inclusive model of study of this phenomenon... [and not] a canonical reading of the classical model to the detriment of its reception. Reception is about our dialogue with the classical past, ..., and as a two-way conversation rather than as a monologue prioritizing one or the other."



informs classical works themselves, according to which recreating the old is, at the same time, an act of respect and transgression. Yet, as the papers seek to demonstrate, the reworking of the classics, spanning almost over two centuries of political independence from the European metropolis, becomes a means of breaking free from colonialism (whether from Portugal or from more recent kinds of imperialism) not only in cultural ways but also in political ways. From Odorico Mendes's *aemulatio* to the modernist and avant-garde movements, classical literature and culture have often been regarded as an indispensable European Other, against which the battle for a national identity is fought. This is the governing principle behind all the papers presented here, from the reception of classical texts in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Brazil to more recent movements, such as the contemporary theater of Guilherme Figueiredo and Ariano Suassuna, and the radical avant-garde poetry of the generation of the 1950s. In this regard, the dossier offers valuable insights about the ways in which time and space affects the reading of classical texts; about the ways in which antiquity is understood and disseminated through these (re)readings; and about what the temporality of classical texts tells us about the cultural forces involved in their transmission.

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Caletroscópio - ISSN 2318-4574 - Volume 6 / n. 1 / jan. – jun. 2018



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[RECEBIDO 24/02/2018] [ACEITO 01/09/2018]