# EPIC POETRY IN BRAZIL

Literary Innovation and Debate in the 19th Century

Roger Friedlein | Marcos Machado Nunes | Regina Zilberman







### **Epic Poetry in Brazil:**

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E-book









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#### Introduction

In nineteenth-century Brazil, epic poems might appear to belong to a literary genre that had already left behind the high points of its history, namely the colonial-era epics Caramuru by Santa Rita Durão and O Uraguai by Basílio da Gama. In addition, in the context of the cultural transformations of Romanticism, the very idea of literary genre appears problematic. Pillar of a literary practice based on authority and norm, literary model and imitation, the old system of genres is constituted by the use of stable referentials that ensure the reception and communicability of a text. But this logic of creation and circulation of literature will no longer make sense with the emergence of new aesthetic and literary values like the autonomy of the creative subject (and, by extension, of the literary field as a whole), the imagination as a source of creation, dismissing the norm and the model, and originality, imposing each creator the construction of his own path to follow. In the passage from the 18th to the 19th century, we have a scenario of radical transformations in literature accompanying a wider context of transformations in culture and society, on a global scale.

However, as in many of the transformations that mark this period, the past cannot be fully supplanted.

In the case of epic poetry, traditionally conceived as narrative poetry with an elevated style, heroic subject matter and a discourse inclined to approach a fictional universe in a totalising manner, the tendency towards innovation was counterbalanced, at that moment, by the logic of the formation of national literary canons.

In Portugal, for example, a consensus is very close to being reached around a text from the literary past – *Os Lusíadas* (1572), which occupies the central place in the canon. In Brazil, a consensus will be impossible, and that place, idealised for a long time, will remain vacant, despite the countless attempts, in general built around the figure of the Indian as a convergent factor of heroism and identity.

These attempts form a set of texts that contradict the classical thesis of the death of the epic and its replacement by the novel. Marked by innovation, by transgression and, equally, by the intention to dialogue with a millenary literary tradition, a series of epic texts will be published or remain in fragment or project, with different degrees of ambition and canonicity. In general, their reception will be problematic. The vast majority of these texts do not have a second edition, and much remains to be investigated concerning this little explored corpus. Some bibliographical references of studies on the epic production in Brazil and in European literatures in the nineteenth century will be given at the end of this introduction.

This publication presents a collection of studies that deals with the situation of epic poetry – between tradition and innovation – in Brazil in the nineteenth century, both in the texts and in the debate they trigger. In this sense, the volume is divided into two sections: "Tradition and innovation in epic practice", covering some of the epic texts produced in the period, and "Epic poetry, object of debate", which analyses moments in which a critical and theoretical discussion on epic poetry takes place.

As far as creative practice is concerned, the combination of epic genre tradition and romantically influenced innovation marks, for instance, *Confederação dos Tamoios* (1856).

Rafael Brunhara's chapter, "The *Confederação dos Tamoios*, exemplary epic", analyzes how Gonçalves de Magalhães' epic poem represents the consolidation of the ufanistic intent of creating a national epic, which already affected writers from the generation of 1830 onwards. According to Brunhara, since its first reception, however, the work was overshadowed by severe criticism, especially that of José de Alencar, who accused it of ineptitude in versification and an inadequacy that occurs both thematically and formally and, paradoxically, as Saulo Neiva (2017, p. 8) points out, in a deviation from the consecrated models of the epic genre. Brunhara analyzes in the texts that are part of the so-called "Polêmica sobre a *Confederação*" (the "Polemics on the *Confederação*") the competing definitions of the epic genre and argues that the poem by Gonçalves de Magalhães not only employs rhetorical-formal elements of an epic whose prototype is Virgil (including the reformulation and generic mixture undertaken by the poet of the Aeneid

in relation to Homer) as well as makes use of these to highlight themes dear to Romanticism, thus seeking a harmonization between the classical model and a certain aesthetic program of the first romantic generation. In this way, Magalhães' conception of the epic genre would be in accordance both with his own poetic programme and with a model of the epic not properly considered in the polemics about the poem. In this sense, Brunhara shows how the poem dialogues with precepts of the epic of the past and, at the same time, agitates future discussions about the genre.

In this context, Indianism as a potentiator of innovation, as in the case of Magalhães, leads to several other projects penned by central actors in Brazilian Romanticism, sometimes unfinished (ZILBERMAN, 2020). However, innovation does not only concern indigenous protagonists – some of them pictured not only as warriors, but also as singers of traditional poetry –, but also the new traits of heroism in more traditional epic figures as well, such as Pedro I in *A Independência do Brasil* (1847-1855).

"Transformations of epic heroism in *A Independência do Brasil*, by Teixeira e Sousa", by Marcos Machado Nunes, begins by analysing the reception of the poem. According to Nunes, critical voices contemporary to the poem's publication were emphatic in highlighting the presence of a dynamic of continuity and change in elements of the poem, with particular focus on the incorporation of other genres within the text. Nunes then focuses on how this dynamic influences the construction of heroism in the poem, a central element in the tradition. The poem's hero, Prince Regent Pedro (later Emperor Pedro I), is portrayed as an epic hero who, guided by a divine plot to which he is subjectet, acts through the use of words rather than as a warrior. Moreover, the poem presents Pedro's relationship with the collective as being based on a model of affection drawn from family relations.

The poem *Anchieta, ou O Evangelho na Selva* (1875), by Fagundes Varela, is also in a certain sense indianistic; it combines however the Gospel and Indianism against the background of the epic genre. New is here the anchoring of its poetic dimension in the voice of the author, and not in tradition. Roger Friedlein starts from this observation in "Narrator and poet in Fagundes Varela: *Anchieta ou o Evangelho nas selvas* (1875)". According to

Friedlein, although among the many facets of José de Anchieta features that of being the author of the first epic poem written in the Americas, De gestis Mendii de Saa (Coimbra, 1563), in the literary recreations of the poet's character in the 19th century – as much as in the numerous biographies of the Jesuit – other aspects of his personality predominate. In Confederação dos Tamoios, for example, the figure of Anchieta, in his capacity as poet, would appear as marked by a romantic sensibility of a lyric poet who finds himself in communion with nature and the autochthonous inhabitants of his adopted country. As shown in Gonçalves de Magalhães' poem, Anchieta would mark the beginning of a historical lineage of Americanist poets that would be continued until reaching the 19th century. Fagundes Varela's poem, on the other hand, according to Friedlein, stages the polyfacetic missionary in his preaching of the Gospel, and therefore as a narrator possessing a power of irresistible attraction, creating for his neophyte audience, each night, a fascinating world of peace to which the audience is carried away, and whose flagrant contrast with the warlike reality of everyday life remains unresolved until the end of the poem. The figures of Anchieta as a poet and Anchieta as a narrator indicate, according to Friedlein, how between the two epic poems, by Goncalves de Magalhães and Fagundes Varela, the focus is transferred from the national dimension of the epic to another one, which is closer to the narrative. As the epic genre is transformed, the self-reflexive vision of the first poet in Brazil conceived in the epic poetry of Romanticism is also modified. Varela distances himself from the historicist self-reflexivity of earlier Romanticism to arrive at an individualist poetics. In this sense, Fagundes Varela's poem is a site of literary innovation, but also of implicit reflection on poetry and its making.

In fact, innovation not only coexists with reflection but certainly inspires it, triggering an explicit theoretical debate at the time around its limits and possibilities, justifying, substantiating or condemning it. An intense (though sometimes dispersed) reflection on epic poetry is articulated in discourses that circulate in diverse textual typology: paratexts, literary historiography and criticism, press, private writing (letters), as well as in literary texts, particularly in the epic poems themselves, in moments of selfreflection (as we have seen in Fagundes Varela). Precisely the literary discussion that takes place around the epic genre in nineteenth-century Brazil will be the second focus of the papers that make up this book and occupy the section "Epic poetry, object of debate". These investigations will help to dimension the expectations that are built about the genre and to better understand the particular texts, their construction and reception.

If it is true that, from Romanticism onwards, an intense debate on the relevance and scope of epic poetry has arisen in Brazilian literary circles, this debate is not unique to Brazil or isolated in the country. It occurs also in the context of international exchange, in the first place between Brazil and Portugal. Accompanying the celebrations of the third centenary of its publication, *Os Lusíadas* enters the discussion agenda with force. If, however, from the point of view of poetic practice, Camões' poem serves as an epitome of tradition, on the other hand, we find in Joaquim Nabuco an innovative critical proposal that introduces us to a very particular situation of the tradition/innovation dynamic.

This situation is the object of Regina Zilberman's chapter, "Os Lusíadas according to Joaquim Nabuco: the debate over the poem's nationality in the press of 1872". Joaquim Nabuco publishes in 1872 Camões e Os Lusíadas, a book preceded by an article, with the same title, printed in the newspaper A República. He presents, through the press, the main theses of his book, which are based on the surprising assumption that The Lusiads belong to Brazilian literature. To better dimension the meaning of Nabuco's discussion on the epic, Zilberman contextualizes it in the debate on the existence or not of a specificity of Brazilian literature in relation to the Portuguese, which runs through the nineteenth century and is the basis of Indianism. According to Zilberman, the assumptions of Romanticism on the construction of a national literature, based on the representation of Nature and the indigenous people would be, for Nabuco, mistaken. Such bases would not correspond to the concrete reality of Brazilian society, which would find its particularity, rather, in slavery, an institution, in turn, doomed to disappear. For Nabuco, since there is no viable basis for the affirmation of his particularity, being, as Zilberman notes, in a way, "foreign" the literature then made in Brazil, a vacuum is created that could be filled by the literary heritage of the

Portuguese language. Thus, for not finding a reason to justify the separation of Brazilian and Portuguese literature, Nabuco adopts the aesthetic criterion to affirm the superiority of *Os Lusíadas* over *Confederação dos Tamoios*. The premise of Nabuco's text remains the idea that epic poetry would be able to synthesize the aspirations of representation of nationality. More than that, with Zilberman's work, it becomes clear how the debate on the epic comes to imply the more general questioning about the possibility of a whole national literature, indicating the centrality of the genre in current conceptions of literature and its discursive representations as a synthesis of a national literature.

But this debate also occurs (largely overseen until now) between Brazil and its South American neighbors. As Dirk Brunke shows in his contribution to this volume, "Brazil and the River Plate: critical intersections and possibilities of the epic in the 19th century", Brazil appears in this context as a space that is favourable to the epic. It is the authors from the River Plate region who discover the epic potential of the Brazilian national territory. At any rate, Brazil and the Río de la Plata assumed a central position with regard to the epic genre: the controversy over Confederação dos Tamoios (1856) was accompanied by the publication of a large number of poems, exceeded only by the quantity of texts published in the Río de la Plata region. Brazilian and Río de la Plata epics have mutually inspired one another. There are, for example, theoretical contributions from authors from the Plata region - exiled in Brazil – who theme "Brazil" in their texts. The most important example in this context is the epic poem Cantos del peregrino (1846-57), by the Argentinian José Mármol, who uses the motif of the "tropical" to stylise Brazil as a space of inspiration, favouring heroic poetry, comparing it with the climatic conditions of Argentina, arid and lacking in poetic stimuli. In his study, Brunke explores the contact of the Rioplatense (Juan María Gutiérrez, José Mármol) and Brazilian (Joaquim Norberto Souza Silva) authors, focusing on the theoretical discourse and how it is articulated in paratexts (prologues, footnotes, glossaries) and in self-reflexive passages in the epic poems.

Particularly in Brazil (unlike in Argentina), the discussion on the epic constitutes a central piece of the discourses of nationality formation, but also of aesthetic innovation. Notorious to this day has been the debate between José de Alencar and Gonçalves de Magalhães, which unfolds in the conflict between the epic and the novel. Alencar, though probing the possibility of a larger formal rupture, (like Nabuco) condemns Magalhães's *Confederação dos Tamoios* precisely because it is not worthy of occupying the position of the coveted "national poem"; thus, the assumption shared by both is that there needs to be such a text. This polemic is certainly the best known and most studied episode in the history of epic poetry in 19th century Brazil. But as we have seen in the works of Regina Zilberman and Dirk Brunke, the reflection and discussion on the genre and its meaning in the context of emerging national literatures is not exhausted in it.

Some of the other contributions to the debate consider the epic thereby satirically, and are articulated retrospectively, from the point of view of those who already consider the debate to be over. In this sense, Antônio Sanseverino's interest in his contribution to this book, "In the middle of this prose, an epic poem", is to go through the references to the epic in the prose of Machado de Assis. The starting point is the critical performance of Machado, called to debate the attempts of epic poetry, mainly in the 1860s. Machado's chronicles incorporate epic references, in elevated terms, to ironize the precariousness of daily life in Rio de Janeiro. In the novel and the short story, according to Sanseverino, the reference to the epic is also presented as irony to debased characters and actions. In a way, the critic learned the literary field and the place of epic poetry in Brazil. The fictionist, in turn, made a prose in which the discourse incorporates the authors of the tradition, epic scenes and characters, but only in vocabulary. This mismatch between scenes and narrative discourse indicates the impossibility of heroic action, revealing a modern prose, which breaks with the epic tradition. Parallel to these developments, however, the epic genre continues to be topical and is pushed towards modernity. Sousândrade's O Guesa will be the best example for that.

This volume brings together a selection of articles that stem from two phases of a PROBRAL project (CAPES and DAAD) between UFRGS in Porto Alegre and Ruhr-Universität in Bochum.

The project has manifested itself in, so far, three congresses of the Deutscher Lusitanistenverband DLV (Association of German Lusitanists)

in Mainz (2017), Augsburg (2019) and Leipzig (2021), and has produced a series of publications as its main outcome: *A epopeia em questão* (2019), *Épica e modernidade* (2022, first in the journal of the Brazilian Association of Comparative Literature ABRALIC, 2020), a thematic *dossier* in *Revista Épicas* (2020) and another *dossier* in *Conexão Letras* (2022).

This volume brings together a selection of articles from these volumes, and this introduction is largely based on the introduction to *A epopeia em questão*, where we had already formulated the basic problems with a slightly different focus.

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Bochum/Porto Alegre, the editors

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