

THE DEMISE OF MYTH IN
TRISTE FIM DE POLICARPO
QUARESMA

Este ensaio dedica-se ao estudo da desvalorização dos três mitos fundamentais brasileiros em *Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma*. Trata-se do mito da terra fértil, o mito da influência do índio na cultura brasileira, e o mito do brasileiro pacífico. Policarpo Quaresma, a personagem principal do romance, na sua aventura de procura do verdadeiro Brasil, descobre a falsidade dos seus mitos, descoberta que é acompanhada pela degradação geral da sua condição na vida, sendo o último passo desta degradação a morte de Policarpo. A sua morte então é a consequência última da sua tomada de consciência da falsidade do mito. O estudo aprofunda as causas da morte de Policarpo por meio de uma consideração das consequências sérias e ambíguas do mito, que ao servir de ópio às massas converte-se numa ferramenta poderosa nas mãos do Estado que o utiliza para atingir os seus próprios fins. Artigos recentes de Krista Kamenetsky e Wolfgang Mieder aprofundam o grande êxito da apropriação do mito de raça pura pelo Estado Nazi com o fim de promulgar e promover a sua ideologia. A significação da contribuição de Lima Barreto à tipologia do mito é ter reconhecido tanto a capacidade destrutiva como a construtiva do mito.

Ensaio
Essay

In *Triste Fim de Policarpo Quaresma* Lima Barreto¹ portrays Brazil in the early days of the Republic focusing in particular on the period that falls between Deodoro da Fonseca's attempt to become a dictator and Floriano Peixoto's reprisal of the Revolution of 1892. Most historians have considered this period to be of crucial importance in the process of consolidation of the republican system of government in Brazil.

Lima Barreto chooses to portray the young, emerging nation from the perspective of Policarpo Quaresma, a middle aged civil servant obsessed with seeking the "true" Brazil. Barreto's focusing on Policarpo creates a multi-panoramic perspective for the reader who is thus afforded the opportunity of viewing Brazil not only through historical, geographical and travel texts read by Policarpo, but also through situations of his daily life which include descriptions, analyses and perceptions formulated by Policarpo's acquaintances.

From this multi-panoramic perspective, I see the emergence of the unifying, overriding theme of an individual's loyalty to his country being not at all contingent upon his having a true understanding of what his country is, but rather upon his belief in national myths. Because those who hold political power realize the importance of national myths for the preservation of nationhood, they relentlessly persecute the people who challenge them.

In the course of the novel the main character Policarpo Quaresma sets out to test his country's pivotal myths, an act for which he is condemned to die, but not before his bitter recognition of their falseness and futility. The textual fabric, however, in which Policarpo's quest and demise take place, allows for the emergence of a critical image of Brazil, a composite view of myth and reality which find its validation in

the works of present-day historian and sociologists, such as E. Bradford Burns, Glauco Carneiro, Gilberto Freyre, and Philip Reisman.

The three myths, tested by Policarpo Quaresma, are at the core of the Brazilian cosmos's shaping mythology. These are the myths of the land, of the Indian, and of the non-violent Brazilian. The myth of the land glorifies its fertility, the myth of the Indian glorifies Indian influence on Brazilian life, and the myth of the peaceful Brazilian glorifies Brazilian docility and non-violence.

The myth of the land was consolidated in *História da América Portuguesa*, written by Sebastião da Rocha Pita in the first half of the eighteenth century in which "nature especially was praised in all her splendor in a Gongoristic exaltation of the beauty and opulence of Brazil."² This view of Brazil summarized many of the books on Policarpo's shelves and was the one he initially embraced and defended with vigor. Led by a false sense of patriotism, Policarpo disregarded the much more realistic view of Brazil contained in the other works he owned, such as those written by Southey, Varnhagen, Marcius, Capistrano de Abreu and others. From every source he extracted only the myth of Brazil's superlative virtues, as can be seen in his vigorous defense of "proeminência do Amazonas sobre todos os demais rios do mundo" (25). An outline of his views summarizes perfectly the myth of the superiority of Brazil's land and the docility of its people:

Tinha todos os climas, todos os frutos, todos os minerais e animais úteis, as melhores terras de cultura, a gente mais valente, mais hospitaleira, mais inteligente e mais doce do mundo. (35)

Policarpo, however, did not just glorify the Brazilian land; he rejected everything that was not Brazilian. He envisioned a national isolationism as the best way to appreciate Brazil, evidenced in his irate remark to a colleague dreaming of Europe: "Ingrato! Tens uma terra tão bela, tão rica, e queres visitar a dos outros! Eu, se algum dia puder, hei de percorrer a minha de princípio ao fim!" (27)

While Policarpo did not manage to fulfill this dream of traveling across his land from one end to the other, he did come to know it better. Following his release from a mental asylum, he

engaged in farming a small *sítio*, ironically called "Sossego", located two hours from Rio. Believing as he did that "A nossa terra tem os terrenos mais férteis do mundo" (86), he was easily persuaded by his niece to take up this farming venture with wholehearted vigor. When the work proved to be exceedingly hard and his inexperience had to be compensated for by the wisdom of his hired man, Anastácio, "Não se agastou com as primeiras ingratidões da terra. . . Capinava e capinava sempre até vir jantar" (91), he resisted facing reality by doubling his work effort.

Gradually, however, Policarpo saw the myth of the fertile land whither on the vine. His disillusionment began with the invasion of fire ants, the fight against which became an all-consuming activity (129) and culminated with the death of "Duquesa", his sister's favorite duck, overcome by a three-day-long lethal paralysis (133). While Policarpo refused to give up easily, maintaining continually that with just a little bit more effort he could solve Brazil's land problems (134), his niece Olga understood immediately the sad and sorry state of desolation in the Brazilian land and its rural inhabitants:

O que mais a impressionou no passeio foi a miséria, a falta de cultivo, a pobreza das casas, o ar triste, abatido de gente pobre. . . Por que, ao redor dessas casas não havia cultura, uma horta, um pomar?. . . Não podia ser preguiça só ou indolência. . . Seria a terra? Que seria? (119).

Articulated by Olga, the closure and the demise of the myth of the land did not convince Policarpo who continued testing it until his emergency leave to join Floriano Peixoto's forces against the 1892 insurgency. Yet the difficulty experienced by Policarpo in this process of testing the land myth leads to the validation of the thesis contained in the descriptions of Southey and Varnhagen, a thesis which emphasizes the hostility of the land and the inaptitude of the colonizer.

Similarly the myth of the Indian was embraced initially with vigorous devotion and belief by Policarpo. Indianism, as explained by Bradford E. Burns, is a natural outgrowth of anti-Lusitanism,

"In Brazil, anti-Lusitanism, understandably unleashed by independence, reverted to the exaltation of the Indian as the legitimate and true ancestor of Brazil's nationality. . . the phenomenon was not new, since Gregorio de Matos in the 17th Century had been able to deride those who boasted of their aboriginal ancestors"³

The myth was easily elevated to an unprecedented height by the romantic model of the noble savage. The importance of the Indian in the formation of Brazilian culture and the universality of the Tupi language were further confirmed by reputable historians such as Karl F. P. von Martius, whose 1848 account, *How the History of Brazil Should be Written*, doubtlessly exerted great influence on Policarpo's feverish imagination.

When he first began to research national music, Policarpo discovered that all the music available to him had come from Europe. Possessed by true anti-European and anti-Lusitanist sentiments, he found in the Indian culture the essence of all things "truly" brazilian, be they customs, lifestyle or language. Policarpo tested this myth of the Indian by practicing Indian customs. The rebuke received by this practice leads the reader to understand what the ultimate consequences of *Indianismo* would have been, had it been taken seriously.

Significantly, Policarpo first decided to use his Indian customs to greet two visitors, his Italian *compadre*, Vicente, and his daughter, Olga. Neither of the two could relate to Policarpo's ceremony of crying and hair-tearing on seeing visitors. Their reaction was best summarized by Vicente, who, acknowledging that the custom might well be Brazilian, described it as a "sad" custom nonetheless. His remark was reinforced by his daughter's comparison of this display of "joy" to a bad omen, "parece até agouro" (43). Subsequent testing of the myth in the form of Policarpo's request to the National Assembly that Tupiguarani be recognized as the official language of Brazil (60-62), followed by an absentminded issue of an office memo in Tupi (69), resulted in his hospitalization in an insane asylum.

Policarpo's hospitalization, the result of the violent clash of the myth of the Indian with a Brazilian reality dominated by European influence, demonstrates a negative attitude to things

truly Indian in a society in which only the "idea" of the Indian is glorified. The idealized view of the Indian held by the demented Policarpo, interested in emulating the Indians' language, customs and lifestyle is counterbalanced by the view held by his sensible niece, Olga, who considered the Indian to be an uncivilized savage, quite removed from the Brazilian reality of her day.

... e se lembrou que, por estas terras, já tinham errado tribos selvagens, das quais um dos chefes se orgulhava de ter no sangue o sangue de dez mil inimigos. Fora há quatro séculos (215).

The internal logic of the two views of the Indian contained within the text, brings this myth to a closure by allowing the reader to conclude on his own that Indian language, customs and lifestyle simply did not fit in contemporary Brazilian society. The falseness of the myth of the Indian imposed upon the reader by the internal logic of the text clearly echoes the opinion expressed by Capistrano de Abreu, paraphrased as follows by Sílvia Romero.

He [Capistrano] understood the weakness and inevitable death of romanticism and launched the beginning of another literary formula for poetry and for art in general. He appropriately appraised the necessity to examine all the old base for Brazilian sentiments and he introduced the true ethnographic principle into Brazilian criticism and history, until then falsified by the mania of Indianism.⁴

Each time Policarpo tested a myth and found it did not work, he suffered severe consequences. On discovering that in the Lusitanian-European Brazil the myth of the Tupi language and its influence could not have much substance, Policarpo Quaresma landed in a mental hospital. His coming to terms with the demise of the myth of the land was postponed when he joined Floriano's forces of reprisal against the Revolution of 1892. And it was only while testing the third and perhaps the most powerful national myth – the peacefulness of the Brazilian people – that Policarpo came to terms with the demise of the land myth, which in turn had a profound impact upon his attitude toward life. The contented, self-satisfied man that he had been once gave way to a

somber and moody personality, aware at last of the falseness of his illusions, as evidenced in a letter written from jail to his sister:

Esta vida é absurda e ilógica; eu já tenho medo de viver, Adelaide. . . O melhor é não agir, Adelaide. . . para que do fundo de mim mesmo ou do mistério das cousas não provoque a minha ação o aparecimento de energias estranhas à minha vontade, que mais me façam sofrer e tirem o doce sabor de viver. . . (197).

He realized that his constant search, motivated by his desire to find the truth, led to his action of testing and destroying the sacred myths which until then had sweetened his life. However, once destroyed, these could never again bring him the peace and calm he desired, the purely material pleasure of living the "sensação material pura e simples de viver" (198).

While the realization of the demise of the first two myths – the land and the Indian – made Policarpo's life very difficult, the demythifications of peacefulness and docility of the Brazilian people was not only the most painful and difficult to accept, but it actually cost Policarpo his life. His final horror on perceiving the falseness of this myth in Brazilian reality is equaled only by that of the present-day revisionist historian, Glauco Carneiro. Early in the text, Lima Barreto shows Policarpo's faith in the myth of "a gente mais valente, mais hospitaleira, mais inteligente e doce do mundo", (35) being gradually eroded and constantly contradicted by everyday experiences in which acquaintances, such as Genelício, demonstrated with every move, every word, every action that Brazilians were not the way he expected them to be: sweet, devoted, unselfish and courageous. Albernaz, Genelício's future father-in-law, cultivated Policarpo's friendship because of family interests but when Policarpo could no longer be of any use to the family, neither Albernaz nor Genelício demonstrated any concern for him during his hospitalization following the memo in the Tupi episode. Albernaz only reiterated self-righteously that, indeed, Policarpo was as mad as he had suspected. "É o que eu dizia" (58). The myth of the Brazilian people's kindness, constantly eroded in the course of daily life and abundantly described throughout the narrative, was dealt the death blow by Policarpo's realization of the Brazilians' aptitude for and practice of violence. Having witnessed accidentally a mass execution of

political prisoners (204), Policarpo sent a letter of protest to the government, which resulted in his imprisonment and subsequent sentence. In prison, Policarpo realized how foolish he had been for having cherished all those myths about his country. Sane and recovered from his mythomania, Policarpo reviewed accurately his myth-testing experience:

O tupi encontrou a incredulidade geral, o riso, a mofa, o escárnio e levou-o à loucura. Uma decepção. E a agricultura? Nada. As terras não eram ferazes e ela não era fácil como diziam os livros. Outra decepção. . . Onde estava a doçura de nossa gente? Pois não a via matar prisioneiros, inúmeros? Outra decepção. A sua vida era uma decepção, uma série, melhor, um encadeamento de decepções (207).

Policarpo's personal bitterness is echoed in the writing of the famous revisionist historian Glauco Carneiro:

Contrariando a crença geral de que o temperamento brasileiro é essencialmente pacífico, detestando a violência, a Revolução Federalista, que rapidamente evoluiu de dissensões locais para ampliar-se numa guerra civil contra o Governo Federal, caracterizou-se pela ausência quase completa de cavalheirismo nas lutas entre "maragatos" (federalistas) e "picapaus" (republicanos), sendo tais combates responsáveis pela fama de selvageria que durante muito tempo acompanhou os brasileiros do Extremo Sul.⁵

Glauco Carneiro supports his position with that of another horror-stricken historian, Arthur Ferreira Filho, who describes this war's activity in most graphic terms, "nessa guerra civil soltaram-se instintos maus dos homens e atentados monstruosos macularam os mais nobres sentimentos da humanidade". Thus Glauco Carneiro uses the historical data generated by the *Revolução Federalista* to put to sleep forever the myth of Brazilian pacificity:

Alinharemos a seguir alguns fatos demonstrativos da impiedade e selvageria da Revolução Federalista e da repressão que se lhe seguiu, os quais. . . jogam por terra a idéia geral de que todos os movimentos brasileiros são pacíficos devido à boa índole do povo.⁶

Having lost his faith in this last Brazilian myth, Policarpo felt devastated by his former acceptance of all these deceptions. His whole life had been made up of a series of beliefs in false illusions. Yet he had to pay dearly for his newly recovered sanity because his testing of Brazilian mythology finally resulted in the loss of his life as if life were the one and only price that could be paid for the loss of myth. Policarpo Quaresma thought that he had to die because he no longer believed in the myth, when, in fact, he died because by testing the myth, he destroyed it on both the personal and social levels. On the personal level, without the myth, his life had become empty and pointless.

... e assim é que ia para a cova, sem deixar traço seu, sem um filho, sem um amor, sem um beijo mais quente, sem nenhum mesmo, e sem sequer uma asneira! (208)

It was therefor unnecessary for him to be tried for the nonexistent crime of the loss of myth, because without the myth his life was worthless and so the sentence was an appropriate way to end it. "E eu, que não tinha crime algum, nem era ouvido, nem era julgado: Seria simplesmente executado" (208). The reader can perceive that on the social level, Policarpo had to die, because of the extreme danger that he, as a myth breaker, presented to society in general and, in particular, to those in power.

Having confronted myth and reality, historian Glauco Carneiro leaves the Brazilian reader devastated with no place to turn. Having done the same, however, novelist Lima Barreto suggests another posture, a posture that seems to be both sane and bearable. At his hour of death, Policarpo may have realized indeed that he had spent his life pursuing a chimera, inventing a country that had never existed: "A pátria que quisera ter era um mito" (207). But while Policarpo's last moments are filled with bitter disillusionment, the reader knows that his very belief in myth had made his life bearable. His life, which, in his letter to his sister, he described as "absurda e ilógica" (197), stood out above others. His life made him notable, and made him forget his lack of family, love and other earthly comforts (207). The myth gave his life color and texture and made it worth living. It was this very myth that moved both Ricardo and Olga to immortalize Policarpo's memory (215). The texts of both the historian Glauco Carneiro and the writer Lima Barreto do indeed destroy the

Brazilian myth, yet, unlike the historian, the writer takes into account the vital importance of myth in daily life, which he seems to perceive as an organizing element analogous to "thought and action", a process articulated by Lucien Goldmann. For Lucien Goldmann, "thought and action" have the vital function of organizing "social structures so that life becomes more acceptable."⁷

If an often-mentioned similarity between Don Quijote and Policarpo Quaresma does in fact exist, it lies in both characters' test and destruction of myth. They both die upon unmasking myth's falsity. Each character's death, a direct result of the demise of the myth, may lead the reader to assume that preservation of the myth is essential to human survival, that to render life bearable on the level of everyday reality, myths of sustenance are necessary on the level of the imaginary. The death of myth on the level of the imaginary would then necessarily translate into death of the individual on the level of reality. Through the figure of Policarpo himself, the reader discovers how the belief in myth can lead to the illusion of well-being and satisfaction. The acts of questioning the myth and discovering its falsity led Policarpo to a state of depression and unhappiness, which finally culminated in social action—his letter of protest.

It is precisely this dissatisfaction followed by social protest that is perceived as most dangerous to those in power. Citizens who believe in the national myths maintain an illusion of contentment and satisfaction while those who lose faith in national myths are moved to protest and social action. Hence, the death of national myths represents not only a direct threat to the stability of the state but also a challenge to the very foundations of the concept of statehood. The execution of myth breakers therefore may be seen as justifiable in defense of statehood. However, while the historian exposes the myth for what it is, the novelist deftly uncovers its double-edged property. On the one hand Lima Barreto's text reveals the myth as constituting a citizen's "opium". Driven by his belief in the myth, Policarpo was a happy, orderly, productive citizen. The loss of his belief in each myth was accompanied by a subsequent loss in productivity, orderliness and contentment. On the other hand, Lima Barreto suggests that governments, aware of the powerful influence of myths, exploit them for their own purposes, and are thus forced to

silence anyone who might challenge or destroy these myths. Therefore, in the novel, Policarpo's death is the logical outcome of his myth-testing while, paradoxically, death is the outcome he desires, for without myth his life is not worth living.

Governments have always been aware of the power of myth to calm and appease the citizenry, or to move it to war, if necessary. However, only recently have studies demonstrated the pernicious influence of myth when appropriated by the state for its own purposes. The Augustan model, probably known by Lima Barreto, shows only the positive effects of myth appropriation by the state. R. M. Ogilvie's analysis of Augustus' success in bringing about peace and prosperity relates it very closely to Augustus' ability to revitalize and circulate old religious myths. "For the social and constitutional recovery which he [Augustus] engineered could not have succeeded unless it had been based on a widely diffused religious confidence to make it succeed".⁸

Yet, while beneficial in its contemporary effects, the *Augustan* model provided the modern state with the ability to inflict enormous damage through the use of myth. The appropriation of myth by the state has become the object of serious inquiry by such respectable myth scholars as Krista Kamenestsky and Wolfgang Mieder as well as such literary historians as François Pérus. François Pérus develops in great detail the exploitation of the myth of the gaucho in the effort of unifying the Argentine nation in the 19th century,⁹ while Wolfgang Mieder and Krista Kamenestsky conclude that Hitler's work would have been impossible without the expansion of myth through the folktale for the preparation of Third Reich Ideology and the promulgation of anti-semitism based on the "racial parasite" myth, a process described at length by Wolfgang Mieder.¹⁰ Krista Kamenestsky points out further that the Nazi state was quite aware of the power of the folktale for the promulgation of racial and political ideology:

The German folktale gained significantly in status and popularity during the National Socialist Regime, as the Party promoted it actively within the context of German folk education. A Party official put it quite plainly in 1935: 'The German folktale shall become a most valuable means for us in the racial and political education of the young'.¹¹

Thus the folktale was elevated to a special status in Nazi days in order to disseminate national myths among the young.

Whether Lima Barreto did in fact anticipate the potentially dangerous use of myth in the modern Nazi state is open to question. But a reading of Krista Kamenestsky's summary of the use of folklore as "an effective and potentially dangerous tool of the Nazi Socialist Weltanschauung"¹² certainly suggests that Lima Barreto was far more aware of the profound double-edged implications of national myths than is obvious at first glance and therefore deserves a significant marker in the topology of myth.

NOTES

¹ Lima Barreto. *Triste fim de Policarpo Quaresma*. 28th ed. (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1982). All quotations are taken from this edition. The English translation is *The Patriot*, trans. Robert Scott - Bucclench, London: Rex Collings, 1978.

² E. Bradford Burns. *Perspectives on Brazilian History*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). p. 45.

³ Burns, p. 50.

⁴ Quoted in Burns, p. 68.

⁵ Glauco Carneiro. *História das Revoluções Brasileiras*. (Rio de Janeiro: O Cruzeiro, 1965). p. 75.

⁶ Carneiro, p. 91 (cf. with Burns, E. Bradford. *A History of Brasil*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980. p. 293-300).

⁷ Lucien Goldmann. Structure: Human Reality and methodological Concept. In: *The Structuralist Controversy*. eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982. p. 110.

⁸ Ogilvie, R. M. *The romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York: W. W. Norton & Col, 1969). p. 124.

⁹ François Pérus. *Historia y Crítica Literaria* (La Habana, Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1982). p. 262-263.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Mieder. The Promulgation of Anti Semitism and Stereotypes through Folklore. *Journal of American Folklore*, 95: 378 (1982) p. 435.

¹¹ Krista Kamenestsky. *Children's Literature in Hitler's Germany*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1984). p. 70.

¹² Folklore as a Political Tool in Nazi Germany. *Journal of American Folklore*, 95:378 (1982) p. 235.