The reinterpretation of a Brazilian Play: O Rei da Vela

David George
Middlebury College

Oswald de Andrade’s *O Rei da Vela*¹, written in 1933 and published in 1937, received scant attention in its own time as a literary work, and the first attempt to stage it was repressed by Vargas’ secret police. Although Brazilian critics began to reassess the play in 1967, on the occasion of Teatro Oficina’s famous production, American scholars seem largely to have ignored what is one of the key works of Brazilian Modernism. And its relationship to historical context has been only superficially considered. The play, to be fully understood, must be seen essentially as an unmasking of 1930’s economic nationalism in Brazil², with a concomitant presentation of a radical view of class struggle. One must also consider the work’s inextricable links to the decline of the coffee economy, the fall of the Old Republic, and the rise of the Corporate State³. The play’s internal structures are bound to historical events and socio-economic realities by means of a wide range of avant-garde and anti-illusionist techniques. At the same time, *O Rei da Vela* must not be confined to its own period. It became significant as literature and as theatre only in the 1960’s, long after the Modernist period itself. In that context, it can be argued that Oswald’s play was in many ways a harbinger of later dependestivist viewpoints espoused by writers of that later period.

*O Rei da Vela* deals with a specific time and place (São Paulo and Rio in the 1930’s). It presents a kaleidoscopic view of Brazilian society and class relationships in a period of abrupt changes and crises. All social levels make a direct or indirect appearance: residues of the Old Republic—the decadent coffee oligarchy—, the emerging urban commercial and industrial bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie, the clergy, the intellectuals, the military, the immigrants —especially Italian—, the rural and urban proletariat, the poor and disenfranchised, the archetypal American capitalist. Historical events, too, play their part: the Depression, the decline of the monocultural coffee economy, the 1930 Revolution, the transition from British to American economic hegemony. Political polarization of the times manifests itself, from social revolutionary consciousness to Integralism. There are premonitions of future events: the rise of fascism in Europe, the advent of the repressive Corporatist State—Vargas’ Estado Novo—, the establishment of multinational corporations. The presentation of an entire socio-economic, political, and historical complex is structured around a radical, anti-imperialist view of economic nationalism.
Artistically, Oswald utilizes an array of avant garde techniques: Expressionist, Surrealist, Absurdist. The anti-illusionist techniques in the play bring to mind Brecht, though there is no evidence to support that Oswald de Andrade was acquainted with the German playwright's early work. Further, O Rei da Vela presents a form of analysis that will become common currency in the post-1930 Spanish American «boom» narrative: manipulation of masks and mytho-cyclical patterns within a dependency context.

FORMS, STRUCTURES, AND THEMES

The external, physical elements that comprise the setting and set of the play provide a visual framework for the socio-ideological-artist relationships. The set for Act I, a money-lender's office, establishes the first stratum of what will later crystallize into a hierarchy of exploitation: foreign domination, internal bourgeoisie, and internal proletariat (both urban and rural), along with sectors totally dispossessed. The «props» seen on stage in Act I include a futurist divan, a Louis XV desk, a telephone, candles of all sizes and types. That perspective suggests a Brazil looking toward the future while remaining in the past, a Brazil without a history of its own. Those themes relate both to 1930's economic nationalism—a future-oriented ideology based on industrialization and modernization—and to the future theory of dependency. There is also an Expressionist device used to symbolize Brazil's «imprisonment» by external and internal capital: a waiting room in the form of a cage where debtors are kept.

Art II takes place on a tropical isle in Guanabara Bay near the city of Rio de Janeiro. There are exotic birds, palm trees, a beach, and people dressed in the «mais furiosa fantasía burguesa e equatorial» (p. 97). The American flag flies from a pole. Additional elements are sounds of motors operating, a landing field, «móveis mecânicos». That Absurdist parody brings into focus a cultural juncture of the Brazilian bourgeoisie: Lus-Tropicalist exoticism for export, with an overlay of imported American technology. The scene reminds one of a Carmen Miranda movie—set and choreography by Busby Berkeley—which was precisely the inspiration for the Teatro Oficina performance of O Rei da Vela.

Act III takes place in the same setting as Act I, with «props» from a hospital clinic, symbolizing the defeat of one «rei da vela» and the rise of another, a theme to be analyzed below.

A constant in the set—candles—as well as the title—«candle king»—have varied and continually shifting symbolic values. The title is central to an understanding of the play's dialectic tension of art/ideology/society. The symbolic values of «rei» and «vela» unfold throughout the work and are fully revealed by the end of Act III.

The fundamental value of «vela» is economic. Because of the Great Depression and the coffee crisis, the electric company has shut down and the candle has come back into use. The protagonist, the usurer Abelardo I, has cornered the market in candles and thus becomes the candle king, «rei da vela». Consequently, «vela» is associated with notions of regression into feudalism, semi-colonialism, and underdevelopment. And the «rei da vela» represents the petty speculator, near the bottom in the hierarchy of exploitation. At the top is imperialism. Abelardo I himself sums up this process in Act I: «O pânico do café. Com dinheiro inglês comprar café na porta das fazendas desesperadas. De posse de segredos governamentais, joguicuro dio e certo no café-papel! Amoanetique ruínas de um lado e ouro do outro! Calculei até uma regressão parcial que a crise provocou...»

From its economic foundation, the candle symbol shifts to matters of social class. Abelardo I, who because of his money will marry into the traditional coffee oligarchy, is scorned by his adopted family as «rei da vela», «intruso», «arri-vista». He is a petit bourgeois, nouveau riche social climber.

Abelardo is destroyed by the very exploitative system in which he participates. As a result, «vela» turns into a death symbol, «velório» (or wake), and finally «válida» (or mass grave). Therefore a symbol of personal death, it comes to suggest collective death as well: the historical death of a people in a dependent country. When one candle king falls, another replaces him: Abelardo I is overthrown by Abelardo II. It is the unchanging cycle of non-history of all Latin American countries according to Oswald de Andrade's anti-imperialist focus.

The implications of title and set, the author's ideological stance. The main body of the play does so even more clearly.

HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

O Rei da Vela has a direct bearing on specific socio-economic systems and political events. The play begins with a reference to the financial troubles of the early 1930's. Because of the problems of the coffee market crisis and the Depression, credit is tight and many people have lost what small material wealth they once possessed. Abelardo I charges absurdly high interest rates. «O cliente», who represents all debtors, has paid more than twice the amount of his original loan just in interest and it is now two months overdue on his latest installment. Abelardo II orders him shot. A hierarchy of exploitation is thus established: segments of the national bourgeoisie exploit their countrymen and take advantage of the financial vicissitudes of the time, while foreign interests exploit Brazil's economic vulnerability and the nation is saddled with an onerous foreign debt.

Some blame the 1930 Revolution for the problems. «O cliente» says: «E a revolução em 30 foi um mau sucesso que complicou tudo» (p. 58). Vargas-style reform measures and populist appeals to the growing urban proletariat are the villains according to middlemen like Abelardo I who benefit from the crisis: «Lei contra a usura! Bolchevisas! Por isso é que o país se arruina» (p. 70). Similar scapegoats are «as exigências do operariado. O salário mínimo. As férias» (p. 77). The true villain of the play, as we shall later see, is imperialism.

The plot of O Rei da Vela hinges on the marriage of the nouveau riche Abelardo I to Heloisa, a member of an old coffee family ruined in the crisis (the parody of the classical love motif, Abelard and Heloise, will be explored in another section of this article). Her father, Belarmino, «está de tanga. Entregou tudo aos credores» (p. 64). Heloisa has consented to marry Abelardo I in order to recapture past comforts. Her genuine predilection is revealed by her declaration to Heloisa de Lesboa: «Se é que o pai se arruina» (p. 70). Since the coffee crisis and the decline of the coffee oligarchy, power had shifted to the cities and the rising urban bourgeoisie had begun to establish ties with the traditional rural «aristocracy», often in the form of marriage. Abelardo's marriage signifies for him the purchase of a status symbol: «Comprar esses restos de brasa ainda é um negócio» (p. 64). According to the perspective of Rei da Vela, the urban bourgeoisie is, by its very
nature as a social class, corrupt, cruel, and greedy; and the author views capitalism and imperialism as the prime causes of the chaos, suffering, and poverty. The concept of dependency comes to mind in this context, but the word must be used with caution. *O Rei da Vela* does present a full-blown dependency theory as we know it today. There are obvious differences, not the least of which is the lack of an elaborate and sophisticated theoretical formulation in the play. As a work of art, however, its *depêndência* resonances are loud and clear. Just as Oswald de Andrade reacted against economic nationalism, the theory of dependency is a reaction to developmentalism. A basic assumption of *O Rei da Vela* is that the Brazilian economy functions to serve the economies of the capitalist powers and that the urban bourgeoisie, represented by Abaelro, consciously participates to its own advantage: «Os países inferiores têm que trabalhar para os países superiores como os pobres trabalham para os ricos». E se: «que sou um simples feitor do capital estrangeiro... E por isso que posso uma lancha, uma lha e você [Heloisa]» (p. 94). The bourgeoisie may have certain ideals (e.g., liberal economic nationalism), but ultimately it cooperates with imperialism. The reason is that dependency, in Oswald’s view, is the key to bourgeois success: «A chave milagrosa da fortuna, uma chave Yale» (p. 90). As a result, Brazil remains «in hook» to foreigners; «aj hipotecamos tudo ao estrangeiro, até a paisagem!» (p. 147).

Dependency, however, extends beyond economics. Cultural dependency takes many forms, one being the restriction of autonomous understanding and knowledge: «Esse negócio de escrever livros de sociologia... fica ridiculo para nós, industrializados atrasados. Diante dos ingleses e americanos» (p. 80). Imported culture becomes distorted, grotesque. Dona Cesaria, Heloisa’s mother, serves «robas-de-galo»: «E a tradução de coquetel feita pela Academia de Letras» (p. 106).

In Act III, Abaelro I is destroyed by Abaelro II, who replaces him as candle king and husband of Heloisa, events that represent change without change: «Um cai, outro o substitui enquanto houver imperialismo e diferença de classes» (p. 151). That is, the dynamic of change remains external. Internal changes are circular, ritualistic. Abaelro II states the concept ironically during his wedding: «Heloisa será sempre de Abaelro. É clássico» (p. 158). Dependency is «clássica»: there is only endless repetition.

Fittingly, the final word in the play belongs to the American capitalist Mr. Jones: «Oh! Good business!» (p. 158). Jones is the phantom protagonist of *O Rei da Vela*, the manipulator behind the scenes. He first becomes visible in the second act in a sexual context with Heloisa. Sexuality is portrayed in a grotesque manner, for Jones teaches Heloisa to wrestle and box: «Ele é campeão de tudo isso em Nova Iorque, Wall Street!» (p. 105). Symbolically, Brazilian culture is prostituted, while received culture is distorted and dependency and exploitation are violent. Jones himself describes the essence of dependency—«a response to the needs of the economic center (i.e., the United States):»

Heloísa.—Diga uma coisa, Jones, porque é que o Brasil não paga as dívidas com o café que está queimando?

Jones.—No Brasil precisa avôes... Metralhices... trocar por café... Oh! Good business! Shut up! (pp. 122-123).

The denouement—the marriage of Abaelro II with Heloísa—takes place to make her available for Mr. Jones. The meaning is clear: Brazilian social institutions, although conducted by Brazilians, function on the basis of foreign economic control.

While revealing the nature of imperialism and underdevelopment, the work also suggests alternatives. Abaelro I, as his death approaches, recounts the parable of Jujuba, stray dog and mascot of the soldiers. Jujuba brings other strays into the barracks, but they are shot. Jujuba decides to relinquish the comfort of the barracks and join his comrades, even though he will die of starvation. Such a romantic vision of the class struggle, fidelity of the proletariat, and unity of the oppressed represents, in the sense of class solidarity, an alternate solution to dependency. Jujuba is «solidário com sua classe» (p. 154) while Abaelro I, once poor himself, betrays his class: «Trai minha fome» (p. 154). The soldiers also belong to Jujuba’s class; they will foment the social revolution. In the light of subsequent events in Brazilian history, one may consider this presumption naïve, to say the least. Nevertheless, «tenenismo» was still a heroic myth at the time of the play’s composition, and Jujuba may well symbolize Luis Carlos Prestes.

Having examined the author’s treatment of the historical situation and his response to economic nationalism, we shall now turn to Oswald’s means of conveying that situation and response—his aesthetic code and the destructive force of his art.

### Aesthetic Code and Total Theatrical Language

The complex aesthetic components of *O Rei da Vela* require for their understanding a variety of analytical perspectives. Those components are multi-dimensional within a temporal/spatial frame of reference. They represent an outgrowth of the São Paulo literary experiments of the 1920’s, and parallel artistic currents in Europe before and simultaneous with the time of the play’s writing. The components foreground Brazilian and foreign aesthetic transformations of following decades. The aesthetic code can be broken down into the following components: Modernist themes and the establishment of a Brazilian language; anti-illusionist techniques; avant-garde techniques; masks and ritual.

Oswald de Andrade is one of the great figures of the Modernist generation. Discussions and writings on Modernism usually include Oswald’s prose works, poetry, and manifestoes. Scholars generally hold that Modernist theatre is insignificant, and they rarely mention *O Rei da Vela* as one of the key works of the generation. The play’s polemical intensity is a factor, since it is placed on the aesthetic rather than the political thrust of Modernism, at least the São Paulo variety. Indeed, Alfredo Bosi, one of the best contemporary critics, lists among the Modernist’s now irrelevant traits their «inconsequência ideológica».

Nevertheless, *O Rei da Vela* imparts a strong ideological message through use of Modernist themes and techniques, thus representing a logical extension of the *Semana de Arte Moderna* program. The Modernist notion of anthropophagy is central to the play. (In fact, the reader may recall that Oswald is the author of the *Manifesto Antropofágico*). In *O Rei da Vela*, the metaphor according to which Brazilians devour each other and are devoured by foreigners has been transformed into the concept of hierarchy of economic exploitation. Also fundamental to the play is the anthropophagic paradox of rejecting while simultaneously devouring foreign aesthetic tenets. *O Rei da Vela* parodies European classical and romantic motifs, while it incorporates European avant-garde techniques; the purpose is to create a uniquely Brazilian language and ultimately to define Brazilian reality. Other Modernist works (e.g., Mário de Andrade’s *Macunaima*) attempt to define Brazilian reality in primitive, racial.
that in spite of the play’s relationship to specific historical circumstances, the author makes no attempt to present a realistic portrayal of Brazilian society. The relationship between art and reality can be a destructive one.

The first level of destruction pertains to the ideological foundation of the play: demolition of bourgeois mind-sets based on dependent capitalism and the hierarchy of exploitation.

The second level involves artistic destruction in many forms. One must certainly consider the fundamental influence of Dada. Specifically, however, Oswald’s artistic destruction takes the form of masks and unmasking. The characters, flat types who manipulate a language, are masks of the urban commercial bourgeoisie, decadent coffee aristocracy, and so forth. By revealing these masks, by mocking them, the author intends to unmask official bourgeois reality, to destroy its mind-sets. The masks, within the context of a total theatrical language, become grotesque. The reader will recall examples from the text cited above, such as Mr. Jones’ show-making with Heloisa. Destruction in this form saves the play from becoming a mere didactic exercise. As Mário Chamine observes: “Todo esse elenco recortado de protagonistas caíra num absolutismo didático, se Oswald de Andrade não o dinamizasse com o seu poder de análise demolidora” (op. cit., página 22). Oswald’s most powerful weapons are parody and sarcasm.

O Rei da Vela parodies the classical love myth: Heloisa and Abelardo. Their relationship revolves around finances and sexual aberration, as do most of the other relationships in the play. In his version of the love myth, Oswald manipulates the language of love. (Much of the destructive power of his language arises from the transformation of symbolic charges.) In one example, Abelardo declares his love in a grotesque manner to Dona Cesarina, his future mother-in-law: “Por que não sorri mais e exala esse perfume de rosas murchas?” (p. 101). The traditional rose of youth and beauty is transformed into a symbol of decay. He calls her “meu vésuvio.” The symbol transmutes in the following manner: Dona Cesarina is ready to go off sexually; she is large; she is old; she is scarred, wrinkled, rent, and pockmarked. The source of the sexual degradation, according to Oswald de Andrade’s analysis, is capitalist society itself. Other examples of similar symbolic transformations are “rei” and “vela” (see above).

Finally, the parody of the classical love motif takes on the meaning of the circular, of repetition of the same decadent rituals. When Abelardo punts that his marriage with Heloisa is “clásico,” the ultimate significance within the ideological/aesthetic framework of O Rei da Vela is that Brazil’s class system and hierarchy of exploitation will remain unaltered as long as the economy and class relationships are founded on dependent capitalism. Endless repetition means nonhistory. When “one falls, another replaces him,” no real change takes place; Brazil’s history does not unfold. And there is a further implication: the classical love myth is a foreign literary model, a European mindset and “ideology” of the pure relationship. Imposition of such an “ideology” represents dependency on a cultural level, and its presence suggests an ideological blind for the true relationship on the socio-economic plane. The relationship is a form of dependency that is unmasked — i. e., shown to be fundamentally “impure” through the various dramatic structures of O Rei da Vela.

NOTES

1 Oswald de Andrade, O Rei da Vela (São Paulo: Difusão Europeia do Livro, 1967).

During the Old Republic, economic nationalism expressed narrow class and financial interests rather than genuine national concerns. Furthermore, statements of economic nationalism had virtually no impact on the failure of the coffee-oriented export economy and price defense in the 1920s. Manufacturing and modernization became, to the minds of the nationalists in the 1930s, the means to greater economic and political independence. The Vargas regime during the Estado Novo took on many of the elements of economic nationalism as part of its official policy, particularly regarding state ownership and intervention in the economy.

3 The history of São Paulo, from the late nineteenth century to 1930, revolves around coffee. Production of coffee, at that time the principal export and source of foreign exchange, became focused in the state of São Paulo, and as a result Brazilian economic and political power gravitated to that region. The government of the Old Republic or «República Velha»—1890-1930—was controlled by the São Paulo coffee bourgeoisie. National coffee interests, however, took a back seat to international capital in various ways. Foreign capital investment, especially British, gained control of Brazilian coffee marketing and export operations.

4 The external financial strangulation, as well as overplanting and subsequent surpluses, gave rise to a series of coffee crises. The government of the Old Republic instituted periodic price defense and maintenance measures referred to by the blanket term «valorização». Because of the crises, a large number of coffee planters and the independent coffee «artistas» associated with the coffee estate feature of São Paulo society. The onset of the world economic crisis in the 1920s ensured the decline of coffee and the end of the coffee bourgeoisie’s hegemony. Disaster was inevitable for the Old Republic, whose fall brought on Getúlio Vargas’ initial tenure (1930-1945).

Vargas, who came out of the political machinery of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul—was an unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1930, but he was swept into office via military revolt. By 1937 he had become a dictator. He ruled by decree and censorship, and maintained a strong secret police force. Political parties on both the right and left were supressed. The new government was called the Estado Novo or «New State»; it was modeled after the corporatist states of Italy and Portugal. Vargas’ economic programs foreshadowed the developmentalist model of the 1950s. He initiated the drive toward industrialization and increasing government participation in the economy, which produced a tremendous spurt in industrial investment and output and an overall effort to establish basic state-owned steel and petroleum industries. Most Brazilians remained outside the economy, however, and foreign presence was felt more strongly than ever. By the late 1920s, in fact, the United States had replaced England as the principal foreign influence in the country.


5 The critic and Brecht had known, in the decade anterior, developed a theory of the afastament of the actor illusion of the scene Italian, mas não cremos que el estimasse muito divulgada nas fontes acessíveis a Oswald de Andrade, para que se pudesse estabelecer uma influência.

«E dizer que nesse tempo Brecht... já havia realizado alguns marcos do seu teatro épico com realizações memoráveis, e que Oswald de Andrade sem sofrer
do capitalismo», Mário Chamie, *A Linguagem Virtual* (São Paulo: Edições Quiron, 1976), p. 20. Chamie’s concept, which he terms «pan-sexualismo», is that Oswald de Andrade’s ideological action is linked to anarchic liberation, the organic representation of which is uninhibited sexuality. According to the author, the diionysian aspect of sex means for Oswald the overturning of stifling ethics founded on social class interest and prejudice.

There are, to be sure, significant differences between Brecht’s drama and Oswald de Andrade’s. While Brecht’s theatre production was vast, Oswald’s was meager: *O Rei da Vela*, *A Morte, O Homem e o Cavalo*, *Renúncia*, and *O santeiro do Monge* (the latter two unpublished). The influence of Brecht’s theatre has been monumental and his works have been staged all over the world. The Epic Theatre has established its own tradition — which is not to say there were no forerunners (i.e., Piscator’s Epic Theatre). *O Rei da Vela* was practically forgotten for 30 years until its first staging in 1967. Of Oswald’s other works, only *A Morte* has been staged — by an amateur group at the University of São Paulo. Nevertheless, *O Rei da Vela* does represent the first major break with the worn-out «comédia de costumes» formula and the point of departure for the revolution in contemporary Brazilian theatre: in the 1940’s, Nelson Rodrigues’ *Vestido de Noiva*; in the 1950’s, the founding of Teatro de Arena and Teatro Oficina; in the 1960’s, an explosion of engagé, ensemble, and experimental theatre.

**CARLOS BLANCO AGUINAGA, JULIO RODRÍGUEZ PUÉRTOLAS e IRIS ZAVAÑA, Historia social de la literatura española** (en lengua castellana), 3 vols.

Se trata de la primera historia de la literatura con intención rigurosamente metodológica en que la literatura se estudia en su auténtico contexto histórico-social, desde el feudalismo al franquismo, como una «rama de la historia». Así, se integra la literatura con la sociedad, la política, la economía, en las coordenadas de la dinámica histórica.

Un acontecimiento en la historia de nuestra crítica base para nuevos estudios, un libro polémico con el que, a partir de ahora será preciso contar.

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