

## **ALMEIDA JÚNIOR: THE SUN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE WAY\***

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### **SUMMARY**

Focusing the painting “Caipira picando fumo” [Peasant cutting tobacco], this article analyses the work of the Brazilian painter Almeida Júnior (1850-1899). The author discusses the way the artist depicted the social environment, nature, human types and regional peculiarities. He then questions the idea of nationality in Junior’s work, marked by instabilities of form which carry on a dialogue with the critical tradition of Naturalist determinism.

**KEY WORDS:** Almeida Júnior; nationality; naturalist determinism; Brazilian painting.

### **I**

The strong sun doesn’t appear to bother the man sitting on the steps of the house. A simple task concentrates all of his attention: cutting tobacco, attending to a small vice. This is not work strictly speaking. And his concentration corresponds to the painstaking aspect of the activity. Absorbed, his features do not reveal the tension of someone who needs to achieve a precise objective. It is enough for him to allow himself to be led by the familiar movements of his hands<sup>1</sup>. The fact that he is lost in thought reduces his physical presence and makes him less susceptible to the heat, enjoying a moment of intimacy, of one who finds himself surrendering to the rhythm of his wandering thoughts. In the background, the half-open door and the shadow of the interior of the dwelling reinforce the self-absorbed attitude of the countryman, as if the physical shelter of the house echoed the protection evoked by the psychological withdrawal, in almost a figuration of what we usually term “interiority”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The movement of the hands of the farm worker in this picture has always intrigued me. Indeed, I have never seen anyone cut tobacco in this way, i.e. moving the blade downwards. This position corresponds more, in my view, to the action of peeling an orange. At the same time, various individuals who I have consulted think that this position is plausible. This evidently does nothing to change the quality of Almeida Júnior’s canvas.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Cecília França Lourenço, author of the most extensive study on the work of Almeida Júnior (Master’s Dissertation “Reverendo Almeida Júnior” [Reviewing Almeida Júnior], defended at ECA-USP, in 1980), calls attention to this intimate dimension in the regionalist canvases of the painter. See “Almeida Júnior e a expressão de valores” [Almeida Júnior and the expression of values]. In *Almeida Júnior — um artista*

Only this protecting intimacy separates the backwoodsman from the environment in which he finds himself and saves him from the lack of differentiation, which permeates the whole canvas. The strong light and the extremely close tones tend to break the distance between all the elements of the painting in a menacing way. Culture and nature, men and things have too similar features and could almost take the place of the other. The floor of the yard is transported with very few nuances to the wattle and daub wall. And between earth and earth, the separations are also very rustic. Rough worn-out steps, supported by precarious stakes, the wooden frame of the house, which already leaves behind the marks of men's work and returns to its natural condition. Before changing his ideas under the influence of the "higienista" [Hygienist] movement of Belisário Penna and Miguel Pereira, among others, Monteiro Lobato would say of the clay hut of the Brazilian farm hand: "The communion of these huts covered with straw with the local land is so intimate that it gives the idea of something born from the ground by a spontaneous work of nature – if nature were capable of creating such ugly things"<sup>3</sup>. A better description is impossible. Subsequently, in the same decade, Lobato would consider Almeida Júnior to be the "dawn of the following day"<sup>4</sup> in Brazilian painting.

Physically too, the man hardly distances himself from this rough milieu. His simple clothes are worn like his surroundings. The white shirt, poorly cut without buttons, instead of highlighting the human figure, strengthens the sunlight, which acts mercilessly on his body. The corn straw scattered on the floor has a similar tone to the shirt and helps, in its dispersion, to reinforce the precariousness of the garment. His trousers, above all the left leg, are stained with soil. Nothing removes itself definitively from the earth. The exposed parts of the backwoodsman's body also have a tone close to that of the earth. Tanned by the sun, his skin reveals the roughness of a life obligatorily spent close to nature. The hands, and above all, the feet, have suffered from constant contact with the environment and become deformed, acquiring the eroded and rounded aspect of elements long submitted to the force of the elements.

Monteiro Lobato affirms that the definitive version of "Caipira picando fumo" was inferior to the study that also belongs to the Pinacoteca's collection. While the study was "(...) executed in the open air, with the artist's soul impregnated with the theme, the expanded edition (which also occurs in "Amolação interrompida" [Sharpening interrupted]) has "(...) all of the light defects of a second, expanded edition, prepared in a hurry exclusively for commercial purposes"<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, if the definitive version

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*revisitado* [Almeida Júnior - an artist revisited]. São Paulo, Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo [São Paulo State Art Gallery], 2000, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> "Velha praga" [Old Plague]. In *Urupês*. São Paulo, Brasiliense, 2002, p. 162. This article was originally published in *O Estado de S. Paulo*, in 1914.

<sup>4</sup> "Almeida Júnior". In *Idéias de Jeca Tatu* [The ideas of Jeca Tatu] São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1959, p. 79. In the apparent paradox between the criticism of the countryman and the support for the regionalist painting of Almeida Júnior, as we shall see below, lie some of the reasons that aid in understanding the importance that the painting of Almeida Júnior acquired for us, above all for natives of São Paulo.

<sup>5</sup> "Almeida Júnior". *Op. cit.*, p. 82-3. Almeida Júnior did not have the habit of making preparatory drawings for his canvases and his sketches were painted in oils. See the essay by Maria Cecília França Lourenço cited above, p. 14. In "Caipira picando fumo", Almeida Júnior used a farm hand from the region as model, named Quatro-Pau or Quatro-Paus [Four of Clubs/Spades], in reference to the highest card of the card game and

could have lost something of the freshness of the free study, it has gained much in realism and in harmony with the theme. The basic difference between the two pictures is the general lightening to which Almeida Júnior submitted the second version. In the study, the contrasts between light and shadow are more marked, and the volumes, all the more accentuated, giving greater solidity to objects and lightly highlighting the figure of the peasant in relation to the background. Without mentioning that in the study, the figure of the countryman is proportionally greater than in the final canvas, and hence, all of the space is articulated with more force and determination. In the final canvas, not only do the tones approximate to each other, the shadow introduced in the lower right corner (which does not exist in the study), by contrast, increases the force of the sun, and consequently, the movement of approximation of everything, to which the lightening of his palette also makes a decisive contribution. And it becomes difficult not to think of certain works at the start of Monet's output, such as "Garden in Flower" (1866), "Women in the Garden" (1866-67), in which the recourse to areas of shadow in order to intensify lit areas was also used, when we observe the device to which Almeida Júnior resorts here.

At the same time, what is really important to highlight with regard to "Caipira picando fumo" is the contrast between the aridity of the environment and the relative serenity of the farm hand. Pressed between the shadow of the roof at the top of the canvas and that of the foliage in the lower right-hand corner, the region of light functions as a greenhouse, and it becomes difficult not to associate the desolation of the scene with the intensity of the climate. And if the absorbed attitude of the peasant delivers him in part from the punishment of the sun, this occurs because of a kind of ascetic renunciation instead of resulting from an activity that submits nature to human designs. In this canvas, the man *suffers* the milieu, instead of determining it. But it is useful to highlight how Almeida Júnior knew how to find a way of painting, which suited the theme. By the subdued tonal relations, by the role played by the details of the painting, by the cunning representation of the light, his painting also rejects a representation of the farmworker's environment in a picturesque manner. There is in it a refusal to represent the backwoodsman through minute contrasts, suggestive of the little arrangements he uses to get through life. Indeed, Almeida Júnior's painting, at least this canvas, has something of the fragility of the life it describes, in which work did not intervene in reality in such a way as to guarantee protection to men and women.

The comparison of this painting with other works of the period which deal with similar themes helps to identify the particular characteristics of the art of Almeida Júnior. Both Modesto Brocos (1852-1936) and Antonio Ferrigno (1863-1940), foreigners who came to Brazil and who were contemporaries of Almeida Júnior<sup>6</sup>, have works that in thematic terms approach "Caipira picando fumo". At the same time, seen at greater length, it becomes clear that for them, the rural or suburban scene was an occasion for a traditional painting of customs, in which certain everyday episodes served to fix events that were at once singular and representative of a culture and a place: moments in which prosaic contrasts appear to unite the picturesque with more revealing extracts from a way of life. In

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probably a sign of the character's skill. On this point, see Vicente de Azevedo. *Almeida Júnior. O romance do pintor* [Almeida Júnior. The romance of the painter]. São Paulo, author's edition, 1985, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> Modesto Brocos, a Spaniard, arrived in Brazil as a young man and studied at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, subsequently travelling to Europe to improve his skills, as was customary for the most successful pupils in the Academy. Antonio Ferrigno already had an artistic training when he arrived in São Paulo, where he remained from 1893 to 1905, returning to Italy where he died.

this art, even the most humble themes made possible a painting marked by a paradoxical modest exuberance, in which the figure of a negro slave woman is adorned by the tasty details that envelop her, as is the case in “Mulata quitandeira” [Mulatta greengrocer] (n/d), by Antonio Ferrigno, in the collection of the Pinacoteca. Or also when individuals of different races serve as actors in an edifying parable, as in the picture “Redenção de Cam” [The Redemption of Ham] (1895, MNBA), by Modesto Brocos. In this, the eulogy of the whitening of the Brazilian population has an almost propaganda-like tone<sup>7</sup>, together with a painting traversed by a pathetic richness of detail, which merely tends to give an airy tone to an absolutely prejudiced meaning. In these paintings, nothing reveals the aridity that governs the canvas of Almeida Júnior. On the contrary a minute diversity merely distracts and enraptures us, removing us from the grinding poverty of that population.

## II

The sun is the major character of this “Caipira picando fumo”. The man who accommodates himself in the doorway of the house, could even live well with it. But he is not up to the task. The meditation which protects him also prevents him from acting and what dominates the picture is the majestic externality of the light and heat, which appear merely to tolerate the presence of what has not yet been reduced to them. This emphasis on the natural environment places this work by Almeida Júnior in contact with a series of cultural manifestations of that period which will assist in understanding better the extension and meaning of this canvas, and perhaps the most significant part of the painter’s output. A small digression is thus necessary before returning to the painting of Almeida Júnior.

In an essay written during the 1990s, Antonio Candido provided an extremely illuminating analysis of *O cortiço* [The tenement] by Aluísio Azevedo, a book published to great acclaim in 1890, three years before the execution of the painting that we are analysing<sup>8</sup>. Antonio Candido’s objective was to find the singularities of the Brazilian book in relation to Zola’s *L’Assommoir*, undeniably the source of inspiration for the romance of Aluísio Azevedo. For the purposes of my analysis, however, it is of particular interest to highlight certain aspects of Antonio Candido’s analysis, which reveals precisely how the naturalism of Aluísio Azevedo above all emphasises the sun as the defining element of the Brazilian milieu, with environment constituting for all naturalists one of the keys for understanding human attitudes, on a par with heredity (race) and other biological determinants, even though the sun may infiltrate into men through the ethnic mediation of the mulatta, a racial figure who also becomes an almost natural element.

*O cortiço* not only organises itself around the collective dwelling which gives the name to the book, but also in the opposition between the figures of João Romão and Jerônimo, both Portuguese immigrants and of humble origin, whose diametrically opposed attitudes in relation to the Brazilian milieu will lead to opposing outcomes. The

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<sup>7</sup> See Lilia Moritz Schwarcz. *O espetáculo das raças. Cientistas, instituições e questão racial no Brasil, 1870-1930*. [The Spectacle of the Races: Scientists, institutions and the racial question in São Paulo, 1870-1930]. Companhia das Letras, 2002, pp. 11 and 12. Ham was one of the three sons of Noah. In Genesis, we read that Ham surprised his father naked and drunk. A prejudiced reading of the Bible turns this gesture into the reason why Ham is the supposed founder of the negro race, whose slavery in modern time was supposedly a punishment for the shameful act of their ancestor.

<sup>8</sup> “De cortiço a cortiço” [From tenement to tenement]. In *Novos estudos*, n. 30. São Paulo, Cebrap, July 1991, pp. 111-129.

course of João Romão is that of “accumulation of individual wealth”<sup>9</sup>. Through work but also through harsh exploitation, he goes from grocer’s employee to a rich man, a property owner ready to change his social status radically through marriage with the daughter of a *parvenu* aristocrat, Miranda. Jerônimo, in turn emerges as an exemplary worker but gradually succumbs to the nature of the country, symbolised by Rita Baiana: “In that mulatta was the great mystery, the synthesis of impressions that he received on his arrival here: she was the burning midday light; she was the red heat of afternoon naps on the ranch; she was the warm aroma of clover and vanilla pods, which intoxicated him in the Brazilian forests”<sup>10</sup>.

While João Romão resists the milieu and imposes himself on it, Jerônimo gives way to the ubiquitous sun. And it is here that Aluísio Azevedo builds an ingenious bridge between nature and race. Up to a certain point, Jerônimo tolerates the fatiguing work in João Romão’s quarry, bearing a sun that appears to have emerged from the canvas by Almeida Júnior: “Midday on the dot. The sun was at its height; everything reverberated with the irreconcilable light of December, on a cloudless day. The quarry on which it fell flatly, was blinding when seen head on. It was necessary to martyr the eye in order to discover the nuances of the stone (...)”<sup>11</sup>. But the surreptitious sun, the mulatta Rita Baiana, finally softens him, leading him progressively to laxity and decadence.

Through a wise manoeuvre, Aluísio Azevedo does not allow Jerônimo to succumb to nature through his direct relations with it: working in the quarry. The sun takes control of the Portuguese through the mediation of race, the mulatta Rita Baiana, expanding the range of action and the scope of its influences, even if suffering from an unmistakable racial prejudice. To defeat Jerônimo in the exact location of his greatest efforts would partly disqualify the Naturalist optimism regarding the regenerating power of active and enterprising behaviour. And Antonio Candido shows how this negative appraisal of nature, principally in a country where civilisation was incipient, inverted the idealisation promoted by the Romantics and perturbed Brazilian intellectual life, marking it with a pessimism that reinforced the colonial domination, since it turned Brazilian nature into something opposed to the virtues of civilisation<sup>12</sup>.

However, it was not only naturalist determinism which had a major influence on the country. Other mesological theories won significant support among the literate classes of Brazil, reinforcing the negative vision that we had of ourselves. Thomas E. Skidmore<sup>13</sup> shows how the few pages dedicated to Brazil by Henry Thomas Buckle (1821-62) in his *History of Civilization in England* had a major influence on the country, to the point of being translated (approvingly) by no less a figure than Silvio Romero<sup>14</sup>. For Buckle, within Brazil “the vegetation is so luxuriant that nature appears to lose track of its rules in flaunting its power (...), in the midst of the pomp and splendour of its power, no place is left for man. (...) In no other place is there such a painful contrast between the

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<sup>9</sup> Idem, p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Aluísio Azevedo. *O cortiço*. São Paulo, Abril Cultural, 1981, p. 78. Cited by Antonio Candido on page 122.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Candido. Op. cit., pp. 120 e 123.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas E. Skidmore. *Preto no branco. Raça e nacionalidade no pensamento brasileiro*. [Black on White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought] RJ, Paz e Terra, 1976. The cited work by Lilia Moritz Schwarcz also helps to clarify these questions.

<sup>14</sup> Skidmore, op. cit., p. 44ff. and 49-50.

grandeur of the external world and the smallness of the interior one”<sup>15</sup>. It is practically impossible not to recall Almeida Júnior’s farm hand pondering in the midst of a paralyzing heat. And these evaluations of nature had such an influence that even at the start of the following century, they would echo (even if in questioned form) in works such as *Os sertões* [Rebellion in the Backlands], by Euclides da Cunha, and *Canaã* [Canaan], by Graça Aranha. Even Milkau, the character in *Canaã* who believes in the possibility of triumphing over Brazilian nature through work, affirms: “Here the spirit is crushed by the stupendous majesty of nature...we dissolve in contemplation”<sup>16</sup>.

The acceptance within Brazil of a form of thinking that made civilisation practically impossible within the country cannot be explained, however, merely in terms of a strong feeling of inferiority, which conferred on the metropolises the power of anticipating the course of history and the countries able to follow it. One of the most perverse kinds of social stratification caused these determinisms of various shades to fit like a glove in an environment in which everything conspired towards a relentless causalism, given that for a long time, slave labour condemned a large proportion of the population, precisely those who worked, to the simple condition of belt drive. In the novels of Zola himself, the conflicts and complexities of French society mitigated the attempt to reduce life to simple causal processes, and it is sufficient to read *Germinal* to have a precise idea of this. And if we return to painting just for a moment, it seems to me that Zola’s defence of Manet and the Impressionists, whom, in any case, he considered as Naturalists, but who undoubtedly were far removed from his aesthetic, was due not only to his receptiveness to new movements, but also and principally to the *force* with which these artists and their works sought to *differentiate* themselves from tradition and the dominant artistic thinking. This was not the case in Brazil.

And what did Almeida Júnior have to do with all this? It is practically impossible to *prove* these affiliations, although various aspects of the work and biography of the painter lead in this direction. Almeida Júnior was born into an impoverished family from Itu, in the interior of the state of São Paulo, and an entire literature, from Gonzaga Duque to Luís Martins, attempted to make him into a kind of prototype for its countryman types, thereby guaranteeing a greater truth for his work<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, the artist went to Europe<sup>18</sup> four times, appears to have studied a great deal during his first stay in Paris<sup>19</sup>, had considerable knowledge of French artistic and intellectual output, and in São Paulo moved in circles that were used to these discussions, given that theories such as Naturalism,

<sup>15</sup> Henry Thomas Buckle. Apud Skidmore, op. cit., p. 44-5.

<sup>16</sup> Graça Aranha. *Canaã* [Canaan]. Rio de Janeiro, F. Briguiet, 1959, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Gonzaga Duque writes: “(...) this modest provincial, inalterably rustic, became an artist of value (...) Corot was of a similar type: small, robust, complexion roasted by the sun, little blue eyes”. In *A arte brasileira*. [Brazilian Art], Rio de Janeiro, H. Lombaerts, 1888, p. 155. Luís Martins cites and endorses the words of Bazilio de Magalhães, who states that even in Paris, the painter “(...) always conserved his innate ‘caipirismo’, in his way of speaking, dressing, his tendencies and ideas (...)”. Luís Martins. “Almeida Junior”, in the *Revista do Arquivo Municipal*. São Paulo, Department of Culture, LXVI, 1940, p. 7. Monteiro Lobato says that Almeida Júnior is “(...) a Paulista of the old school, ‘a good-humoured farm hand’”. Op. cit. p. 85. Affirmations like these permeate a good part of the literature on Almeida Júnior.

<sup>18</sup> His longest stay was from 1876 to 1882, when he was a scholar of Dom Pedro II, studying in Paris, having also travelled to Italy. He subsequently returned to Europe, albeit briefly, in the years 1887, 1891 and 1896. See the dissertation of Maria Cecília França Lourenço, cited above, pp. 15-19.

<sup>19</sup> This statement is made by his first biographer, Gastão Pereira da Silva. *Almeida Junior. Sua vida e sua obra* [Almeida Junior. His life and work], São Paulo, Editora do Brasil, 1946, pp. 78-9.

Social Darwinism and Positivism circulated freely among them. His sensitivity to the pressures between social medium, nature and artistic output becomes clear in what must be the only text he wrote to be published during his lifetime<sup>20</sup>, in which he not only highlights “(...) the extraordinary difficulties of interpreting and reproducing Brazilian nature”<sup>21</sup> but the obstacles placed “(...) by the bad taste of the public that is often intolerable”<sup>22</sup>.

In my view, however, it is above all his painting which provides evidence of his involvement with the questions raised above. While he studied in Paris with Cabanel, a kind of high priest of declining academicism, after having passed through the lectures of Vítor Meireles at the National Academy of Fine Arts, in his more independent productions (the so-called regionalist or rustic canvases), Almeida Júnior lays aside the idealisations enshrined by the academy. Together with a more conventional output such as “Pintura — alegoria” [Painting – allegory] (1892) or “Batismo de Jesus” [The Baptism of Jesus] (1895), both in the collection of the Pinacoteca, the painter also inclines towards a realism that is closer to the concerns of Courbet, an artist whom he admired<sup>23</sup>. But it is difficult to approach the master of realism without placing truth in the place of beauty, with which the theories of Taine and Zola were built, in spite of his desire.

On the other hand, almost all of his regionalist canvases, which are not reduced to a single phase of his output, emphasise this complex (and I would say, subordinate) relationship with the environment, as is shown by “Apertando o lombilho” [Tightening the saddle] (1895), “Cozinha caipira” [Provincial kitchen] (1895), but also “Derrubador brasileiro” [Brazilian lumberjack] (1879), “Caipiras negaceando” [Backwoodsmen stalking] (1888), “Saudade” [Longing] (1899), “Nhá Chica” [Miss Chica] (1895), “Amolação interrompida” [Interrupted sharpening] (1894) and even “Violeiro” [Guitar player] (1899). Principally in the first two canvases mentioned above, the human figures, although involved with work, hardly allow themselves to be separated from the environment that surrounds them, an environment which, like in “Caipira picando fumo”, culture and nature are constantly changing places with each other, to the point that the kitchen in which the woman toils has more the look of a lair than a human habitation<sup>24</sup>.

### III

At the same time, the condemnation that determinisms have imposed on us does not appear to have the promised effectiveness in the canvases of Almeida Júnior.

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<sup>20</sup> Filinto de Almeida, the critic of *O Estado de S. Paulo*, in his analysis of an exhibition by Benedito Calixto, launched a severe attack on the painter in a text published on 23/7/1890, citing a conversation that he would have had with Almeida Júnior to reinforce his arguments. Almeida Júnior defended his honour in an article published in *Correio Paulistano* on 3/8/1890. This article was republished in the dissertation of Maria Cecília França Lourenço, pp. 211-16.

<sup>21</sup> Idem, p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> See the essay cited above by Maria Cecília França Lourenço, p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Other more or less episodic data would help to prove Almeida Júnior’s ties with the intellectual movements mentioned, such as the sympathy for his work of the circle organised around the Historical and Geographic Institute of São Paulo, also strongly marked by determinist theories. And it does not appear a chance matter that the most famous naturalist writer of São Paulo, Júlio Ribeiro, a native of Minas Gerais, mentions the painter in his best known book, *A carne* [Meat] (1888), when the principal character, the emancipated and cultured Lenita, imagines building a house in São Paulo, decorated by “Aurélio de Figueiredo and Almeida Júnior”. São Paulo, Editora Três, 1972, p. 58.

Paradoxically, his regional figures, almost without exception submitted to those adverse conditions which prevent the advent of civilisation in the country, were never (in so far as I am aware) seen pejoratively, as examples of a degraded and impotent species, or simply as wretches.

On the contrary, starting with the opinion of the artist himself, they were considered as heirs to “(...) a glorious tradition for the people of São Paulo”<sup>25</sup>. In the first edition of the publication *A Bohemia*, a vehicle of the São Paulo elite, directed by José Piza and dating from April 1896, on the occasion of the voyage of Almeida Júnior and Pedro Alexandrino to Europe, the editor praises the art of the painter from Itu, who “(...) with the patience of a Benedictine monk, studies all the life of São Paulo in its state of primitive purity (...)”<sup>26</sup>. Who knows what “primitive purity” might mean? But it was certainly not intended as an offence. And Monteiro Lobato saw that within the body of the “Violeiro” “(...) one could feel the pulsing of the ingenuous heart of one of our spontaneous musicians, sons of the field and the open air”<sup>27</sup>. A little later, in 1940, Luís Martins made a contaminated interpretation of the Modernism of 1922, noting “(...) that we feel in his latest works the sloth, the cloying, drowsy yielding before the punishment of the sun, an irresistible suggestion of corn fields burning in the summer afternoons, bamboo groves bending over the soft water of lakes and the melancholy song of the cricket... There is an unequivocally Brazilian spirit in his paintings, anything unconsciously barbarous and profound, a fatality of virgin land, which no great foreign artist would succeed in translating. He is the first classic of our painting”<sup>28</sup>. And not even Mário de Andrade could resist. In a letter to Luís Martins, he states that his criticism of Almeida Júnior is very good, “(...) although at times you do lots of literature (...) instead of seeing this Brazilian spirit in ‘anything unconsciously barbarous and profound, a fatality of a virgin land’, would it not be preferable to this impressionistic criticism to give more objective information”<sup>29</sup>? What is curious is that years before, the same Mário de Andrade wrote about Tarsila do Amaral in tones very similar to those of Luís Martins, specifically trying to demonstrate the differences between the “Brazilianness” of Almeida Júnior and of Tarsila: “(...) what really creates that immanent Brazilian flavour in her paintings is the plastic reality itself: a certain and very well used provincialism of forms and colour, an intelligent systematisation of bad taste done with exceptionally good taste, an intimist sentimentality, rather small-scale [sic], full of indolence and with a strong flavour”<sup>30</sup>. As we can see, this goes a long way; And in

<sup>25</sup> This text was distributed by the artist on the occasion of the public exhibition of “Partida da monção” [Departure of the Expedition] (1897). While the historic character of the painting certainly demands an edifying tone, if we remember that the river expeditions to explore the interior of Brazil lasted until around 1830, i.e. slightly before the era in which Almeida Júnior’s characters are located, it is not inappropriate to establish a link between the “fearless and daring backlands men” of these expeditions and the people portrayed by the painter. This text was republished in the dissertation of Maria Cecília França Lourenço, on p. 217.

<sup>26</sup> Facsimile reproduction of *A Bohemia* in the catalogue of the Pinacoteca mentioned above, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> “Almeida Júnior”, op. cit., p. 85.

<sup>28</sup> “Almeida Júnior”, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Letter of 16/7/1940 from Mário de Andrade to Luís Martins. There is a copy of this manuscript in the library of the MAM-SP. The question mark is not present in the letter of Mário de Andrade, even if the sentence is in the form of a question.

<sup>30</sup> Mário de Andrade. “Tarsila”. In *Brasil: primeiro tempo modernista —1917/29*. São Paulo, IEB-USP, 1972 (Org. Marta Rossetti Batista and others), p. 127. The text by Mário de Andrade was published in 1929, but is dated 21 December 1927.

our time, Maria Cecília França Lourenço, on the explanatory panel installed in the room with the works of Almeida Júnior in the Pinacoteca, would say that the painter “(...) transformed the characters in his canvases into genuine monuments to the serious, skilful, strong, brave, competent and fearless worker”.

This double movement, which is paradoxical in principle, the negative emphasis on the determinism of the milieu and the positive appreciation of this environment and its characters, may largely be explained by the objective which engaged São Paulo men of letters and institutions, in the sense of creating a heroic identity for the people of the province and thus permitting the establishment of a history that would justify a grand and promising future; in the place of being impracticable, we were merely at the beginning...whence the purity of the primitives, the innocence, the unconsciously barbarous, which provided us with an immaculate origin. During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the wealth created principally by coffee placed the province of São Paulo in an uncomfortable position with regard to the centralisation of the Empire and its capital, Rio de Janeiro. Together with the development of a Republican movement, a conscious effort was made in São Paulo to endow the province with historic attributes that justified the position of economic leadership that it had been achieving and that pointed to the need for a political weight that it still lacked.

Institutions such as the Historical and Geographical Institute of São Paulo, the Museu Paulista [São Paulo Museum], the São Paulo Academy of Letters, the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* and a large number of men of letters more or less close to them would gradually produce a discourse, heterogeneous but effective, which among other aspects, would lead to the glorification of the Bandeirantes and an appreciation of the mixing of races, highlighting here the singularities with which it occurred in the region, where the isolation of the Piratininga Plateau had promoted the formation of a superior sub-race, a mixture of the brave Bandeirantes with the haughty Guaianá, the São Paulo mixture of Indians and whites, father of the farm hand and the backwoodsman<sup>31</sup>. Almeida Júnior contributed to the formation of this set of ideas and the reception of his work would be incomprehensible without considering this process.

As may be seen, the backwoodsmen of Almeida Júnior bore heavy responsibilities. On the one hand, they suffer the determined action of the milieu and serve as an example for the most diverse determinist theses, which saw in this kind of relationship the correct way to understand man and his background. On the other, they had to incarnate, at least in a transient way, the bravura of the “race of giants”, which from Saint-Hilaire to Alfredo Ellis Jr. would accompany the people of São Paulo. This was indeed no small responsibility. And the painting of Almeida Júnior itself appeared to resent this weight and the many demands to be fulfilled. Furthermore: it was this commitment of the painter’s backwoodsman to the symbolic aggrandizement of the people of São Paulo which, in my view, prevented his canvases from radicalizing pitilessly the action of the sun on the human figures, shredding them and reducing them to genuine human rags, with which his art would certainly gain in quality and even in verisimilitude.

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<sup>31</sup> The process of consolidating this imagination is discussed by Antonio Celso Ferreira in *A epopéia bandeirante: letrados, instituições, invenção histórica (1870-1940)*. [The Bandeirante epic: men of letters, institutions, historical invention] São Paulo, Unesp, 2001. Domingos Tadeu Chiarelli defends ideas similar to these in his doctoral thesis, and adds that this eulogy of a typical São Paulo figure would also be related to the effort by the São Paulo elite to differentiate themselves from the immigrants who were starting to populate the cities of the state. See details of this these in note 39.

## IV

Almeida Júnior made a sincere effort to produce a painting that approximated Brazilian reality more closely and left aside the empty universalism of academic formulas. His output is highly irregular, marked several times by the timid social environment to which he had to respond in order to earn his living, and this may be noted clearly in the portraits, which for a long time were his bread and butter, as well as in the inconstancy of a man who saw himself forced to please the public, even at the risk of compromising the development of his work. Throughout his career, however, he reveals a continuous concern with a number of questions that differentiated him from his artistic environment.

Critics such as Sérgio Milliet, Lourival Gomes Machado and Mário Pedrosa considered that Almeida Júnior only innovated to any degree in his themes, while he continued to paint in the manner of Cabanel<sup>32</sup>. Although considered inadequate, this new impulse was not to be dismissed, above all if considered in its full extension. As Gilda de Mello e Souza showed, his activity “(...) helped to suppress the monumentality of the works, to renew themes and characters, to tie the figures organically to the environment and perhaps reformulate the treatment of the light”<sup>33</sup>.

In my view, “Caipira picando fumo” is the canvas in which Almeida Júnior succeeds in going the furthest, not only thematically, but above all in its effort to find a manner of painting that was attuned to such themes. There is a major controversy surrounding the light of Almeida Júnior and its relationship with French painting of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>34</sup>. In this painting, however, I believe that there is an undeniable confrontation with non-academic French painting, which helps to reveal the limits and ambiguities of his dialogue with the most advanced art of the day.

If the formal artistic education of Almeida Júnior took place in an academic environment (Vitor Meireles in Rio de Janeiro, Alexandre Cabanel in Paris<sup>35</sup>, as I mentioned above), the same did not occur with his broader training. Little is known of the

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<sup>32</sup> Sérgio Milliet. “Luz — paisagem — arte nacional” [Light- Landscape – National Art], in *Pintura quase sempre*. [Painting almost always], Porto Alegre, Globo, 1944, p. 77. Lourival Gomes Machado. *Retrato da arte moderna do Brasil*. [Portrait of the modern art of Brazil] São Paulo, Departamento de Cultura, 1947, p. 26. Mário Pedrosa. “Visconti diante das modernas gerações” [Visconti in the face of modern generations], in *Acadêmicos e modernos*. São Paulo, Edusp, 1998, p. 122.

<sup>33</sup> Gilda de Mello e Souza. “Pintura brasileira contemporânea: os precursores” [Contemporary Brazilian painting: the precursors], in *Exercícios de leitura*. [Exercises in reading], São Paulo, Duas Cidades, 1980, p. 224. For a discussion of the importance of the author’s thinking for the history of Brazilian art, see “Moda caipira” [The wave of the backwoodsman], by Otilia Beatriz Fiori Arantes and Paulo Eduardo Arantes, in *Sentido da formação*. [The Meaning of Formation], São Paulo, Paz e Terra, 1997.

<sup>34</sup> The authors who consider that the painter was only innovative in his themes, merely see traditional elements in his light. Luís Martins (op. cit., p. 12) says that it was the “(...) influence of the Brazilian sun (...)” which lightened his palette. Aracy Amaral (“A luz de Almeida Júnior” [The light of Almeida Júnior], in *Almeida Júnior — um artista revisitado* [Almeida Júnior – an artist revisited], op. cit., p. 10) also considers that the painter “(...) remains sensitive to the light, to local light (...)”. The analysis which seems most enlightening to me is that of Gilda de Mello e Souza (op. cit., p. 230ff), to which I shall return below.

<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of the French training of Almeida Júnior, see Patricia Telles. *Os estudantes brasileiros de pintura na École des Beaux Arts de Paris de 1831 a 1889*. [Brazilian students at the École des Beaux Arts de Paris: 1831-1889]. Dissertation submitted to the Specialization Course on the History of Brazilian Art and Architecture. PUC-Rio de Janeiro, 1992.

artistic tastes of the painter. At the same time, the observation of his paintings leaves few doubts about certain links, beyond the academic commitments of the more traditional paintings. Courbet and Millet contributed to an unidealized relationship with nature and men. And it is almost impossible not to see in a work such as “A Estrada” [The Road] (1899), the influence of Corot and of a luminosity made of clear and intense colours, no longer created by the contrast between light and dark. In the same way, I think it is highly likely that “O derrubador brasileiro” (1879) had found support in Manet’s “The Dead Christ and the Angels” (1864), without mentioning the marked contrasts between regions of shadow and light that bring him close to the early works of Monet, as I pointed out at the beginning. All of these paintings highlight an attention to the renovation that occurred in French painting at that point, although this painting by Manet was one of the most moderate, and which had in the light one of its most decisive elements. Gilda de Mello e Souza considers that Almeida Júnior had opted for a compromise solution by approaching the solutions discovered by a number of secondary academic painters: Jules Breton, Troyon, Rosa Bonheur, who superficially incorporated aspects of Impressionism, without placing the dominant pictorial codes in check<sup>36</sup>. I think that there are also other aspects in addition to these.

In the painting that I analyse, the light dominates the entire scene. Its intensity is revealed in the blinding clarity and the proximity between everything, which does not have a very marked outline. At the same time, even in this canvas, the light of Almeida Júnior does not succeed, as it does in the best Impressionist works, in breaking with the integrity of the volumes and portraying an action that went beyond a given *a priori* reality that was inviolable in its wholeness. And since it is unable to transfigure reality, the light in this painting tends to present itself solely as *heat*, which the desolation of the environment confirms and qualifies. Cabanel had transposed the clarity to the interior of his figures. And his women resemble lampshades, volumes illuminated from within. Almeida Júnior displaces this light to the outside, creating within the environment a genuine furnace.

The light of the Impressionists, made possible pictorially by the discontinuous brushstrokes, which when juxtaposed allowed the representation of the reciprocal interaction between the colours, cleaved the compact appearance of the world, making it suitable for new arrangements and possibilities. And the series realised by Monet, the Cathedral of Rouen, the Houses of Parliament, the water lilies, etc. made explicit the end of the oneness of the real and the new accessibility of the world. At the same time, for the Impressionists, light was principally the element that made evident, that the *eye* had acquired a new status in the face of reality. It no longer merely mirrored the world, taking for granted its solid and finished feature. It acted on things and reoriented them, in similar fashion to the possibilities opened by the new social movements and the new techniques. In this context, light showed itself as the most appropriate pictorial aspect for freeing reality from a conservative solidity and delivering it to the oscillations of a reality tending towards the widest range of transformations.

Within the world of Almeida Júnior, this agility was unthinkable. The socially and technologically backward Brazilian milieu would not allow light to make life and reality more porous and plastic. It would still need, for a long time to come, to be understood as heat, to function as a natural instrument, and not as an instrument of the eye, at the service of every kind of determinism, as much as artists such as Castagneto, Visconti

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<sup>36</sup> Gilda de Mello e Souza, op. cit., p. 231.

and Parreiras had tried, with varying degrees of success, to lead it in another direction. Even if, on account of one of these ambiguities that life in the tropics tends to create, the action of the sun would replace history and would carve the mythical figure of a man of São Paulo from the remote past, rustic in his habits and features, but tanned and bruised like a work of nature.

## V

The painting of Almeida Júnior is characterised by its permeability to almost all the discussions which sought to determine the forces that gave a singularity to the life of the country. His attention to the social milieu, to nature, to human types, to regional peculiarities appeared to point to a more concrete country, the product of a crossing of real aspects, without greater idealisations and fantasies. I have attempted to show the extent to which these ideas were permeated by highly debatable arguments, at times decidedly ideological and prejudiced. But none of this was very relevant. The fruits were juicy and stimulated the appetite.

It was thus no accident that Almeida Júnior awoke an interest in all those who, in one way or another, were concerned with establishing a national art: Gonzaga Duque<sup>37</sup>, Oswald de Andrade in 1915, before he became a Modernist, Monteiro Lobato, Mário de Andrade, Luís Martins... the list is a long one. Touching this material meant feeling the pulse of a rich and promising life, since all paths crossed there. In 1928, Mário de Andrade looked sadly at a national tradition which, within the visual arts, had not been fulfilled. Speaking of Aleijadinho, he said that he was “(...) the greatest false rumour of nationality, at the same time as he characterized all the falsification of our civilised entity, made not from internal, natural development, which moves from the centre to the periphery and becomes eccentric through expansion, but through adaptable, irregular and artificial imports from abroad. Indeed, Antônio Francisco Lisboa prophesied for nationality an artistic genius that the subsequent Almeida Júnios (so rare!) are insufficient to confirm”<sup>38</sup>. After more than a decade had passed, in 1939, and writing on the panels that Portinari had executed for the World’s Fair in New York, he saw things differently: “These are paintings that could only have been conceived by someone profoundly Brazilian. Not only the customs, but everything is ours, the air, the smell, the climate of these panels. That tradition which Almeida Jr. wanted to initiate, only now seems to have been resumed by this painter, who instead of wasting time seeking the colour of our sky, is genuinely creating a work of national feeling”<sup>39</sup>. Whenever an attempt was made to find a national tradition in the visual arts, Almeida Júnior was there as a model... whether or not he was being resumed. In order

<sup>37</sup> After supporting the initial works of Almeida Júnior, Gonzaga Duque criticised him for his farm hand themes, and above all, his way of painting. See *Contemporaneos*. [Contemporaries] Rio de Janeiro, Typ. Benedicto de Souza, 1929, pp. 110-12.

<sup>38</sup> Mário de Andrade. “O Aleijadinho”, in *Aspectos das artes plásticas no Brasil*. [Aspects of the visual arts in Brazil] São Paulo, Livraria Martins Editora, 1975, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Mário de Andrade. “Obras novas de Cândido Portinari” [New works by Cândido Portinari]. *O Estado de S. Paulo. Suplemento em rotogravura*, n. 134, 1939. In Domingos Tadeu Chiarelli. *De Almeida Jr. a Almeida Jr.* — crítica de arte de Mário de Andrade. [From Almeida Jr. to Almeida Jr.] Doctoral Thesis submitted to the Department of Visual Arts of ECA-USP, 1996, p. 162. This study is extremely illuminating, not only of the artistic thinking of Mário de Andrade, who, as far as I am aware, never wrote a text specifically devoted to Almeida Júnior, even though he mentions him in various articles, as well as the role that Almeida Júnior plays in his vision of the visual arts in Brazil.

to constitute a strong line capable of authorising the mention of a tradition, a succession of dense moments was necessary, cultural or artistic manifestations that synthesised multiple aspects of Brazil. And Almeida Júnior was always the example on duty.

For Taine, as for Zola, art would be the expression of a race and a historic milieu. And Monteiro Lobato, himself an admirer of Taine and Zola, pronounced every letter of this, in speaking of Almeida Júnior: “Among us he is carrying out Courbet’s mission in France. He paints not man, but a man, a son of the earth, and with this creates national painting, in counterpoint to the dominant international painting”. And shortly afterwards: “And it was always, Almeida Junior as individual; São Paulo as a species, Brazilian in genre”<sup>40</sup>. As may be seen, it was almost a biological development, in which from the seed one arrived at the flower (art), by way of the plant (people, history), moreover a metaphor dear to Taine. In a process of growing tendency to detail and determination, one progressed from the most generic to national singularity.

Almeida Júnior genuinely responds to this demand and wishes to make the flower of nationality bloom. The problem is that the nation hardly existed and could only support itself on ready-made and doubtful ideas. In a largely undifferentiated society, lacking in complexity, hardly anything contributed to placing in check that evolutionary movement which led from the more brute to the more refined, even if the gem crystallised in the figure of the backwoodsman. And painting, without being an instrument of interrogation and questioning, merely reaffirmed what it already supposed it knew. More than art, Almeida Júnior made culture, extending to another area of expression themes and problems already delineated and for which he would provide little help in advancing or discussing. And I think that this article of mine, beyond my own limitations, proves this impasse, since it also concerns itself with circumstantial information, which would set guidelines for the analysed painting.

At the same time, it is highly revealing to observe how the radicalism of Dostoyevsky’s *art*, its rejection of given and accepted ideas, led him to deride this well established order of things. The narrator of *Notes from the underground*, for example, is cruelly ironic about the same Buckle, who enchanted most of our best intellectuals: “(...) I insolently proclaim that all these fine systems, all these theories to explain humanity’s true interests to it (...) all of this is mere sophistry! (...) to affirm, for example, like Buckle, that civilisation renders man milder and so less bloodthirsty and addicted to warfare (...) Look around you: everywhere blood flows in torrents, and what’s more, as merrily as if it were champagne”<sup>41</sup>.

In order to play a game with words, but perhaps also to carry on a dialogue with them, with the “out-of-place ideas” of Roberto Schwarz, it does not seem inappropriate to me to affirm that in the work of Almeida Júnior, the limit was a different one: the ideas were excessively in their place. By searching so hard for what determined us, he ended by praising our very incapacity for transcendence and victory. Everything conspired towards making the work of art the mere expression of an era and a people, without at any time opposing this movement of exteriorization or constituting itself as a reasonably autonomous force which could contribute towards making our idea of ourselves

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<sup>40</sup> “Almeida Junior”, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>41</sup> Fiodor Dostoyevsky. *Notes from Underground*. São Paulo, Editora 34, 2000, pp. 35-6 [translation by Boris Schnaiderman].

more complex. The timidity of his painting did not merely derive from a possible lack of artistic talent. There was principally a lack of air for artistic activity.

It is thus not surprising that from this eulogy of nationality, while tinged with Bandeirantism, a profound sadness and melancholy emerges, by contrast with the formidable Impressionist joy. The outlining of a recognisable face for the country supposed a certain fatalism and acceptance of our own impotence. Taine's *interpretative* method, regardless of its limits, came to function as a *guide* for artistic creation. And what could, to a certain degree, serve as a demystification for the production of art, the identification of the origins of the work of art, delivering it from ineffable inspirations and intuitions, eventually showed itself to be a resolute sterilization, when placed as a goal to be reached. In other words, what was set at the beginning, the origins, would necessarily have to be reencountered at the end of the work of art, with which an unbreakable vicious circle was established. At a certain point, American painting also saw itself as a prisoner of this dilemma. While artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood made an effort to achieve a painting that was voluntarily different from that of Europe and close to what would be the authentic American man, they made little progress. At the same time, with Pollock and his generation, it effectively achieved a differentiated art, not merely from European output. With Abstract Expressionism, the American experience was itself expanded, revealing possibilities of meaning and rupture that were previously unknown.

The painting of Almeida Júnior awakes the legitimate interest of those who sought a national art concerned with intercepting the weave of relationships that made us singular. And the influence of naturalism and the various determinisms helped to delineate the currents that wove our concrete reality. At the same time, if it were sufficient for art to establish the conditions in which it emerged, very probably it would not have a *raison d'être*, since the lack of transcendence at its base would paralyze its power. The emphasis on circumstances which, for good or ill, define a nationality, led all the attempts at artistic nationalism to a paradoxically combative and *impotent* position, given that art had the task of not going beyond a stabilised ground which it helped to characterize, and which in turn, also stabilized and pacified it. And an art which must, beforehand, make sense, tends necessarily towards contributing to the perpetuation of societies in which social forces are led to a zero-sum game, since a culturalism orders them like a mosaic in which antagonisms are converted into contrasts close to the picturesque. A good part of Brazil's visual output, at least until the end of the 1960s, was domesticated and diluted by problems of this nature.

On account of this, Almeida Júnior's light carries within itself, what, at this point in the history of art, was merely conservation of the sun and not expansion: the repulsed light, the heat which benumbs. The farm hand cutting tobacco leaf appears to be enraptured in his modest task. Perhaps it might even be possible to detect here a eulogy of simple life, a bucolic poetry of those who have found the right balance in contact with nature and who live in peace, were they not at the point of being swallowed by this paradoxical sun, which speaks of sunset at the height of midday.<sup>42</sup>

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