

# Pathways between literature and history

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I believe that at a given point in life our personal memory exceeds our limits; thus, what we say will perhaps make some sense in the realm of history and culture. Actually, only this hope redeems us from the sin of talking about ourselves, a deep-rooted habit often cultivated, which, in Umberto Eco's words, is the essence of bad taste.

Where should I begin from? From the notebook in which the teenager used to copy down his favorite poems bringing together sonnets by Camões and Sá de Miranda – *The sun is large; the birds and calm are falling* – and *Berceuse of the richest rhymes*, by Guilherme de Almeida, which rhymed *lágrimas* with *milagre mas...* But in this intimate anthology there are also poems for weeping, poems I read secretly, in a low voice, moved to the verge of tears. There was *The Little Child Dead* by Vicente de Carvalho and there were *The Swans* by Júlio Salusse, gleaned in some literary magazine of the 1950s. The triplets of this sonnet have kept ringing in my memory up to this day:

*One day one swan will die for sure;  
When that unsure moment comes  
In the lake, where the water may darken,*

*Let the living swan, full of longings,  
Sing nevermore, neither lonely swim,  
Nor by the side of another swan.*

Leafing through this notebook today, after so many years, I look for a name of some contemporary poet who might have aroused in me the desire to bring him to the company of the Classical, Romantic, Parnassian and Symbolist poets who then merited my painstaking care of a handwritten copy and the emotion of a solitary reader. And I find a sonnet by Carlos Drummond de Andrade, “Legacy” (which begins with a baffling question: *What memory will I give to the country that gave me / everything I remember and know, everything I've felt? / In the night of endlessness, time has already forgotten / my uncertain medal, and my name dies laughing.* And four pages

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later, the “Night Prayer” by Cecília Meireles. How could at that time the self-centered teenager have imagined that, half a century later, invited to give a lecture on the occasion of Cecília Meireles’ centennial, he would speak about the feeling of absence from the world which is the theme of those fourteen lines transcribed in his notebook? Is everything due to chance or is there a secret coherence set up by a call still unaware of itself?

But, whether conscious or not, the call to Literature was strong, so strong that, at the moment of choosing a profession, I did not waver for a single minute: I wanted to be a Portuguese teacher, and took the direct route, which meant to enroll in the Neo-Latin Letters course in the School of Philosophy of the Universidade de São Paulo. Allow me to recollect again the first class I attended, taught by the highly missed Professor Ítalo Bettarello, then in charge of the Italian Literature discipline. I say “recollect again” because I have already evoked this incident in my introduction to *Leitura de Poesia* (Poetry Reading). It happened like this:

It was a class in Italian literature. Everyone in class was a freshman, and most of us had no experience in the language of that *bel paese là dove il si suona*. The São Paulo of the second post-war period had already ceased to be that Italo-Brazilian city which the modernists celebrated and told us about. But, utterly disregarding any didactical caution and betting everything on the philosopher’s words and on the even stronger power of our eagerness to learn, Professor Ítalo Bettarello opened his course reading the first sentence in Benedetto Croce’s *Aesthetica in nuce*:

*Se si prende a considerare qualsiasi poema per determinare che cosa lo faccia giudicare tale, si discernono alla prima, costanti e necessari, due elementi: un complesso d’immagini e un sentimento che lo anima.*

Translation: “If we set out to consider any poem to determine what makes us consider it a poem, we identify at first sight two elements which are constant and necessary: a set of images and a feeling which gives life to it.”

Everything else depended on that at once simple and deep outlook.

The example to illustrate the doctrine was taken from Virgil. Croce analyses *Aeneid*’s Third Canto, in which Aeneas reports how he had reached the port of Epirus, where the Trojan Helenus with Andromache ruled. Wishing to see his fellow citizens escaped from the Trojan disaster, Aeneas meets the queen outside the city walls, in a sacred grove by the waters of a brook which had been given the name of Simois after the river that runs through Troy. Andromache is celebrating funeral rites before an empty tomb where she had built two altars, one for Hector, her first husband, and another for her son Astyanax. Seeing him, she is awestricken and faints. Aeneas recalls the broken speech with which, coming to herself, Andromache questioned him to know whether he was a man or a shadow. There follows Aeneas’ equally upset answer, as he, in his turn, asks her to recollect the past. And the painful and coy evocation by Andromache, who revisits her destiny as a survivor of

the slaughter, as a slave won in a lottery only to be made Pyrrhus' concubine; he, however, had rejected her and given her as a slave to Helenus; and Pyrrhus' death by the hands of Orestes, and the liberation of Helenus, who became a king. There follows the account of Aeneas' and his folks' procession through the city which, small in size, imitates in everything the glorious and torn down Troy of their common ancestors (Third Canto, 295-355).

Having completed the reading of that episode, what do we have? Images representing people, things, attitudes, whether historically real or just existing in the poet's imagination. (*This confirmation would have a significant influence on my way of considering how poetic figures and historically verified facts relate to each other.*) They are neither loose nor isolated images, for

through them flows feeling, a feeling which is the poet's as much as ours, a human feeling of sharp memories, of hair-raising melancholy, of nostalgia, of poignancy and even of something childish as well as pious, like that idle restoration of things lost, those toys counterfeited by a religious piety, of *little Troy*: something unutterable in logical terms, something which only poetry, in its own way, can fully express.<sup>1</sup>

In a way, the Crocean doctrine of poetry as figuration of a determined *pathos*, as intuition of a soul movement, conferred a theoretical status to my naïve but intense enjoyment of a poem, so intense that it made me copy in my notebook texts which moved and fascinated me. Looking back today at the transition from the passionate reader to the scholar armed with an aesthetic theory, I would say that without that first soul bent toward poetry, of very little use would have been to me the theoretical tools picked up in college. Passion is not enough for poetry interpretation, but it is completely necessary, and the literature teachers who matured before the stage of Structuralist Literary Criticism know that only those affectively involved were able to cross the sandy stretch of linguistic schemata without fading in the saddest dryness.

As we know, the Crocean doctrine offered excellent clues to explain the link between fictional images and subjective motions, which is the most important legacy of this Italian philosopher as well as one of the tenets of Spanish stylistics. But, insofar as Croce harshly denied the aesthetic relevance of other subjects connected with poetry (such as historical discourse, philosophy, morality, religion, scientific knowledge...), he seriously hindered the interpreter willing to carry out a sociohistorical reading of a literary text.

I became aware of these limitations when, having completed my graduate studies, I was granted a scholarship to study Italian literature and philosophy in the College of Letters in Florence during the school year of 1961-62. The hegemony of the Crocean thought, self-evident up to 1950, was already being replaced by other theoretical sources, namely by *Existentialism* and *Marxism*.

Existentialism did not distinguish the lyrical speaker's affective motives from his political and philosophical choices. To the existence thinker, the human being who creates a work of art *thinks through* his own subjective life and, at the same time, dramatically *lives out* his own thinking and engagement. Making literature was, for Camus, a life choice implying emotion, theory and a political design. The same urgency embodied Sartre's whole work.

As for Marxism, it must be remembered that, in the Italy of the early 1960s, the central figure was that of Antonio Gramsci, whose heavy polemical texts against Crocean idealism were read and revered by the valiant leftist intelligentsia present in every university. An example that clearly shows the difference between the Crocean and Gramscian approaches appears in the way Dante's work was analyzed, particularly the *Divine Comedy*. Croce used to clearly distinguish in the work what was *poetry*, that is, the moments of intense lyrical and imagistic expression (the episodes of Paolo and Francesca, of Ulysses and Ugolino, for example) and what would be *non-poetry*, that is, the passages of political and religious reflection, which are abundant in Purgatory and Paradise. For Gramsci as well as for the Marxists, however, it seemed arbitrary to separate lyrical poetry from doctrinal background and lyrical poetry from ideological persuasion. In a way, Croce always reaffirmed, to the last writings, the imaginary character of a work of art, which may cover the whole realm of possibility, whereas science must stick to the universe of certifiable and verifiable reality. *Possibility includes everything that is real plus whatever might become real, and in this last sense what is possible is also the object of desire and imagination, which, in their turn, are present when a work of art is being created.*

These distinctions made by Croce still seem valid and useful to me at the moment of thinking out the manifold relationships between literary history and historiography proper.

Returning to Brazil, in 1962, I had to give lessons in Italian Literature, which kept me quite busy up to 1970, when I began to lecture on Brazilian Literature. Whoever experienced those turbulent years in Brazilian history will agree with me that it is not easy to organize in a clear didactic way the contradictory variety of cultural currents and countercurrents which marked both the period before the 1964 military coup d'état and the so called lead years that continued into the next decade. Trends overlapped and got mixed up. Existentialism either yielded to Marxism (in the wake of Sartre, acting then as the nonconformist thinkers' guru), or flowed back to its phenomenological origins, thanks to Ricoeur and Gadamer, two of the foremost representatives of Hermeneutics, which was here represented by the proposals of the magazine *Tempo Brasileiro* edited by Eduardo Portella. In the field of literary analysis, Stylistics, which in part depended on Crocean expression aesthetics, was replaced by Structuralism or, more generally, by Formalism. The latter, driven out by Stalinist censorship, moved from the Slavic world to France; its

inspiring figure was the great linguist Roman Jakobson, who had theorized the functions of language.

### **Studying Pirandello's narrative itinerary**

In 1964, I defended a doctoral thesis on Luigi Pirandello's narrative itinerary. I studied his short stories and novels which, with few exceptions, anteceded his plays. Strictly speaking, my approach kept away from both literature sociology and narrative structural analysis then in full fashion. What attracted me in Pirandello's work was the conflict between characters' subjective life and the masks they had to wear in order to survive in society. This is the Pirandellian theme *par excellence* hauntingly staged in his plays. My intent was to detect the same contrast in his regional Sicilian novels, in *The late Mattia Pascal*, his masterpiece and in the plots of *Novelle per un anno*, some of which would yield the subject matter for the plays of his maturity.

At that time it seemed to me that neither orthodox Marxism nor Structuralism had at their disposal good enough investigating tools to apprehend the quality of the pathos vibrating in Pirandello's situations. The Existentialism which, under the form of personalism, found inspiration in Max Scheler and had been used by French and Italian Christian philosophers (Lavelle, Le Senne, Mounier, Pareyson) deepened the subject's relations with the other, and this could be a starting point to study Pirandello's narrative. *At heart, however, what this narrative brought forth was not a communion feeling, but precisely a break, the subject's impossibility to live in his/her family context and, tragically, the sheer impossibility to free him/herself from this very context. An existential situation which, strictly speaking, derives from the emergence of the Romantic subject, identified with the "bourgeois self" by Marxist sociology, where in my opinion the term "bourgeois" is used in too general a fashion.*

### **Thesis on myth and poetry in Leopardi**

Still within the field of Italian literature I defended my "Livro Docência" thesis, in 1970, entitled *Myth and poetry in Leopardi*. Like the work on Pirandello, this thesis has not been published yet and it is likely to remain unpublished for a long time, since it deals with some issues that are still unsettled. Its central hypothesis was ambitious and derived, this time yes, from the emphasis Lévi-Strauss' structuralism placed on myth as a narrative matrix. But, instead of analyzing Leopardi's work as a combination of basic mythical units (and this would mean to follow a Structuralistic model which is syntactic) I preferred to see in the poet's fundamental theses the lyrical reinterpretation of some myths of our Greek-Roman or Jewish-Christian culture, such as the myth of an edenic nature, the myth of a lost paradise or the fall and the Promethean myth of man's resistance to the gods' power, that is, to the power of fate; the result of this was to confer to my analysis a semantic model. This focus is not to be found in Lévi-Strauss, who, in fact,

preferred the native myths to the permanent themes of Western tradition. Paul Ricoeur is the one who approaches Greek-Roman or Jewish-Christian tradition; his work *La symbolique du mal* was one of my theoretical props. Definitely, Structuralism would not be a pathway of my choice, since even dealing with a theme connected to the corpus of that trend, as in the case of the myth, I ended up knocking at the door of Hermeneutics.

Paul Ricoeur deals with myth as a set of meanings inherent to our tradition and, as such, it is likely to be understood by the scholar living a life of acquaintance and almost co-naturalness with figures and feelings of his own cultural heritage.

However, the fact that I recognized some Greek or biblical myths in Leopardi's work did not exempt me from historicizing their reconstruction, carried out by a poet in the first twentieth century decades, living in Italy, then divided into several dukedoms, princedoms, foreign kingdoms and pontifical domains, still apart from the Romantic current prevailing in France, England and Germany. Hence, the necessity to understand the cultural conditions which induced the poet to engage in polemics with Madame de Staël and to fiercely stand for Antiquity's unsurpassable beauty as opposed to neo-gothic fashions of Celtic or Germanic Romanticism. Leopardi, still a teenager, had admirably translated Aeneid's Second Canto besides many Greek poems. A Classicist in the heart of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Actually, a philosopher poet who did not believe in the linear progress celebrated by liberals. It was not by chance that his pessimism was praised by another radical, Schopenhauer, Leopardi's best German reader. But, at the heart of his bitterness there was the desire to resist, which his last poem – *La ginestra* – shows amazingly well, since the *ginestra* is a flower which resists to the lava flowing down the barren Vesuvian slopes. It was in fact an ideology which did not feed on hopes created by political parties. It is a pessimism inviting men's solidarity against evils stemming from Nature itself, which is more of a stepmother than a mother. Nor was it by chance that Leopardi inspired a chapter of Brás Cubas' delirium, as Otto Maria Carpeaux brightly pointed out in a revealing article.

In short, I made use of myth Hermeneutics, but could not ignore the cultural and political context of Leopardi's Italy. Different pathways of critical thought began to crisscross conferring a baffled tone to my attempts to interpret literary texts.

### **Literary history and historiography**

The intellectual legacy my theses left me with, by the end of the 1960s, was a serious and fundamental problem. The problem of the relationship between poetry and history and, therefore, between the discourse of literary history and that of historiography taken in its broad sense, which encompasses social history, economic history and political history. It was exactly during those years that, thanks to the generous recommendation of my friend and

poet José Paulo Paes, I was invited to write a literary history, the *História concisa da literatura brasileira* (Concise history of Brazilian literature), which I published in 1970.

*One of the most serious problems faced by literary history, since the Romantic period when peoples' and nations' literary identity was first postulated, has been precisely the choice of its main object.* Is the literary historian's raw material everything that has been written and might be considered typical of a given culture? To answer in the affirmative means to take the word "literature" in its broad sense of written material on a large variety of themes. Or is it its material the literary text in its strict sense, which would give priority to poetry, fictional narrative, tragedy, comedy, drama, in short, to textual genres where either imagination or feeling predominate, without any necessary relationship with a certifiable truth of the actions represented? Take heed of the fact that this dilemma was present in the opposition Croce made between poetry and non-poetry, the latter encompassing all didactic, political, scientific, religious etc. elements, which would compose the cultural structure of a given work, but which would not confer to it an artistic and poetic identity, constituted by the synthesis of image and feeling.

### **Brazil's two patterns of literary history**

I had before me two mutually exclusive patterns, which have marked Brazilian literary history tradition since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: the sociological pattern represented by Sílvio Romero's *História da literatura brasileira* (Brazilian literature history) and the historical-aesthetic pattern represented by José Veríssimo's work of the same title. A close reading of the introductions each of these authors wrote to their works is enough for one to see how different and even politically opposed they are. In another context, much closer to me, opposition showed up in the polemic controversy which Afrânio Coutinho, in the 1950s and 1960s, engaged himself in when he claimed an aesthetic-stylistic approach to literary historiography, opposing it to sociological or historicist criticism, coming from Romero's tradition, which would be prevalent for some time in a good many Brazilian universities.

At Universidade de São Paulo, next to traditional historicism and philology, sociological interpretation was mediated, in the teachings of a critic as powerful as Antônio Cândido, by a close attention to each author's characteristics and, above all, to the typically literary structures in the works under study, all of which can be easily checked by reading the fine textual analyses throughout the chapters of his *Formação da literatura brasileira* [Brazilian Literature Formation]. It is a crucial work which since its publication has been impregnating the college studies of our literature.

In Rio de Janeiro, apart from academic practices, criticism had been exhibiting, since the 1930s and 40s, exceptional energy, and just to be fair we must point out at least two names which have honored this institution

and much have taught me as they still do, Augusto Meyer and Álvaro Lins. To theirs I add the name of a scholarly person very dear to me, Lúcia Miguel Pereira.

Although I understand the reasons of both sides (which, by the way, in the 1970s, seemed partially replaced by the structural discourse, itself neither historicist nor aesthetic), my theoretical background placed me in a somehow atypical position. Deep inside I believed in Croce's aesthetics, which conferred an identity to poetry and art in general, as an instructive, figural and expressive form of knowledge, upholding, as we have seen, a basic distinction between the poetic act and other discursive practices. But (and great stress is placed on this adversative conjunction...), but my readings of Gramsci and mainly the moral and cultural resistance that had marked me and my generation throughout the "lead years" made me firmly insert the literary text into the plot of the ideological history in which it had been conceived. Both requests were demanding and always appeared whenever I chose and evaluated a work of art, now taken as representing a certain frame of mind, now taken for what it was as a well-done aesthetic creation.

Although nobody should be the judge of his own case, to me it seems that, in writing my *História concisa*, I managed to comply with both requirements without becoming unaware that they were different points of view, so much so that they would never allow any comfortable eclecticism. In other words, a poem or a novel may be meaningful from the political or sociological point of view, but these qualities do not give them, by themselves, the status of works of art. Anyway, the best works of all literary traditions have a permanent value according to both representative and aesthetic criteria.

Taking an example just to get away from a discourse that risks falling into the abstraction trap, I recall that, when studying the Brazilian northeastern novel of the 1930s and '40s, one of the richest periods of our realistic narrative history, I took advantage of the concept of *tension* between the narrator and his/her subject matter; a concept finely worked out by Lucien Goldman in his essays on the sociology of the novel. I dwelled then on the works of Jorge Amado, Érico Veríssimo, Marques Rebelo, José Lins do Rego e Graciliano Ramos; they gave me occasion to reflect on novels exhibiting both minimal and maximal tension. It was a dialectic approach to the relationship between the work and society, but one that always took for granted the literary value of the *corpus* under interpretation.

### **Between historicism and the dialectic method**

In analyzing and interpreting texts in the classroom I had a growing suspicion that, although it was a necessary practice, recognizing the difference between social and aesthetic levels was not enough. One had to go deeper into the field of literary and historiographic theories in order to *understand* those that should not be considered merely externalities.

In the first place, similarities and analogies had to be charted. Both literary history and historiography deal with unique phenomena that, strictly speaking, are unrepeatable. No work of art is the same as another, regardless of any number of common form or meaning features they may exhibit. The same is true of a historical fact. An event is something that will not return, exactly as it is, in space and time, be it a battle, be it a revolution, be it an edition, be it a coup d'état. The uniqueness or unrepeatability of a work and of a historical event demands from the literary or social historian an ability to select meaningful works or events, an operation that is necessary due to the growing and cumulative number of works and events. To operate selectively, both the social and the literary historian must be guided by a given perspective, which will define their criteria of meaning. For only what is meaningful will and must, in principle, remain. *Uniqueness or unrepeatability in the object; selectivity and perspective in the scholar – these are some of the common characteristics that bring the literary critic and the historian together.*

Where would the differentiation zones begin? According to German historicism there would still be considerable room for analogies. The culturalists, who are Dilthey's, and, more remotely, Vico's heirs, would recognize in the history of civilization large cultural movements corresponding to clearly delimited historical periods. Hence the recognition through ages of great literary styles in which acts, facts and works are inserted: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Arcadism, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism and Symbolism, to stick just to the names of movements described up to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The recognition of these styles would be therefore a first step in bringing personalities and works together pointing out what they have in common within the context of the ideological trends of their age. Even before Dilthey, Burkhardt, for instance, used to refer to the Renaissance man, endowed with certain constant attributes such as the cult of the individual; and it is common knowledge that Nietzsche drank heavily from that source when he created the overman figure. Baroque and Romanticism yielded similar descriptions, so much so that occasionally the literary historian would fall into the *petitio principii* fallacy of considering a given work Baroque because it had been created in the Baroque period, which was considered Baroque because it had produced works exhibiting... Baroque characteristics.

One of the less felicitous results of historicism *à outrance* was and is, precisely, that of underestimating the uniqueness and unrepeatability of a work of art, insofar as it starts from style marks common to a given age and tends to delete the differences which distinguish one text from another, one poet from another, one narrator from another. Likewise, certain similarities or theme or style coincidences between works from different times invite pure historicism to see narrow chains of influence, sometimes going as far as believing that a given work brought forth another written long after, turning intertextuality into a sort of remote fatherhood. I recall a Brazilian literature teacher who

used to state, without any doubt whatsoever, that *São Bernardo*, by Graciliano Ramos, only became possible because before it Machado de Assis had written *Dom Casmurro*: the evidence was the fact that both narrators were quite jealous... I do not know how Graciliano Ramos, hardly outstanding for his good humor, would have reacted to that speculation.

The recognition of historical styles preserved, in any case, their coherence and validity, and I did not shun it while organizing my literary history. But, as already said, I suspected that it would not be enough to have similarities nor much less to subordinate individual experience to a common cultural or ideological background. Where would real differences begin? *How would it be possible to safeguard the unique character of a work of art in a literary discourse?* How could one show that the aesthetic act springs from a distinctive affective or cognitive or playful experience, which was stylized in a certain way and not in any other, with subjective resonances of its own and rendered more or less communicable to other human beings by the linguistic form? Besides, they are not perfectly communicable once poetry or prose language is not always transparent, requiring an interpreting effort?

To answer to this difficult but inevitable question, strictly sociological criticism lacked tuned instruments, since it used to work as still does using large unifying categories such as *social class and sociohistorical type*, categories which include an *a priori* set of defining marks of the authors and their characters. According to determinist criticism, to say that a given work was produced by an aristocrat or for an aristocratic audience yields the key to understanding the characters' nature or the poem metaphors. The question still remains: what individualizes a poetic text and separates it from another if both have been produced within the same social class and are to be read by an audience belonging to that class? This is one of the crucial questions that I tried to answer throughout the 1970s, during the full objectivist tide, represented both by Structuralism and Marxism, two systemic approaches that classified the symbolic phenomena. A dilemma with no visible way out, or just a problem to solve?

Although marked by existentialist and hermeneutic readings likely to delve into the writer's subjective aspects and to recognize the edge of freedom of his stylistic options, I must say that the sociohistoric understanding of literary texts seemed to me not only an epistemological necessity, but also an ethical and political imperative, pushing me away, albeit partially, from the Crocean orbit, idealistic in its inspiration. I remember my readings of Goldmann, which were added to previous readings of Gramsci and would later, in the same 1970s, add up to readings of Hegel, Adorno, Benjamin and Simone Weil, all of them philosophers who opened in the compact body of the predominant ideologies the critical spirit breach and turned on the light of ethical and aesthetical awareness in the lackluster scene of economic determinations and political oppressions.

## The lesson of Otto Maria Carpeaux

And now it is the right moment to do justice to a Western culture historian to whom I had already dedicated my *História concisa da literatura brasileira* (Concise history of Brazilian literature), Otto Maria Carpeaux, whose *História da Literatura Occidental* (The History of Western Literature) had become my bedside companion. And what did Carpeaux teach me alongside his vast learning?

Carpeaux taught me, among other fundamental things, the half truth of sociological determinism. Machiavel had already evaluated the balance between human will and the power of fate when he spoke of *metà virtù metà fortuna*, adding with his relentless realism that to fortune we should probably attribute a little more than half the causes of human actions. *If we carry the balance pointed out by the Florentine secretary over to the analysis of the elements of a literary work and if we sift it through Carpeaux's dialectic historicism, what would we have? A renewed tension concept between the extremes of determinism and creative freedom, a difficult balance between social-historical categories and authorial individuation, a renewed and difficult balance between dominant ideologies and the counter-ideologies all along the artistic creation.*

I now recognize, on looking back, that there worked in my spirit a design to surmount and yet retain (in the Hegelian sense of the term dialectics) a sharp opposition between poetry and non-poetry, between art and ideology.

The core of Carpeaux's dialectics in the making of *História da Literatura Occidental* (The History of Western Literature) lies precisely in his ability to identify in great literary texts not only the mimesis of hegemonic culture, but also its counterpoint that signalizes the turnaround moment, the gesture of resistance expressing difference and contradiction. This sharp look, which recognizes both orthodoxy and its necessary heresies, perceives even in ancient writings, highly crystallized by school tradition, the many forms of dissent. Read what Carpeaux wrote about the poet Lucanus, who was forced to commit suicide after conspiring against Nero

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*Carpeaux in a pen and ink drawing by Luís Jardim*

(65 A.C.). His epic poem *Pharsalia* was considered by the learned Latinist Gaston Bossier the poem of the *opposition sous les Césars*. Lucanus, who was a stoic like his contemporary Seneca, also a suicide in the same year of 65, would not idealize the imperial power holders. Unlike Virgil, who invented a divine genealogy to exalt the figure of Augustus Caesar, Lucanus prefers Cato, the great defeated, over everybody else – *Victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni* – “The winning cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleased Cato.”

I have chosen the example above, itself a true paradigm, as I might have chosen hundreds of others in which Carpeaux apprehends an author’s meaning of resistance in face of the hegemonic discourse of his/her time. As a rule, the source of this critical awareness comes from the past, seen as a better time, the Golden Age. It is the austere simplicity of the Republic, before the corruption in the history of Rome. Later on, it will be the purity of the early Church as opposed to the papacy decadence, in the mind of reformers and neo-evangelical movements of the Middle Ages. Sometimes it is not the memory of a mythical paradise, but the utopia of the Kingdom, of an equalitarian society or universal communism that makes a writer to brave his/her time and, with the eyes set on what is to come, debunk the traps of the current ideology.<sup>2</sup>

### **From mirror to resistance – the making of *O ser e o tempo da poesia* (Being and time in poetry)**

I believe that by the middle 1970s my groping through aesthetic and ideological requirements finally gave way to an intuition of the pathway I had to follow without getting stuck in a jammed Manichaeism. The pathway was the analysis and interpretation of poems the power and beauty of which proved themselves to my sensibility, seeking in them the double relationship they might have with the dominant ideology in their context: *the specular relationship and the resistance relationship*.

The basic data required to detect the specular relationship are yielded by the social and cultural history that conditioned the work under analysis. Historicism has always been prodigal in yielding information about the author, his/her time and his/her literary activity, examining his/her family milieu, his/her elementary and higher education, the books he/she read, the scholar he/she used to meet, his/her literary or political groups and the cultural fashions of his/her time and, on the Marxist side, the class he/she belonged to or to which he/she aspired as well as that of his/her readers. We might call this operation *ground scouting work*, which confers to the literary historian’s discourse a strong referential character insofar as the work *refers* to its context and this, in turn, determines or, to put it in milder language, conditions the work.

But the specular relationship is not the only one. The narrator’s or the poet’s point of view can see or foresee what ideology covers up or counterfeits. In this confrontation between fictional process and hegemonic thought

rationalizations we identify the vital core of resistance literature. The concept and its basic forms have kept me busy for long since I wrote, around 1976, the essay “Resistance poetry”, a chapter of *O ser e o tempo da poesia* (Being and time in poetry), issued the following year, up to when I finished *Literatura e Resistência* (Literature and Resistance) published recently.

The essay charted some forms of resistance poetry: metalanguage-poetry, myth-poetry, biography-poetry, satire-poetry and utopia-poetry, ending up with an analysis of Leopardi’s long poem “La ginestra”.

### **Resistance forces and forms in Brazilian literature and history**

Much of what I have been exploring and writing about, since the 1980s, both in the field of literary interpretation and in that of cultural history, is identified with the perception of the opposition movements within the style of different ages (contradiction movements that Carpeaux’s dialectical method pointed out in his great *History*). *Either within the very works which are in tension with the dominant ideologies of their time or, even more dramatically, are in tension with themselves.*

It is possible, but I cannot state it for sure, that the choice I have made of works particularly attractive to me reflects the representation of existential situations marked by social or psychological contrasts and conflicts. Anyway, the contradictions do exist and from them there comes an intellectual liveliness giving them a constant presentness, even though the conflicts might be debtors of ideologies and counter-ideologies of past times. This statement demands examples.

**Antonio Vieira** – What social forces made the Maranhão and Pará settlers expel Father Vieira from these mission fields and what social and cultural forces made Portuguese Inquisition imprison him for two years proffering charges against him, the result of which was his prohibition to preach in his own country?

In both cases the temerarious Jesuit had been working in projects that clearly opposed the establishment. Standing for the Indians of the North in the name of an evangelization plan which impeded any form of enslavement of manual labor, Vieira hindered the way of slave hunters whose raids into the country had precisely the purpose of making slaves. Standing for the Christian converts’ right to remain in Portugal, where their capital would be necessary to finance the Western Indies Company, Vieira became a suspect to the Inquisition which immediately took advantage of the breaches his prophetic writings offered when he made the establishment of the Fifth Empire coincide with the reunification of the Israel tribes and their return to the Promised Land. Both the Indians’ controlled freedom and the preaching of that messianic time were counter-ideological components cherished by this unrepentant dreamer, who paid dearly for his utopias. But if Vieira’s works merely mirrored the colonial ideology or the Inquisition’s orthodoxy,

what value would his eloquence have for us? It would have become food and fodder for puristic grammarians.

*Basílio da Gama – O Uruguai* – Still within the context of colonial Brazil, take a look at the fertile ideological contradiction pervading Basílio da Gama's fair poem *O Uruguai*, rightly admired by Machado de Assis. While studying it I thought that the essay I would dedicate to it could not have any other title but "The shades of the lights in our colonial condition".

The Lights, which came from Pombal's Portugal in a time of tactic alliance with Spain by means of the Treaty of Madrid, considered it to be rational and useful to throw out the missionaries from the Seven Peoples in order to subject the region to the control of the Portuguese in exchange for the Colônia do Sacramento, which would then go to the Spanish crown. This was the *reason of the Lights*, made clear by the action and speech of Gomes Freire de Andrada, who commands the colonial troops, invades the Seven Peoples' region and tries to convince the native chiefs to yield the mission lands. An echo to the Marquis of Pombal's will is the proposal adopted by Basílio da Gama who is eager to offer his protector one more definite proof of his repudiation of his own past as a Jesuit novice. It so happens, however, and luckily for the readers of the poem, that Basílio da Gama was not just a flatterer writing lines vaguely in praise of political power: he was an artist and a man sensitive to the integrity and beauty of the Guaranis chased after by the so superior forces of the colonial army.

The poem Second Canto is typical as point and counterpoint in a disconcerted duo in which the heroic voice, resisting death, will be that of the rebellious peoples. Sepé Tiaraju, who would become a legendary figure in gaucho songs, comes unarmed and alone, carrying neither arches nor quivers, without any deference whatsoever, *without showing or suggesting any courtesy* towards the supreme military authority. This image displays in full measure the American man, at the same time free and able to offer reasons, for it is of reason that his companion Cacambo will speak to the general:

O, famous General,  
[...]  
Though our ancestors were spoils  
Of Europe's treachery, and from this very spot,  
Due to the unavenged bones of our relatives,  
Far valleys are seen turning white,  
I, unarmed and alone, come looking for you,  
So much I expect from you. AND WHILE WEAPONS  
GIVE OCCASION TO REASON, SIR, LET US SEE  
IF WE CAN SPARE THE LIFE AND BLOOD  
OF SO MANY WRETCHED PEOPLE (II, 48-59).

The missionary's speech is supported by a reasoned peace proposal. The Indian shows confidence in the validity of human reason which would bring everybody closer. WHILE WEAPONS GIVE OCCASION TO REASON... But the outcome of the meeting between the Guaranis and the general makes it clear that there are two reasons in conflict: that of natural law, or *jus gentium*, claimed by scholastic theology and postulated by the missionaries; and the reason of State, nothing short of the law of power, which in the name of "Europe's ease", claimed by Gomes Freire de Andrada, will throw the missionaries out and tear down the Seven Peoples, which today are magnificent and melancholic ruins.



*Front page of the first edition of O Uruguai*

In the same poem are brought together the Marquis of Pombal flatterer's colonial ideology and the voice of the defeated, to whom the poet allows the tone of slaughtered heroism.

### *Other resistance figures*

The eye direction determines one's perspective. Literary history tends to select its own objects and does it using a strict criterion, using a finer sifter than that of social and political historiography, whose reference corpus must be as open and inclusive as possible to avoid the risk of generalizations based on a small and pre-selected number of samples.

Literary history deals with unique and highly individualized objects such as narrative and poetic works, which may be assembled according to great age styles or, in the process we have been essaying, according to conspicuous trends of existential or ethical character. This way I could, after writing *Poesia resistência* (Resistance Poetry), search for similar relationships in the field of the novel and present them in the essay "Narrativa e resistência" (Narrative and resistance), which is part of the collectanea *Literatura e Resistência* (Literature and Resistance). The rereading of powerfully critical narrators such as Raul Pompéia, Lima Barreto and Graciliano Ramos showed me new perspectives to detect internal differences underlying the resistance narrative concept.

Outside the range of Brazilian literature, but still within the range of Brazilian experience, I had the pleasant surprise to find, in a short story book by Albert Camus, *L'exil et le royaume*, a narrative the theme of which is a perfect metaphor for the resistance concept, the Sisyphus myth, the rolling stone which the hero in vain tries to take to the mountain top. The story carries the title "La pierre qui pousse", "The sprouting stone". To the Brazilian reader's delight, the stone in this case lies in the middle of a square before the church of Bom Jesus at Iguape, a colonial caiçara town Albert Camus visited having Oswald de Andrade as his guide during his trip to Brazil.

The author of *La peste* imagined a French engineer, who works at Iguape, meeting a black Sisyphus, a sailor who had made a promise to Bom Jesus at a dangerous moment at sea: he had promised to carry on his head a hundred-pound stone and place it on the patron saint's altar on the saint's festival day. However, our devout sailor had been dancing the night before the festival during a long macumba séance, which had made him exhausted. He is unable to carry the stone and falls halfway to the altar. His substitute who is to keep the promise will be the French engineer, and this defies the idea of life as an absurd weight thanks to an unexpected solidarity gesture. Life will go on meaningless, but, even so, or exactly because of this, we must stretch out our hands to one another.

### **Back to the field of Brazilian literature**

Camus' black sailor carried an overly heavy stone as far as he could, but he did not manage to take it up to the Bom Jesus' altar. If we go back in time and stop to examine the unhappy lot of a great Brazilian black poet, Cruz e Souza, who died half a century before Camus' visit to Brazil, we shall see the

same stone, but overlapping other stones and setting up a wall behind which the poet sees himself immured.

Cruz e Souza lived and died at a time in Brazilian and Western history when both in science and in current ideology the thesis for the existence of superior and inferior races was predominant. Colonialism and eurocentrism joined to brand the black people as representative of an archaic and, therefore, inferior phase in human being's evolutionary scale. Even apt scientists mindful of the richness of afro-Brazilian culture, such as Nina Rodrigues, used to consider black people as incapable of an intellectual performance similar to that of white people. Furthermore, the black were marked by violent feelings and were morally below civilized European requirements. This was the context of the ideas and prejudices Cruz de Souza had to face throughout his short and painful existence. And how did he express his revolt as a man and artist whose skin was seen as a brand?

Read, for example, the prose poem titled "O emparedado" (The immured). The poet sees himself within four high stone walls built up by prejudice; but what amazes and revolts him above all is to detect the man of science bringing more and more stones in his own hands in order to immure him and hinder him from denouncing his personal ignominious condition. To the extent of my knowledge in Brazilian literature there are not any other pages as clear and intense as the challenge this black Dante poses to the dominant ideology strong tenet, its racist anthropology. He questions science calling it a "hypothesis dictator", which is astonishing, once what was science by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would not be considered so in the next century, mainly after Franz Boas' illuminating studies, which had a strong bearing on Gilberto Freire's thought. But, when Cruz e Souza, in his discontent, used to ask what was the color of his feelings, of his imagination, of his dreams, of his poetic forms, showing strongly that the world of symbols and artistic creation has nothing to do with the chemistry of one's skin, he was alone, without any support from the sages of his country and of his time. Could the tension between poetry and ideology have a better example than this in which poetry itself is the very anti-ideological resistance?

It is understandable that deterministic sociology would rather collect cases in which literature is but the representation of dominant ideologies. Old historicism used to follow, in its own way, this trail, demonstrating beyond any possible doubt that any literary work reproduces the fundamental traces of its culture and time. Positivism which, as we know, brought forth sociology (since Comte, who baptized the new science, up to Durkheim, the his great master between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th) had no doubts whatsoever concerning the "environment" factor as the causing principle of a literary work. And, in this sense, positivism resumed the dogma of Conde de Bonald, the father of French conservative thought, who used to define literature, *tout court*, as "society's expression".

What cultural critical theory, from Benjamin to Adorno, has found out since the 1920s e 30s, is precisely the reverse of this generic formula. The best literature does not accept passively society's image of a daily benumbed life conveyed in manners of discourse seated on the present reality. This was already the embryo of the tension hypothesis conceived by Goldmann. Anyone who has read, as I had the privilege to do, the many examples of counter-ideology filling Otto Maria Carpeaux's *História da Literatura Ocidental* (History of Western Literature) must have learned a resistance lesson that is for good.

### **Towards the history of ideologies as cultural history**

By the mid 1980s, having already taught several courses in Colonial literature, I felt the need to go deeper into the cultural sources of the texts I used to interpret in the classroom. I had then the opportunity to do some research in the Roman archives of the Jesuit Writers' House and in the vast collection of Portuguese Inquisition proceedings in the Torre do Tombo library housed in the Assembléia Nacional in Lisbon. This research originated the essays on Anchieta, Vieira and Antonil which would be part of *Dialética da colonização* (Colonization Dialectics), issued only in 1992.

I shall not dwell, for the sake of brevity, on the reconstructions of the different working hypotheses I tried to bring together in this work. The main objective was to detect the manifold relationships which connect *cult, colonization and culture*.

These three concepts are conveyed by words having the same Latin root, the verb *colo*. Among its several acceptations, *colo* means *to cultivate the land, to occupy and control someone else's land, that is, the colony, to summon and invoke the dead and the gods, through the cult brought from the motherland to the conquered territory and, finally, to build a universe of learning and an intellectual project*, which the term *culture* expresses to the full. Colony = cultivation + cult + culture. But, in spite of this etymological affinity, what history kept on revealing to me was a field of seldom well settled tensions between the colonization material project and the ideal values of cult or culture. If occasionally the colonizer's interests found support in the words of our first economist, the clever Jesuit Antonil, advisor to the sugar plantation masters, or if the colonial exploratory expeditions were extolled by fabricators of noble classes, on other occasions the conquest process agents would be evaluated by the fiery words of the greatest religious orator in our language, Father Antônio Vieira.

Within the context of the Second Reign, José de Alencar, the father of the Brazilian novel, voted in the senate against the Free Womb Act, following the steps of conservative Bernardo Pereira de Vasconcelos, by then already gone, and the Marquis of Olinda, still alive and obstinately proslavery. Alencar's old-fashioned Romantic culture warranted the *status quo*; but the

same romantic culture inspired pleading and critical words in the work of Gonçalves Dias, the father of Indianist poetry and author of a remarkable prose work, “Meditation”, an early emancipationist pamphlet. Two Indianist Romantic authors: one supported with his work the colonization cold-hearted trading activities; the other denounced, using religious and cultural weapons, the iniquities of a process which mowed down the natives and made the African people slaves. To refer to this yes and no play I used the term “dialectics”, aware that the concept itself, by the 1980s and 90s, did not enjoy the same prestige that had haloed it in previous decades.

The book deals with other situations in which ideological conflicts emerge. In a liberal Old Republic there is embedded a province ruled by a constitution of its own, having a positivist background, half-progressive and half-centralizing, Rio Grande do Sul. The opposition will not be made up of ideas only, but of political projects, which the 1930 Revolution showed to the full. In the social positivism embraced by the winning gaucho politicians in 1930 we find the archeology of our welfare state.

Another example dear to many of our generation: in the year of 1956, the president Juscelino Kubitschek launches his modernizing plan which will come to a head with the foundation of Brasília; in the same year, one of JK’s partisans launches a masterpiece totally grounded on the revaluation and closer analysis of cultural sources of Minas Gerais’ backlands – Guimarães Rosa issues *Grande sertão: veredas*.

Finally, so as not to be accused of having ignored the present, what is to be postmodern? Breaking away from modern rationality, or pushing to extremes the technical processes and ideological presuppositions typical of capitalist modernity? If nothing is simple in the concept of civilization, neither are the faces of contemporary civilization uniform.

Have I learned a lesson from this journey which has been going on for half a century? Surely, the suspicion that culture is a tense meeting between mirroring and resisting, transparency and opacity, which sometimes confers to it the figure of a puzzle. Returning lately to the work of Machado de Assis, the wizard who founded this house, it was the word “enigma” that occurred to me when I decided to decipher his look in which I seemed to guess a mix of relentless criticism and stoical resignation. Rereading Machado de Assis, this has been the pathway I have been following now, and only God knows whether this will be the last one.

## Notes

- 1 In *Leitura de poesia* (ed. Alfredo Bosi), São Paulo: Ática, 1996, p. 7-9.
- 2 Otto Maria Carpeaux presents, in his *História da literatura ocidental*, many examples of literature resisting to the dominant ideology. I have commented on some meaningful cases in *Literatura e resistência*, São Paulo, Cia. Das Letras, 2002, pp. 36-40.

*ABSTRACT* – This essay summarizes the author’s itinerary as historian of Brazilian literature, theoretician of poetry and scholar of our cultural heritage. The initial moments of this career merit special attention: the study of Croce’s aesthetics, the first acquaintance with Gramsci’s Marxist philosophy, the influence of Christian Existentialism in the late 1950s, and the political engagement in leftist politics in Brazil in the 1960s and 70s. As professor of Italian Literature, the author has written theses on Pirandello and Leopardi, which remain unpublished. As a student of literary history, in the wake of Otto Maria Carpeaux’s work, the author examines the dialectic relationships between ideology and poetry, and ideology and prose, which led to his concept of literature as resistance. When writing the *Dialectics of Colonization*, he immersed himself in the study of the tensions that distinguish the history of ideologies in Brazil.

*KEYWORDS* - History of Literature, Criticism of Culture, Dialectics of Colonization.

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