

**Pedro Meira Monteiro. *Um moralista nos trópicos: o visconde de Cairu e o duque de La Rochefoucauld*. São Paulo: Boitempo and Fapesp, 2004.**

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In his latest book, Pedro Meira Monteiro offers a solid and stimulating analysis of the intersections between literature, morals, and society. He discusses the semantic artifacts that create moral norms in the construction of meaning through the intersubjective experience of social agents. He also discusses how morals operate in the structuring of their reflexive ability and how they are rendered manifest in the successful communication between literature and society. These relationships are the basis for understanding the “moral catechism” compiled by José da Silva Lisboa, which is based on Roman Catholic doctrines. Lisboa was a Viscount of the Brazilian Empire, and his prose symbolically deals with morals intertextually, as an orientation of conduct and social organization, as shown in Monteiro’s book.

In this study, the writings of the Viscount of Cairu cast a new historical and discursive light on Brazil’s transition from colonial society to independent state. Monteiro emphasizes the search, implicit in this state-in-the-making, for a moral basis that could contribute to the containment of the “collective fabric” in the blossoming national political community. *Constituição Moral, e deveres do cidadão* [*Moral constitution and obligations of the citizen*] was first published in 1824, when, two years after Brazil declared its independence from Portugal, the country “was granted” its first constitution. Cairu’s writings, then, arise in the context of the institutional and political architecture of that new state, or perhaps even in opposition to it, if we consider that, in appealing to Catholic morals, Cairu’s work questioned the liberal principles according to which good institutions are enough to generate virtuous societies and citizens. Taking morals not only as the theme but, specifically, as the motivation that led Cairu to take up his quill, Monteiro correctly refers to a “moralistic campaign” whose main objective was to allow young “Brazilians” to conceive of themselves as members of a collectivity.

The mediations that confer intelligibility to Cairu's moral prose and make possible a communication between literatures and societies are explored from an intertextual perspective that Monteiro calls "crossed readings." These serve as one of the book's original contributions on the methodological level. This does not mean that Lisboa's prose (and literature in general) are taken simply as "independent" of society. But from Monteiro's perspective, it means that literary analysis has obligations of its own that cannot be escaped. This explains his option to leave to historians the task of retracing the connections between text and context. The Maxims of La Rochefoucauld are not the only crossing of readings, as can be seen in Cairu's (chapter 1) use of the collection entitled *Júbilos da América* [*Jubilations of America*], published in Brazil in the mid-eighteenth century, and the meaning of its use. In fact, the Maxims are the main references for understanding Cairu's publication. The comparative intertextual perspective employed does not fit easily into the conventional mold of studies on literary "diffusion," or "reception," although Monteiro's approach does use some of their analytic resources. This is not only because he goes into detail (in chapter 2) about the complexity of the Maxims in the Duc's universe, but also because, by tracing their evolution over time and in space, he renews the reader's understanding of French classicism itself. In particular, at no moment does he ignore the characteristics that may particularize the Maxims as a literary genre in the midst of the diversity of their configurations and intellectual references in Western history.

More than in the sociological mechanisms of transmission, then, the notion of "crossed readings" deals with the "selectivity" proper to this literary genre. Maxims function as an analytic angle to capture experiences, nuances, distinctions, and even new perspectives of composition that symbolically encode dynamic behaviors in time and space. They do so even at the cost of changing their meanings in the final analysis of what was retained of the "original" and what was changed. This holds true for the "shifts" from the "pessimism" associated with the feeling of the eclipse of a civilization (La Rochefoucauld) to the "optimism" stirred up in creating a new one (Cairu), which wishes to be "something else" even if it is built on the ruins of the former (chapter 3). This is also true for shifts from the "individual" as the target of the discourse (La Rochefoucauld) to the "political community" as its unity (Cairu), as well as for the "critical effort" of the Maxims in revealing the falseness of human virtues and the "edifying warning" in the Brazilian catechism.

It is not a question of literary form and its cultural variants, in a struc-

tural, functional, or historicist sense. The attempt is to show in these inter-textually mediated “shifts” that morals allow/demand the experience of *difference* in the same way that the selectivity of the Maxims allow/demand the *contingency* of the all-too-human. *Crossed readings*: the prose of Cairu, the sonnets of the Academy of the Select, La Rochefoucauld’s Maxims, and the Brazilian Empire, then, all allow for multiple, but not infinite, discursive relationships of meaning. Monteiro’s book is marked by its ability to identify in the text the finest threads of the warping of meanings among literature, morals and society, rather than the abrupt contrasts that are common in analyses of genres such as moralizing literature. With grace and precision he shows that—paraphrasing Simmel—the finest threads of historical semantics are indeed the strongest.

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