

The Itinerary of a Problem: Luiz Costa Lima and the "Control of the Imaginary"

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Only recently have Brazilian scholars begun to acknowledge the efforts of Luiz Costa Lima in proposing a new way of thinking about the relationship between reason and imagination, which Costa Lima based on his analysis of the concept of mimesis. Sixteen years have already passed since the publication of *O Controle do Imaginário* (*Control of the Imaginary*), the first volume of the trilogy completed by *Sociedade e Discurso Ficcional* and *O Fingidor e o Censor*. The initial volume was re-edited in 1989 and other books have followed without any significant reaction in Brazilian departments of Literature, let alone in those of History, with the exception of the university circles in Rio de Janeiro with which the author is immediately connected. It is an interesting case in which the written word fails to broaden the reach that the spoken word has already established in face-to-face communication, in the classroom, in colloquia or in conversation.

This late and certainly embarrassed reception contrasts with the readiness with which those works were welcomed at leading centers in Europe and the United States. The American translation of the first volume appeared in 1988, just four years after the publication of the original. In 1990 the German version was released. Two years later the remaining books of the trilogy appeared in English in a single volume.¹ A casual reader might suppose that the publication of those books in languages more accessible to foreign scholars than Portuguese would reflect the growing international interest in so-called "emerging literatures" or in post-colonial studies. That impression, however, quickly fades when one considers the books' tables of contents, where themes of much older academic substance prevail, in

particular those linked to European literature and the history of ideas. In fact, the trilogy of the *Control of the Imaginary* has been read and discussed as a set of theoretical and epistemological inquiries pertinent to Western culture, in the broadest possible sense.

The insight that drove the entire series is relatively simple. It is the assumption that modern reason, as it developed from the Italian Renaissance on, found in the imagination a potentially disruptive faculty that should be kept under constant suspicion and control, framed within specific spaces and social activities and according to very strict criteria. Literature would thus be an object of that control, especially in regard to the status and the autonomy granted to fiction, hierarchically dependent on a principle of reality conceived as a given essence, always identical to itself, immutable and exterior to its eventual observers' subjectivities.

This assumption already demonstrates that the author is working within theoretical perspectives that have increasingly challenged the meta-historical concept of literature since the late 1960s. According to the traditional point of view, literature was to be "a type of product that man (at least in the West) would naturally secrete" ("Pós-escrito" 271). Nevertheless, the problematization of the control of the imaginary enables us to grasp the historical construction of the dominant concept of literature that came into effect in the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. At the same time, we see how its three main institutional supports, regarded as "natural" and prior to history itself, were built: the nation with its specificities, the self-centered individual and the privilege given to "fact" as undeniable truth. The ensuing "secretion" would be the literary work, requiring an interpretation always marked by these three essential referents.

The three books that make up the series examine this assumption from different angles, without following any chronological or thematic order. The trilogy was "imposed" upon the author: "When I began to put together *Control of the Imaginary*, I didn't foresee the volumes that followed," he wrote in the postscript to the second edition of the initial volume (266). Seen as a whole, the books give the impression of a work in progress, in the process of being perfected, moving back and forth, as though stemming from a thought that wants to scrutinize itself endlessly. The chapters follow in a seemingly disorderly fashion, skipping from the Renaissance to German Romanticism, to the clever gimmicks of Machado de Assis, to digressions on the discourse of History, to Enlightenment fiction, to the occupation of the New World,

to culture and society in the Old Regime, to the reception of the work of Jorge Luis Borges and so on. The only thread is the initial assumption that unfolds in a series of pictures in the gallery of the *Control of the Imaginary*. With the conclusion of the third volume the author realized that the materials of the chapters seemed to be dispersed, so much so that in the postscript he presented “a kind of map” which could serve as a guide for the exposition, splitting his work into three subsets or three general approaches to the same collection. Each one of these is composed of chapters spread across the three volumes of the series.

Costa Lima begins with an analysis of Renaissance theoretical texts on poetry and their attempt to tame the wildness of poetical imagination by establishing the primacy of truth over verisimilitude. As Costa Lima points out, the concept of verisimilitude was then deprived of the Aristotelian notion of *enérgeia*, originally directed not at what is already existent but at what is possible at large. A parallel consideration of French classicism enabled the author to identify an initially religious justification to the control of the imaginary, which would thus help strengthen the bases of legitimacy of the Old Regime and its colonial presence in the Americas. These themes constitute the first subset of the collection.

The second subset already refers to another type of control, that of the Enlightenment, which replaced religion with science as the controlling principle of the productions of human imagination. In this context, Costa Lima tackles the resistance of German romanticism to restrictions raised by the controlling reason. This theme was to become one of the areas of the author's mastery, in subsequent books such as *Limites da voz (The Limits of the Voice)* and *Vida e Mimesis*. Finally, the “map” indicates a third “subset”: the trilogy questions the situation of the control of the imaginary in contemporary times. In this it confronts a possible reversal, in which the systematic criticism of the idea of truth threatens to turn fiction from a controlled product into a controlling factor.

The “map,” drawn *a posteriori*, reveals, however, the internal coherence of the various threads. These were begun more from the need to increase and expand rather than through prior planning. It was not for want of competent architecture, but rather due to the very fecundity of the assumption proposed, which slowly revealed to the author its great capacity and versatility. In a statement so simple that it can be reduced to eight words—the control of the imaginary by modern reason—Luiz Costa Lima was able

to discover much more than an empirical opening for his reflections on *mimesis* in modernity. His reflections lay the foundation for an entire theory of culture, far broader than the one encompassing the phenomena that can be historically demarcated as literary. One gets the impression that the succession of the “pictures” in the trilogy could be indefinitely extended and could apply to other areas that are subject to the incidence of the imaginary as well, such as the culture industry, behavior, politics and even ethics. It is up to other scholars to accept such a challenge, necessarily within an interdisciplinary context.

The trigger to the insight into control, however, was activated by a range of material that initially seemed connected to literature, especially in terms of the concern to better define the status of fiction—that is to say, of the product of an activity far too human, viz., *mimesis*. The whole reflection of *Control of the Imaginary* would be impossible without Luiz Costa Lima having first worked out a brilliant deconstruction, in its broadest sense, of a tradition that linked the concepts of *mimesis* and *imitatio*. It was in *Mimesis e Modernidade* (1980) that the author separated those terms by demonstrating that *mimesis* cannot be taken as a representation by reflection or imitation of an already given real; on the contrary, its specificity is the production of difference. In other words, the mimetic activity does not reproduce what is similar, but rather engenders something different from it.

That argument, here roughly summarized, was the first result of Luiz Costa Lima’s contact with the theoretical perspectives of the aesthetics of reception begun by Hans Robert Jauss in Germany in 1967. The Brazilian scholar made his first contacts with that current in the mid-1970s, at a time when he might have already reached the limits of the structuralist approach he had until then adopted. The focus on reception produced a reversal in the literary field by introducing the role of the reader, as an agent who creates meaning, as central. Any fictional product is aesthetically fulfilled only according to the references of experience and expectation that historically demarcate the social activity of reading. Fiction, therefore, arouses the imagination of the recipient. Thus, the actual result of *mimesis* is variable in time and in space. For someone who had reached a dead end in his long reflection on the operation of *mimesis*, this was a promising opportunity for approaching it no longer from its point of departure, but rather from its arrival as a process in the reader. It is only then possible to catch a glimpse of what *mimesis* produces in its reception: not likeness, but otherness, that

which is not represented in the thing itself, but instead what the reader calls for from literature.

This formulation—*mimesis* as the production of difference—was just a step towards the insight into reason's control. In modern times, a series of historical shifts has broken open the security of the Christian cosmology that for centuries had been underpinned by medieval order. A new rationality then began to become obvious, with the tacit acknowledgment of the inadequacy of the revelation. It was now necessary to reconcile the assumption of a univocal real with the new human responsibility of describing it, interpreting it and, finally, inhabiting it. For that reason, if the product of *mimesis* is difference, then this is where its danger lies. It was, therefore, a matter of establishing a control that could inscribe this activity in specific areas of social experience and thus limit its impact on the very univocality presupposed in the real. As a result of that imperative came the slow process of the historical construction of what at the beginning of the nineteenth century already was seen as a meta-historical human property: literature, as the concept has been understood since.

The first chapter of *Control of the Imaginary* seeks to reconstruct "the itinerary of a problem," incorporating the major contributions of historians, critics and theoreticians of literature, who are all concerned with the fictional, such as Paul Zumthor, Howard Bloch, Jacqueline Cerquiglini, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht among others. In this manner, Costa Lima takes a dynamic approach to the crucial moments in the trajectory of control in modern times, that is, from the poetics of the Renaissance to the outbreak of early Romanticism and its subsequent decline. As the author points out in his beautiful "Sketch of an Intellectual Autobiography," if the *mimesis*-difference was the outcome of an abstract, theoretical reflection, now "the observation of control was being performed at the empirical level" ("Esboço" 48). It is through this intimate contact with the empirical that something is constructed that otherwise would be difficult to consolidate through speculation alone, namely, the connection of control to the emergence of an individual subjectivity dependent on the primacy of a substantially conceived Truth. The latter, in turn, encouraged special attention to another "indivisible" being (here, analogous to the "individual"): the *fact*, from which the truth draws its legitimacy and becomes generalized by means of law.

Another important connection concerns the political circumstances that have presided over this *démarche*. The metahistorical concept of literature is

formed in conjunction with the processes of the individual's becoming autonomous as intention and will, of the institutionalization of fact as a unit of truth and of the construction of politically sovereign national identities within the borders of the nation-state. This explains the importance taken in Costa Lima's subsequent work by the formation of the discourse of History as a true narration of related facts and, therefore, as a counterpoint to the discourse of fiction. By being situated in the sights of the control of the imaginary, the author could echo in our times the distrust expressed by Nietzsche in his second "untimely meditation" against the "admiration of the event" and of the "idolatry of the factual," which for the German philosopher tended to foster acquiescence to any kind of power, be it of the government, of public opinion or of the numerical majority (Nietzsche 147).

These are the beacons that guided the opening of the arguments of Costa Lima's trilogy. As the work progressed, they became clear in terms of the initial hypothesis. What in the first volume was described as the "itinerary of a problem" can at the end of the third be characterized only as a question that has many pathways—so many in fact that the author himself is forced to admit his inability to travel them alone. Since the second edition of *Control of the Imaginary* (1989), Costa Lima, when referring to his work, mentions with a certain melancholy his feeling of impotence in the face of the vastness of the continent where he himself "moored his ship." For example, in his postscript: "The price paid for trusting the hypothesis of control was the outrageous certainty that, no matter how much I tried, I would never get even close to exhausting the theme. The possible joy of having found a new and viable pathway turned into the sensation of an inescapable failure" ("Pós-escrito" 268). He made it clear shortly afterwards that this failure should not be mistaken as a fault, since he recognized the value of its contribution.

The same complaint reappears in a memorial text written six years later, accompanied by the same proviso. This time, however, a new element surfaces:

Failure meant the recognition of one's limits in the face of the magnitude involved in the idea of control. That recognition would have had other dimensions had the author belonged to a firmly established culture, but since he did not belong to a metropolitan culture, he lacked efficient exchange, and was hampered by the suspicion of peripheral scholars of their own ability to say anything new, as well as by an intellectual pettiness for which anything goes. All this lent a melancholic overtone to the recognition of failure. ("Esboço" 50-1)

The contrast between “metropolitan culture” and the “periphery” brings out the irony of the paradox mentioned at the outset and which marked the reception given to Costa Lima’s trilogy. The “place” of its construction can be best understood only by other agents, who also bring to bear their own seal of place. For the latter, however, examining and scrutinizing the familiar terrain seems more risky than continuing to contemplate the firmament from afar.

As for that paradox, Costa Lima’s work can be tested with some of his own tools. To begin with a relatively simple statement, it may be said that to glimpse the control of the imaginary is already the beginning of escape. As a theoretician and historian of literature, the author allows his own activity to be subject to a curious analogy with the vitality of the *mimesis*-difference and its transforming potential. Like *mimesis*, the trilogy of the control of the imaginary also manifests the place where one produces and thinks about culture. Thus, Costa Lima’s previous essay on the *antiphysis* in Jorge Luis Borges is also useful for the critic himself. To understand fully *Control of the Imaginary*, it is necessary to question the role that the place of South America played in fashioning the singularity of such a work. While this task does not fit within the limited scope of a summary such as this, several points can be outlined.

The importance of the “place” did not escape the shrewdness of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht in his afterword to the second edition of *Control*, in which the German theoretician and historian describes this “twofold perspective.” “Luiz Costa Lima locates the origin of this thinking from both a Latin American and a Western point of view, or given a more political emphasis, from both a post-colonial dependent and a hegemonic point of view” (“Posfácio” 265). The term “place” does not refer to a fixed reality, fully independent of who and what in fact occupies it, nor can it be thought of as a source of immanence that projects its reflections on everything that is a local product. Only by avoiding a theory of reflection can we realize that the mechanism of the control of the imaginary could not have been uncovered so accurately by any intellectual belonging to a “metropolitan culture,” since in his milieu the mechanism operates with an efficiency that resists such uncovering. Furthermore, in the peripheral “place,” the precarious operation of the mechanism of control does not allow the periphery a perfect identification with the metropolis as a model. Therefore, the leaks in the mechanism of control are all the more evident. On one side of the coin, it is melancholy, on the other, an opportunity for escape: only those who live far from fashionable areas know the city well.

The coordinates of *Control of the Imaginary* would not be complete without also taking into consideration, besides the peripheral "place," the occurrence of this line of thinking at a particular "time" that can also be characterized as at the periphery of Western modernity, where it encounters the prefix "post." Perhaps it is this common point between the First and Third worlds that makes Costa Lima's work intelligible as much in Bochum as in Berlin, Minneapolis and Stanford. It is no accident then that the equation literature/individual/nation/fact should receive its formulation more clearly at the very instant in which those four terms find themselves so profoundly destabilized. The "humanist illusion" of their metahistoricity, we may agree, no longer deceives any who are at least minimally informed and still attentive.

Thus, it was exactly from an unfavorable "place" that one could open a breach in the same scene that from a theater box would appear to be nature itself on display. The initial disadvantage remains, however, even though the original observer has taken advantage of it. One way or the other, the melancholy of failure does indeed occur. If I am not mistaken, this is the deadlock described by Costa Lima himself in a recent and still scarcely discussed text, "O Pai e o *Trickster*. Indivíduo e Cultura nos Campos Metropolitano e Marginal." There the author seems to reflect in a veiled fashion on the sensation about which he himself complained in the postscript to *Controle* in 1989 and in the "Sketch of an Intellectual Autobiography" in 1994. To an intellectual belonging to a metropolitan culture, defined here in terms of stability, there are not many opportunities for a glimpse that would reach all the way to the very foundations that underpin his world. He is confined to exploring the themes already delineated within pre-existing limits. The system itself protects him from the shadow of a melancholy caused by the failure of his professional efforts. Whereas for his foreign colleague, belonging to a marginal field defined by instability, mere exploration within limits is impossible, for that would be false, and at most would result in cheap imitation. The only alternative he is left with is the "explosion of limits," which can offer a stronger and more fecund insight, albeit at the terrible price of insecurity and discontinuity.

In the passage from the autobiographical "Sketch" mentioned above, Costa Lima said that the recognition of failure (though not of any fault) would have other dimensions if he "belonged to a firmly established culture." A few years later in "O Pai e o *Trickster*" he writes:

The stable agent can talk about a 'zero degree' because, unconsciously, he feels he is setting off from a firm place. The sensation mentioned does not spread to the creative agent of the unstable area. (...) *To explode the limits means not only the sensation of starting from a no man's land, but also achieving a limited conquest.* That characterization weighs upon a quite positive possibility: the freedom of movement rises with the fall in effectiveness. (270-1; author's emphasis)

Two mythical images are then associated with these distant colleagues. The "explorer within limits" (of the metropolitan field) is compared to the hieratic, opaque Father, full of authority and surrounded by the stability of the best of traditions. The "detonator of limits" is associated with the brilliant figure of the *trickster*, the man of the seven keys, who is not to be mistaken for a simple improviser since he has in fact become a master in the art of evading the law established by the other. "The *trickster*... is one whose success depends on the cunning of dodging the rules of a game that are stacked against him. For the *trickster*, the father is one whose power must be destroyed. His victory will be one of cunning over internalized law" (271). The success of the trick, however, is always doomed to the provisional: "the explosion of limits after all proves to be a victory of that particular situation alone" (273). The only other possibility lies in the chance that the field to which the *trickster* belongs finally attains some stability. According to Costa Lima, there is no escaping from one point: "The field we belong to marks us. It is our navel" (274).

And it is through that navel that we come back to *Control of the Imaginary*. In the first volume, the final chapter on Machado de Assis' fiction provides an interesting quotation from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, in which the, let us say, Father of psychoanalysis mentions the portion of onirical material unable to contribute to the clarification of the meaning of a particular dream: "This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown [*Dies ist dann der Nabel des Traums, die Stelle, an der er dem Unerkannten aufsitzt*]" (Freud 530). Costa Lima then suggests a possible flaw in Freud's assumption: "... the navel can be seen as the limit point of a semantically motivated interpretation. The navel would, then, set the scene for the imaginary, i. e., for that which has no redeemable semantic basis of its own" (246, note 1). The imaginary is the unknown upon which the dream rests. As a troubling presence, the imaginary does not allow the interpretation of meanings presumed as already given. It can only be attained through the

reconstruction of its movements in its interactions with otherness. "In this sense," explains Costa Lima in his preface, "the analytic construction is also the construction of the analyst subject, yet a construction that sets off from a navel, which always remains the same" (8). It is around that mark, then, that a personal region can be demarcated, from which to trade with the world and the others, whether as a hieratic "explorer within limits" or a trickster "detonator of limits".

These contacts are indeed what move the imaginary and its transforming potential. I believe that this consideration can be added to the extra variable of a "peripheral time," so that, together, they put into perspective the fatalism that Costa Lima attributes to our insecure condition as intellectuals of the "marginal field," the navel upon which we rest and dream. How far today does the real stability of the opposite field go? On the other hand, if the navel is less a center than a frame to which we belong and which marks us definitively, this does not eliminate its analogy with the imaginary, not only in its lack of an interpretable matrix and semantic substance, but also as a signifier of singularity and difference in action.

Notes

¹ *Sociedade e Discurso Ficcional* and *O Fingidor e o Censor* were published in a single volume entitled *The Dark Side of Reason*. For a full bibliographical reference of the translation of Costa Lima's books, see "Works Cited" below.

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