

Otto Maria Carpeaux

Olavo de Carvalho

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Knowledge begins with the unexpected, and the unexpected comes from an awareness of problems. A problem, as Ortega y Gasset would say, is the awareness of a contradiction. Insensitivity to problems, which derives from relying on conventional certainties without even being disturbed by the most glaring contradictions, is a sure sign of intellectual decadence, either of individuals, groups or nations. Anyone who wishes to evaluate the low level of Brazilian intellectual life today, be it in terms of sociological curiosity, or in its attraction to bottomless pits, may obtain a significant proof of the phenomena in the unanimous reaction on the part of the Brazilian cultural press to the recent publication of *Ensaaios Reunidos* (1999) by Otto Maria Carpeaux. These reactions have repeated the praises made at the writer's funeral in 1978, without a single mention of the interpretative problems associated with his life and work.¹ Let me provide a selection of these problems.

1.

Otto Maria Carpeaux arrived in Brazil in 1939. As soon as he began his career in journalism, with a number of literary essays published in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, he became the target of a violent slander campaign stirred up by Brazilian communists. When he died, in 1978, Carpeaux had become the idol of Brazilian communist intellectuals. This later idolatry may be due to his violent opposition to the right-wing military regime that took power in 1964. However, if this explanation were valid, it would also have been applicable to the novelist Carlos Heitor Cony,

Carpeaux's fellow fighter in this heroic and unequal battle, who still is disliked by Brazilian communists. Carpeaux's transfiguration from *bête noire* to canonized saint therefore, remains, a problem, even more so because Carpeaux, the critic and historian, never became a Marxist. It is well-known in Brazil that financial contributions to the Communist party, strongly hegemonic both in the press and in editorial circles, would be enough to absolve a writer from any ideological sin. This is true of writer José Geraldo Vieira, for example, who became a sworn communist, but who, in his books, continued to be the conservative Christian which he had always been. (If the American reader cannot understand these intrigues, then it may help to know that no one understands them in Brazil either; nevertheless, they admit their existence.) Carpeaux, however, was never rich.

2.

Carpeaux, or rather Otto Karspen, a Jew born in Vienna in 1900, converted to Catholicism when he was thirty-years old, and in the following decade became one of the leading theoreticians of the Catholic right that governed Austria under the leadership of Engelbert Dolfuss. After the demise of the regime due to the Nazi invasion, Carpeaux found shelter in Brazil, thanks to the intervention of the Vatican. In Avram Milgren's remarkable study *Os Judeus do Vaticano*, Carpeaux's misspelled name is mentioned as being on the list of Jews who had received false baptism certificates in order to escape the persecution (49). This is a misconception because Carpeaux was not only a Catholic long before the war, but when the Nazis entered Vienna he was already well-known as an intellectual of the Austro-Catholic regime due to his 1936 book *Österreichs Europäische Sendung (Austria's European Mission)*. In addition, his feelings are quite evident in the correspondence he exchanged with Álvaro Lins after his arrival in Brazil. It is surprising therefore that this Catholic should have been buried without religious rites, as being, or so his widow claimed to the press, a "man without religion" (Houaiss 148). Even if the hypothesis of a senile apostasy after a late conversion may be somewhat extravagant, it might have been accepted save for two pieces of additional information. According to Carlos Heitor Cony, the writer's closest friend, Carpeaux prayed regularly, up until the end of his life.² According to the words of philologist Antonio Houaiss, who is equally trustworthy, Carpeaux was afraid of touching upon religious matters in the highly materialist Brazilian intellectual circles. This is a complex problem for a biographer. In

order to suggest a better understanding of this issue, I have put forward the hypothesis that, because he was in exile and tired of suffering, he would disguise his opinion in order not to displease his Brazilian hosts, almost all atheists. This is, however, only a hypothesis, and one that is full of flaws. How is it that a man who is so outspoken against his enemies can be so weak among his friends? Furthermore, how can one claim that the writer's careful attitudes would "seduce" his wife to the point that she would allow him to take the disguise beyond the grave. No, my hypothesis explains nothing.

3.

Carpeaux wrote the most valuable part of his work, his important essays and his monumental *História da Literatura Ocidental (History of Western Literature)*, which comprises almost 5000 pages, within less than six years, between 1941 and 1947. Apart from this, his production continued to be vast, but the quality decreased, as is evident in the somewhat conventional praise garnered by his biography of Alceu Amoroso Lima, his last work. In 1968, Carpeaux announced the end of his literary career, promising to devote the rest of his days to political struggle. He thus diverted his talents to polemics against the military regime, and, although his writings had startling repercussions, they are nowadays regarded as no more than historical documents. The fact is that he had already been losing impetus for twenty years, so much so that his abdication in favor of political writing seemed to have been the final crystallization of a long process of depressive self-denial, which cannot be interpreted solely in terms of political motivation. This is also no more than speculation, despite the fact that it has been confirmed by another close friend of Carpeaux's, the Pernambuco-born writer Edson Nery da Fonseca.³

These examples should already suffice to show that Otto Maria Carpeaux is as unknown in Brazil as he is celebrated. The careless manner in which, for twenty years, his vast circle of admirers and friends refrained from collecting his scattered journalistic writings into a book seems to signal that that they were more interested in creating a cult around a stereotype than increasing an awareness of his work. The reason is clear. Carpeaux was, at the beginning, rejected by the Brazilian left-wing intelligentsia and was only accepted by a select group of privileged minds, a politically diverse group which included the communist Graciliano Ramos as well as the conservatives Manuel Bandeira and Augusto Frederico Schmidt. In the end, he became a leader of

the left-wingers, thanks to a series of political articles published from 1964 onwards in *Correio da Manhã* that gave him the reputation of being the country's leading opponent of the military regime. The regime never really persecuted Carpeaux seriously, but limited itself to starting a legal suit against him; the writer was politely interrogated for a few hours, and the suit was subsequently dropped by the prosecution. Carpeaux's image was consolidated by the press into one of a communist militant who helped this political faction by means of prodigiously erudite writing, and whose literary style may be defined as "delightful," at the very least. However, the publication of his complete literary essays would dissolve this simplistic image, revealing a mystical and religious Carpeaux, an admirer of Léon Bloy, an elitist concerned with the ascent of the ignorant masses at the head of a cultural machine, in the same fashion as Ortega y Gasset. It is not surprising, therefore, that left-wing intellectuals foresaw these difficulties and postponed confronting such contradictions, just as after the publication of *Ensaíos Reunidos* they opted to pretend that they had not seen the contradictions.

There is no posthumous homage that can do justice to a writer, if the praise in the homage is not combined with serious reflection. Therefore, the praise that followed Carpeaux's death, and which has now followed the publication of *Ensaíos* as well, seems to have paradoxically diminished the writer, by highlighting his less important merits as an erudite spokesperson without focusing on the original and valuable elements of his work. This is because the value and the originality of his work reside precisely in its contradictions.

First of all, the *História da Literatura Ocidental* is an attempt to meet in a synthetic and simultaneous manner concerns that are hardly compatible: a sociological understanding of literary periods and the stylistic individualization of writers; the understanding of a civilization's historical unity and the judicious evaluation of singular works. Carpeaux seeks to be both a historian and a critic, by relying not only on the methods learned from Burckhardt, Dilthey, Weber and Max Dvorak but also inspired by the Crocean sense of the irreducible individuality of poetic work. If he eventually fails by exaggerating his judgment of individual works in order to harmonize with the patterns of a specific period, he succeeds on the whole. Carpeaux composes a unique work in the tradition of literary history, akin to what Francesco de Sanctis has done for Italian literature. In the opinion of the critic Mauro Gama, *História da Literatura Ocidental* is simply "the most important work of its genre published in any language and in any setting" (n. p.).

Secondly, Carpeaux's way of thinking emphasizes problems rather than solutions, which may make it appear inconclusive. With a soul shaken by fearful doubts and contradictions, he uses his own interior perplexity as a survey instrument for works and periods. As an outcome he proposes questions with no answers. For many readers, the shock produced by these contradictions is an equally disturbing experience, as they do not perceive that this is the writer's *forma mentis* that allows him to follow the intimate drama of ideas underlying literary manifestations, without resorting to simplistic contrived solutions.

Carpeaux's literary style reflects the paradoxical character of his view of the world. At times, page after page, he takes the point of view of the writer under analysis, defending his ideas as if they were his own; yet, soon afterwards he either rejects them brutally or relativizes them by mentioning a number of contradictory facts. Readers who demand final certainties are driven to despair; for those who delight in viewing reality as it is, the reading of Carpeaux is a rare spiritual experience. On the whole, the *História da Literatura Ocidental* remains as one of the most solid works of the genre, much superior to a similar one written by Arnold Hauser and published in Brazil at the same time, and which is still regarded as reliable and prestigious.⁴

In this way, it is not right to claim, as Franklin de Oliveira did, that Carpeaux's greatest merit is to have introduced Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften* in Brazil. The *História da Literatura Ocidental* may have been produced according to these methods, yet it is more than a propagation of the same. It is, in fact, an achievement which goes beyond any of the applications which the original creators may have devised, thanks to its amplitude and perfection. In this sense, it is not a contribution from Dilthey's school to Brazilian culture, but rather a Brazilian contribution to Dilthey's school.

It is for this reason that elsewhere I have already proposed a sifting of the mass of works that reflect Brazilian thought and a list of the quintessential achievements that are to remain when everything else has faded.⁵ The criterion I adopted was straightforward. I considered works that are intrinsically capable of retaining their validity, not those that "represented Brazil," since there are no guarantees of what future generations will want to know of Brazil; rather, I chose those works that would enable anyone, in any country, to extract something that would help them understand the meaning of life in general and the meaning of one's own life in particular. That which

is classical, by definition, does not focus on itself, on its own time, or on its country of origin. It focuses on each one of us. Side by side with the writings of Gilberto Freyre, Miguel Reale and Mário Ferreira dos Santos, I have placed the historiographic works and essays of Otto Maria Carpeaux. A body of historical works, prepared, supported and completed by a multitude of essays, which succeeds in showing that the internal unity of Western literary development, from Homer to Valéry, is in itself a microcosm of the human soul. It thus deserves to be approached not with the awe of the devout, but with an awareness of the Latin dictum: *De te fabula narratur*.

Notes

¹ For a more complete discussion of these issues, see my Foreword to Carpeaux, *Ensaaios Reunidos*.

² Statement by Carlos Heitor Cony to the author.

³ Statement by Edson Nery da Fonseca to the author.

⁴ I am referring to the well-known *Sozialgeschichte der Kunst und Literatur*, made popular as *The Social History of Art*, in the translation by Stanley Godman, made in collaboration with the author (New York: Knopf, 1952).

⁵ See my *O Futuro do Pensamento Brasileiro*.

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