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The Insufficiency of the Legacy of Antiquity

An excerpt from Costa Lima's latest book, *História. Ficção. Literatura* (2006), this section briefly examines the exceptionality of Aristotle's Poetics, and the history of its reception down to our own time; in doing so, Costa Lima reiterates the point made elsewhere (see *Complement to the "Preface"*), that 'the proposed and transformed conception of mimesis cannot be thought as a sort of recovery of the ancient Greek meaning. The Greek conception of mimesis was correlated to a cosmos conception which would make no sense to us.' But this should not lead to a discarding of the notion; rather, as Costa Lima stresses here, it leads instead to 'the importance of rethinking the concept of mimesis and removing it from the ostracism, stipulated by those who for centuries converted it into a tattered dogma. To do so, as long as we know how to distinguish it from the modern subordination to a certain state of society, where then its presence at the most would be to bear witness to the historical moment.'

Excerpt from *História. Ficção. Literatura* (p 202-211) © 2006 by Luiz Costa Lima, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. This book is not currently translated in English. This excerpt has been translated exclusively for this Special Issue of *Crossroads* by Jane Lamb-Ruiz.

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF THE LEGACY OF ANTIQUITY

We exalt the Ancients as giants to such an extent that it seems strange not to repeat the cliché. Their insufficiency in the comprehension of poetic art derived from three factors: a) the exceptionality of Aristotle's *Poetics*, b) the manner in which the text of the *Poetics* came to us and c) its internal constitution. The first shall be taken up throughout this section. Let's start directly from the second.

For 250 years, throughout what is called the Hellenistic period, the works of Aristotle were wrapped in "a general mist of obscurity."ⁱ There was no reason for any exception to be made for the *Poetics*. Probably composed during his first Athenian period between 367 to 347 CE when he was directly in contact with "Plato's passionate moralism" (Halliwell), and also probably when he returned to writing them during the Lyceum period from 335 to 323/2 Common Era, it may be assumed that his works represented the first of a treaty to be used in the Lyceum as an object of study and research. What is barely certain is that the Second Book that apparently dealt with comedy did not survive. Beyond what Aristotle did not get to write or was lost, the lack of interest in what he wrote got to the point that "the neo-platonists found reason to classify both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* as appendages to the Aristotelian system of logic. This view was to be perpetuated by the Arabic philosophers who encountered the work from the tenth century onwards in a translation (or possibly more than one) made in turn from a Syriac version of perhaps a century earlier."ⁱⁱ

As is frequently borne out in cases of disgrace, this one did not occur by chance. Aristotle's intellectual activity was achieved in a brief, uncommon moment in Athenian history. Its occultation, the consequences of which are not even imaginable – accompanied the debacle of the Greek experience. But echoes of the *Poetics* that Halliwell points out in the Roman Horace (65 CE to 8 CE) do not appear less disastrous than not knowing them. Much acknowledged afterward by René Rapin (1620-1687) as the "first interpreter (*premier interprète*)"ⁱⁱⁱ of Aristotle, the qualifier is only valid as historical fact; in other words, if the atmosphere in which the *Poetics* was received in Rome, under the strong Alexandrian influence, is considered to be radically different. As the author does point out, the change is fundamentally the result of the "dominance acquired over literary criticism during the Hellenistic period by rhetoric."^{iv} For rhetoric not only took its toll on the conception of historiography. Let us consider some indicators of this.

Even without emphasizing the decomposition of the tragic *mythos*, from which the unities of time, action and place derive as of the Renaissance, it may be pointed out that Aristotelian verisimilitude (probability) is transferred into the *proxima ueris* of the "Things invented in view of pleasure are close to truth/that a story (*fabula*) does not require that one believe everything that truth would like it to [*Ficta voluptatis sint proxima ueris/ne quodcumque uolet poscat sibi fabula credi*]"^v – "a notion which, whatever else can be said of it, has no essential bearing on artistic *structure* as such, and is therefore radically different from probability in the *Poetics*."^{vi}

Deformation was just beginning there. No less arbitrary was the transformation of *mythos* into story (*fabula*):

Deprived of its foundation in the concept of a unified structure of human action, the plot-structure of Aristotle's theory was all too easily converted, and reduced, to the *fabula* of the *Ars Poetica* [...] with the consequent loosening of the texture and the rigour of the idea.^{vii}

Once the rhetorical doorkeeper is opened by the *fabula*, there is nothing surprising that the pleasure related to the theory of effects and ethical thinking, primordial throughout Greek thought, are converted to the *aut prodesse* [...] *aut delectare*^{viii} of the *topos* that would sustain conniving mediocrity ("Poets intend either to be useful or pleasing, or, to say things that are beautiful and useful to life at the same time"). Not satisfied, Horace reiterated the lesson: "Whomever mixes what is useful with what is pleasing, provides enjoyment to the reader as well as educating him."^{ix} What difference, other than one of scale, is there between the short, rhetorically incisive sentences of the Roman and the prolix glosses that were expanded between the Renaissance and the 18th century French Enlightenment? In lieu of the complexity that the ethical issue took on in the *Poetics*, "interpreters of the treatise in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries approached it with the Horatian dichotomy [of pleasure or edification] firmly fixed in their minds, and they looked for an answer to the question, on which side does Aristotle stand."^x The consequences of this narrowness accompanied the West. It renders explicable why even a figure of Goethe's stature, saw catharsis as reconciliation, finding uncanny that it could be something deeper or that the Romantics thought of as shedding junk in their disdaining of *imitatio*, which was overall maintained by its vernacular counterpart in modern languages, etc. etc.

When we talk about the precariousness of Antiquity's thinking about the art of poetry and highlight the exceptionality of the *Poetics*, we need to clarify that we are not assuming that Aristotelian thinking was characterized by atemporal rule making. Even if Aristotle viewed mimesis as being man's natural tendency, in which the latter would find pleasure (*Poetics*, 48 b – 6-9), his treatise shows it as a *tekhné* where – despite showing signs of what would come to be called art – the concept of art does not exist. Furthermore, even if it is acknowledged that part of the treatise was lost, the theorization of the *Poetics* assumes specific genres with the superiority reserved for tragedy. Moreover, the heights that lyrical poetry [*a lírica*] would later achieve among the Romans and that would be transmitted to the Provençal poets, Dante and the Renaissance men, contrasts with the silence of the surviving *corpus* of the *Poetics*.^{xii} Alongside this, his highlighting of its presentation through theatrical staging interferes with the very characterization of the *tekhné* whereby mimesis is produced: it assumes men in action (*Poetics* 49a) such that through their movements, without the help of melody, the dancers express “characters, emotions, [and] actions” (47 to 27-a). It is precisely because tragedy has “corporeal figuration” and maintains its vivacity, both when read and staged, that Aristotle judges it superior to the epic (cf. *Poetics*. 61 b26-b 19). Indeed, how may mimesis be conceived without the unfolding in action of something like a myth? Could the silence that the *Poetics* reserves about lyric poetry be won over by understanding it as a myth without *fabulas*? Although the assumption seems interesting, a proponent of it could not consider it to be in accordance with Aristotelian dictates, to such a degree would the philosopher be tying mimesis to the stage.

It is true that this disadvantage of the *Poetics* is palpably reduced since tragedy (and comedy) may be defined as transcultural forms, i.e., in which the modeling of history and time differentiate its present value without impeding its recognition, and, beyond this, the genre dominant since the 18th century, the romance, has been called “the bourgeois epic” – something, nevertheless, whose roots were to be found in archaic Greece. But no one would think of finding in the Aristotelian description of tragedy anything other than a certain modality of tragedy; or would they cogitate constituting a theory of romance other than by contrasting it to the Greek epic model.

None of this hinders the importance of rethinking the concept of mimesis and removing it from the ostracism, stipulated by those who for centuries converted it into a tattered dogma. To do so, as long as we know how to distinguish it from the modern subordination to a certain state of society, where then its presence at the most would be to bear witness to the historical moment. If we are able to avoid this mechanical judgment, we should be able through mimesis to establish a correspondence between the social-historical world and the text. How, nevertheless, to do this, without falling into a condition of causality close to the reflexological, a post-Hegelian replacement for the theories of imitation?

Let us begin to show the way by having recourse to Halliwell. He accepts the risk when he emphasizes that: “The force of the language of ‘like’ [*homoios*] and ‘likeness’ [*homoiotés*] in Aristotle’s vocabulary is essentially logical, not pictorial.”^{xiii} This means that the correspondence is not established in visual terms but rather through homology of function. (The workers in Kafka’s *The Castle* incarnate power – that could be that of the state as much as that of the divine, not because they live high up, but because they are arbitrary, mysterious and random in the relationships they set up with land surveyor. It is not enough to point out “the iconicity” of the mimema^{xiii} but also that: “Not all likenesses are mimetic, since not all likeness has the intentional grounding which is a necessary condition of artistic mimesis.”^{xiv} Although intentional grounding is a necessary restriction, it creates the obvious hindrance of relating the mimema to author’s intentionality. To avoid constantly entering into new difficulties, it is indispensable to relate the opening offered by the English analyst to another path.

As similarity is basically logical and not pictorial, operating on a mimetic basis, it is split into difference, i.e., the expressive means with which a state of the world is manifested and an object of mimesis may be rather discrepant, and yet, the homology of functions performed by both individually establishes its convergence. This overcoming of the similarity of origin by a formally thought difference, in the final configuration of the work, distinguishes the artistic and non-artistic varieties of mimesis. Certainly both suppose the functioning of social institutions. Through both types, as the best theorizer of non-artistic mimesis said it, “it expresses a certain dose of belief and desire”^{xv} although the definition he offers is perfect only outside of art: “Imitation is generation at a distance.”^{xvi} For its part, artistic mimesis contains “remote generation” only in the sense that the artist receives the influence of a common time, of thus being sensitive to artists whose work he does not know and the social pressures that become current in approximated forms.

At this point in the exposition, we are more concerned with paying heed to the two forms of mimesis. Both match the society to which their agent belongs. By means of mimesis the text gathers, selects and transforms social configuration. Society is its partner because society is where values, customs and usage circulates, creating a social logic, which, as Gabriel Tarde also said, precedes individual logic. Mimesis anchors the work

in the world. In the work of the mimesis of art, values, usage and customs not only circulate, but implicitly or explicitly they are questioned. Yet their limits are not mistaken for the ones of Aristotelian mimesis: the limits of the world and the about-face that is capable of succeeding to the destiny of men, in the course of their actions. They are presented by means of another modality of organizing discourse. *The more a discourse goes toward formulating concepts or capital points occupied by concepts, the less the work will belong to the field of mimesis.* By definition, the concept is an utterance that subsumes unlimited particular situations and defines them without necessarily making them operational. That is because a concept first belongs to philosophy before it belongs to science (Deleuze-Guattari). An operator, by comparison, intervenes in a situation, acts upon it, without intending to know it. A concept is all the more probable, the more legitimate it is to expect that it is monologically sufficient to itself, i.e., that it is pure intervention of a human agent in a type of phenomenon, that, as of the intervention, it is wedged in place, i.e., remains known until a more complex concept makes visible what the earlier one did not. When it is long lasting, the concept is converted or presents conditions for being converted into Law.

Assuredly, even certain natural laws, when scientific, may be prone to changes or provoke surprises. Assuredly, even that which for centuries was taken as natural law may undergo, literally, a Copernican revolution. Although the vocation of the concept is to make the particular uniform, mimesis acts in an opposite manner. Through uniformity, the particular is pluralized on the inside. Mimesis seeks the underground. The pleasure that it might produce does not dispel fright. And the horror of the Kantian sublime does not abolish fascination with the abyss – a *sui generis* pleasure. It is true that Aristotle's theory of surprises was already stopping the pleasure that *hedone* was about from becoming confused with the sensation of agreeableness and well being. Since surprise and even horror reserved by this exploration of the underground imply an emotional burden that is added to the comprehension reached. It is not in this sense that his conception of mimesis differs from the one we offer – as we have already said, they are differentiated by the conception of the world as an organized body.

If we accept that the boundary of mimesis is the concept – no need for me to speak of operators – or any utterance that, vis-à-vis particularities, behaves as a concept, that is, an abstract formulation the validity of which is believed to be independent of considerations of junctures, we must add that, although it is an unmistakable form of discourse, as it is supported by the specific aporia of truth of a past situation, *the one written by history carries with itself a reserve of mimesis.* If there is no proper historiographical object, as were we saying in Chapter 2, Section A,^{xvii} and if, as Carl Schorske has recently asserted, the historiographer “is singularly unfertile in devising concepts,^{”xviii} if he aims to show how a certain action, behavior or institution was configured at a particular time, while he himself is anchored in another, his incapacity for engendering concepts easily makes him the bearer of values that he transfers onto his object. The mimesis then operant is independent of his will, and comes to act against him. It makes the mimesis indistinguishable from active, intentional mimesis that is the instrument of engendering a “new poetic configuration that would not do any good to the poet or to the historian”.

Let us look at this conclusion and come to a direction foreseen earlier. It would consist of asking ourselves about the relationship of mimesis to fiction after a reasonably long return to the issue itself.

It is well known that the term fiction, corresponding to the Greek term *plasma*, does not appear in the *Poetics*. Of Latin origin, where *fictio* had as much the negative meaning of malicious deceit or fraud as a positive one of act of creation, and despite the Greek mimesis' receiving, when Plato and Aristotle are compared, the same degree of ambiguity, that would be no reason to conjoin them. So, even in their positive meanings mimesis and *fictio* are not equivalent:

What in Greek is separated into *poiesis* and *mimesis*, is reunited in the Latin concept of *ingeree fictio*. But *fictio* is not a synthesis of *poiesis* and *mimesis* but first a designation whose broad meaning may correspond as much to *poiesis* as its restricted meaning corresponds to *mimesis*, being, in the end, a superimposition of both meanings, so that, at every moment, one of them may appear on the horizon of the other.^{xix}

If the semantic fields of the terms are not superimposed on each other entirely, their relationship is not automatic. It would even be problematic if we accepted from Stierle that “Aristotle restricts the maneuvering space of *poiesis* by the principle of mimesis.”^{xx} Seeking a better result, let us remember that mimesis “is the discovery of form in things. But we must remember that the form thus revealed to us, while it is really (because recognizably) a form of an object, is in no sense a definitive or absolute form.”^{xxi} This presents no novelty. In the same manner that the next notion does not: “Fiction is a new term – or better yet, it is not yet a term. There is not one word in Aristotle that may be translated in this manner. In his days, fiction was a new, emerging genre. The Homeric epic [...] was placed between history and fiction.”^{xxii} There was a very simple historical reason for

the non-existence of the term *plasma* in Aristotle, and not a conceptual one. Knowing this is far from resolving any dilemma but it avoids misunderstandings. The question that arises is whether the act of mimesis implies negation of the fictional, or whether, in some way, it envelops it. Let us take the case of lyric poetry. Literally, there is no discussion of whether lyric poetry fits into the *Poetics*. But a certain Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), unconcerned by philological scruples, had already answered the question: “The delight of tragedy proceeds from our consciousness of fiction.”^{xxiii} Now, if tragedy assumes a fiction, why would the same not be true of lyrical poetry? For all poetic genres the same principle holds: it is the role played in them by the power of imagination that articulates mimesis and fiction.

Let’s consider a small example: the initial scene of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, analyzed by Martha Nussbaum. She is discussing the conflict that is agitating the Argive leader. For the wind to fill their sails, and so Agamemnon’s troops may attack Troy, their commander needs to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon finds himself caught in the dilemma of fulfilling his commitments as military chief and his duties as a father. The ordeal may not be circumvented as it arises in the discord between Zeus and Artemis. If that is how it must be, why does the chorus, instead of recognizing his afflicted innocence and lament his destiny, accuse him? For Nussbaum, the reprimand by the chorus is found in the repetition of the verse “Lamentations, sing lamentations, but may good be triumphant”^{xxiv}:

What they [the chorus] impute to Agamemnon himself is the change of thought and passion accompanying the killing, for which they clearly hold him responsible. ‘He dared (*etla*) to become the sacrifice of his daughter’ (225) – not just *became*, but endured to become. He put up with it; he did not struggle against it. Their description of his behavior in the execution of the sacrifice bears out this charge. Her prayers, her youth, her cries of ‘Father’, this father ‘counted as nothing’ (230), treating his daughter, from then on, as an animal victim to be slaughtered.^{xxv}

In possession of this reading, aren’t we speak of “awareness of fiction” brought on by mimesis? Where did Aeschylus get these reflections of the Argive chief, that are hesitant at first, and then become firm, overly firm? Where would he have found documentation for the Chorus’ subtle argumentation etc. etc. if not in the force of his imagination as dramatist? Using the neologism of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his extraordinary inscape? The construction of *mythos* depends on fictional imagination. That is why it is not only due to philological scruples that we prefer to talk about mimesis and not *plasma*. Mimesis, as has already been said, is constructed in connection to an axis of values, usages and customs of the society in which it is engendered. It is not by chance that Agamemnon’s dilemma is ethical:

Indeed, epic and tragic poets were widely assumed to be the central ethical thinkers and teachers of Greece; nobody thought of their work as less serious, less aimed at truth, than the speculative prose treatises of historians and philosophers.^{xxvi}

As mimesis becomes the beam that brings together and selects the values of society and converts them into paths of orientation that circulate in their works, fiction speaks to the characterization of the discourse of such texts. Mimesis is concrete, i.e., it operates on the basis of social currency of customs and values. That does not mean that they should be endorsed or refined, taking on thus a disposition that renders them visible, when before they seemed to be insignificant details. Mimesis feeds on the raw material of society to exploit it.

We may lament that the rhetorical inflation that would envelop Rome would impede, despite its having great poets, anything anywhere near the *Poetics*. Practically, overall, we should not give up the care taken to not confuse the two terms, central to the West’s poetic thinking. Fiction speaks of the act of discourse with which we are dealing. To use it for a Thucydides or a Tacitus would be as arbitrary as talking about historical truth in the *Iliad*. As mimesis, and fiction, contrast with the demand proper to the concept – the search to know – and the demand proper to the operators – knowing how to deal with something. *Unlike mimesis, in fiction, the act of productive imagination is thematized and not its articulation with a certain community or human society.* All fiction supposes mimesis in action even when, at first glance, it is impossible to recognize it.

In sum, the legacy of Antiquity to what later would come to be called art – no longer as a specific technique but rather a modality of discourse unto itself – is very poor. To convert Aristotelian mimesis into a set of precepts was a disaster. The issue became much more complicated with the lack of trust or even hostility that Christian thinking developed with regard to *fictio*. And, yet, it is difficult to think how this might have turned out otherwise since Christianity dominated the West. If, in the end, we are creatures of a good and omnipotent God, human *poiesis* is only able to repeat what had already been done by the divine. In its classical meaning, Rhetoric, systematized by a Quintilian and centuries later by Hermongenes, would be acceptable in the eyes of a theologian since the *inventio* that rhetoric was about was restricted to the level of verbal expression. Without

denying that the topic of Rhetoric and its influence on poetics to be transmitted down the centuries after the fall of Rome and the expansion of Christianity should be looked into specifically, we shall set it aside for a theme that, for our purposes, is more urgent: the status of pre-fictionality. It results from a) Antiquity not having transmitted to us something similar to what Aristotle did with mimesis and b) the poetic work being the object of suspicion by the first thinkers of the Church. Before doing so, nevertheless, c) the works of Virgil and Ovid should not be sneered at from the point of view of how fictionality is handled.

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