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Introducing Costa Lima: Sailing Against the Wind

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the English translation and publication of *Control of the Imaginary: reason and imagination in modern times* (1988), a groundbreaking work by Brazilian intellectual, Luiz Costa Lima. This should be a cause for celebration – and, in many respects, this Special Issue of *Crossroads*, bringing together a selection of Costa Lima’s work covering the period 1980-2008, is part of this celebration, if not the only one – for the reality is that this book is currently out of print; in fact, of the twenty monographs which Costa Lima has released, since his first publication in 1966 (with *Por que literatura*), only two have been made available in their entirety in English – the other being *The Limits of Voice: Montaigne, Schlegel, Kafka* (1996) – while excerpts from two more books – *Sociedade e discurso ficcional* (1986) and *O fingidor e o censor* (1988) – are merged together in the English translation, *The Dark Side of Reason: Fictionality and Power* (1992). As a result, this project has remained largely unknown in the English speaking world.ⁱ Actually, until only recently, and outside a small circle of colleagues and friends, Costa Lima’s work had been largely ignored in his native Brazilⁱⁱ.

It would be redundant here to outline in detail the main contours of this project. I refer readers instead to the first piece in this selection – the “Preface” from *Control of the Imaginary* (1988) – which is perhaps the most succinct formulation of its kind. Appended to this is a *Complement to the “Preface”* (2008), which Costa Lima has kindly written in English especially for this issue, in which he summarises the most significant points of

advancement which the thesis of the control of the imaginary has undergone in the intervening twenty years. Instead, I will try a different tact.

Schlegel, in his *Athenaeum Fragments*, states: “The best way not to be understood or, rather, to be misunderstood, is to use words in their original meanings, especially words from the ancients” (Frag. 19).ⁱⁱⁱ And it is to Costa Lima’s apparent detriment that at the heart of his project is the attempt – perhaps Quixotic – to revivify the originary sense of the ancient notion of *mimesis*, not as the imitation of the real, but rather as the production of difference within an horizon of similarity. The early Schlegel and the figure of Don Quixote are two of Costa Lima’s intellectual antecedents, and it is no coincidence that if one of these figures is historical, the other is. . . fictional. For the flesh and bones of Costa Lima’s project, within which the heart of *mimesis* beats, is concerned with both the understanding of the nature of fiction – both literary and non-literary – and of the processes which place a veto on fiction and domesticate the individual imagination. It is these processes which he refers to as the control of the imaginary. It is a process characterised by the modern reduction of *mimesis* to *imitatio*, which reduces, in turn, the imagination to simply a reproductive function. But the consequences of this are far reaching, as many of the pieces which follow will attest.

To explore this thesis, Costa Lima draws on sources from multiple fields of enquiry – such as philosophy, history, sociology, political science, anthropology and literature – and although he ostensibly limits himself to the field of literature, these findings are equally pertinent to each of these other fields. Discussing this breadth of scope, in relation to Costa Lima’s initial ‘trilogy’ of works – which were merged into two books in English, *Control of the Imaginary* and *The Dark Side of Reason* – Sérgio Alcides states:

In a statement so simple 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, behaviour, politics and even ethics. It is up to other scholars to accept such a challenge, necessarily within an interdisciplinary context.^{iv}

It is in an effort to take up this challenge that the current Special Issue is directed. To encourage this further we are following this issue in the coming year with another issue, engaging with, responding to, and employing, Costa Lima’s work: we thereby call upon our readers to accept this challenge to thought and submit an essay to this ongoing project. A final challenge – which we can only encourage – is for translators and academic publishers to make more of Costa Lima’s works available in English translation.

But those who know the area I work in will appreciate that even with this delimitation the domain [of the control of the imaginary] is so wide as to make it almost impossible for a single researcher to cover it. However narrow we wish to make the confines of our chosen field, they are still much too ample for any single individual. But just as the question ‘What’s the use of so much effort?’ leads to discouragement, the question ‘What can I do alone?’ encourages conformity. One must be rather brash to keep on sailing against the wind.^v

To facilitate these challenges I have appended below two bibliographies – the first consists of books, essays and articles by Costa Lima currently available in English (it is from these sources that we extracted some of the pieces published here), and the second consists of the books by Costa Lima currently published in Portuguese.

I would like to thank the *Crossroads* team for indulging me in this endeavour to bring this important work to a wider audience, especially Sheldon Peters for formatting and uploading all these pieces to the web; to the publishers for kindly allowing us to reproduce some of this work here; to the translators – Paulo Henriques Britto, Sueli Cavendish and Jane Lamb-Ruiz – for providing some of these English translations here for the first time; and especially to Luiz Costa Lima, for providing additional material, and for patiently answering many inane questions from a monolingual Australian.

Enjoy.

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ⁱ *Control of the Imaginary* has also been translated into German as *Die Kontrolle des Imaginären* (1990).

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Sérgio Alcides, “The itinerary of a problem: Luiz Costa Lima and the ‘Control of the Imaginary’” in *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies*, ed. J. C. de Castro, 4: Spring 2000, p595-605.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schlegel, Friedrich, *Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Peter Firchow, Minneapolis, U.S.A.: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p20.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p597-598.

^v Costa Lima, Luiz, *The Dark Side of Reason*, Translated by Paulo Henrique Britto, Stanford, Calif. U.S.A.: Stanford University Press, 1992, p309.

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