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“Preface” from *Control of the Imaginary* (1988)
and *Complement to the “Preface”* (2008)

The English “Preface” to the groundbreaking book, *Control of the Imaginary* (1988), is perhaps the best, and most succinct, introduction to the field of Costa Lima’s thought. It covers, on the one hand, the rehabilitation of mimesis, not as *imitatio*, or as the imitation of the real, but as the production of difference within an horizon of similarity; and on the other hand, the relationship between mimesis and the imaginary, and how the control of the imaginary in modern times has been predicated upon the reduction of mimesis to *imitatio*.

The Complement to the “Preface” is written by Costa Lima in English for this Special Issue of *Crossroads*, and it covers the most significant points of advancement which the thesis of the control of the imaginary has undergone in the intervening twenty years. This includes the inclusion of both positive and negative forms of control, as well as the broadening of the scope of control beyond modern times to previous periods of Western thought.

“Preface” is an excerpt from *Control of the Imaginary* by Luiz Costa Lima, p vii-x © 1986 University of Minnesota Press, <http://www.upress.umn.edu/>. All rights reserved. No further use, distribution or reproduction is allowed without the prior written permission of the publisher. Originally published in Portuguese as *O controle do imaginário: Razão e imaginação nos tempos modernos* by Editora Brasiliense, São Paulo, © 1984 by Luiz Costa Lima.

“PREFACE” FROM *CONTROL OF THE IMAGINARY* (1988)

Control of the Imaginary is grounded in a dual articulation. The first element is constituted by the terms mimesis, imagination, and fiction. The second, operational in character, is formed by the hypothesis that, from the beginning of modern times, fictional texts have been subjected to either explicit or hidden forms of taming or control.

The basic terms in the first articulation deserve special attention. The first of those terms, mimesis, undergoes a significant reversal with respect to its common usage. We all know that from the Renaissance rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* on, mimesis has been taken as the equivalent of the Latin word *imitatio*. What the prominent critic Ingemar Düring notes — "The artist, the musician, or the poet reproduces or imitates the things of the sensible world"ⁱ—could be repeated by the most undiscerning of commentators. That agreement, however, does not see that when mimesis and *imitatio* are taken as equivalents, with regard to the Greek outlook and especially with regard to Aristotle's thought, an irreparable deformation is established. If, to the Greek mind, mimesis presupposed a correspondence with the cosmic order, in Aristotle that correspondence also became dynamic in nature. That is, mimesis presupposed adequation not with the powerful, sensible appearance of things but rather with their internal potentialities. Its product, *mimema*, was not understood as the copy or imitation of something previously given, for, conversely, it presumed the actualization of the *dynamis* of a cosmos harmonic because ordered by laws. Even though that concept of a dynamic yet ordered universe was lost with the end of the ancient world, understanding mimesis as *imitatio* implies turning the former into a grotesque caricature of what it was.

Using a logic like the one that A. MacIntyre develops about ethics in *After Virtue*ⁱⁱ, we can say that, at the outset of modern times, poetics suffers a catastrophe similar to the one that that English philosopher believes took place in moral philosophy after the Enlightenment. For poetics too came to rely on a vocabulary whose systematicity had been lost. Obviously, there can be no way to recuperate it and restore the Greek sense of mimesis, for the very mentality of modern times, and within it the way that *physis* is conceived, has dramatically changed. It seems to me, then, that someone interested in art has at hand only two alternatives: either to abandon mimesis to the list of tools no longer serviceable or to revive its sense. I have opted for the second route.

Let me explain in simple terms. In the Greek cosmological model, mimesis presupposed an external modeling element to which the *mimema* naturally had to subject itself, namely the ordering law of *physis*. As I use the term, mimesis does not presume a cosmological conception but rather a network of psycho-social meaning. As Mauss and Durkheim demonstrated in "De Quelques formes primitives de classification,"ⁱⁱⁱ every human society presupposes a classification of beings and things by means of which those beings and things are invested with meaning and value. To be socialized is, then, to internalize classificatory networks that locate the individual along the different scales (family, community, professional milieu, social class, and so on) within the social environment. Mimesis is, first and foremost, one—or *the*—mode of learning socialization, that is, a mode of internalizing social values.

Mimesis, then, from the outset presupposes *identification* or *similarity*. But that vector does not exhaust its import. To watch the socialization process of a child, which any parent can do, is to see, on the one hand, the (social) force that impels the child to mold his or her gestures, way of walking and talking, and behavior according to models reasonably open to his or her "choice." But, on the other hand, as the socialization process proceeds, the object of this education manifests differences that are at first almost imperceptible. For socialization via mimesis implies the exercise of a tense, often conflictive, dialectic between assimilation and differentiation. Schematically, two outcomes are predictable; in the first, difference does not advance and the pattern of similarity takes on so much power that the new individual becomes the copy, albeit ever an imperfect one, of the chosen model. (Anyone who was an adolescent in the early 1960s surely recalls some futile Marilyn Monroe, noticed, pointed out, even admired by those in her peer group!) The hypertrophy of the "similarity" vector thus produces the teratology of the mimetic process: the outcome of copy or imitation is a pathological product. The "normal" resolving process has an opposite profile: the "imitator" becomes autonomous—that is, he or she assumes the mark of his or her difference. The real path of mimesis, therefore, supposes not copy but difference. Rather than imitation, mimesis is the production of difference. It is, however, not an idiosyncratic difference similar to an idiolect but a socially recognizable, potentially acceptable difference. Recognizable and acceptable according to the expectations engendered in the members of a given community by the criteria of classification in force in that community.

No matter how simplified the above explanation may be, it suggests that I do not take mimesis to be something reducible to experience of the fictional. And, because I do not analyze it in itself but only as it relates to the fictional, my intent here is to indicate how I conceive the articulation between the two.

Between mimesis and fictional precipitation lies the imaginary. Along with Sartre^{iv} I take the imaginary to be one of the two forms of thematization of the world. Whereas the other form, the perceptual, locates things as present, the imaginary annihilates (*néantise*) them, thematizing them as absent. (I perceive what surrounds me, but I can imagine only what is absent.) To be sure, I agree with those who criticize Sartre because his criterion does not allow for distinction between day-to-day use of the imaginary and its specific use in the production and reception of the fictional. But, although I cannot develop the critique here, the problem is not insoluble. As Wolfgang Iser would say, because the fictional concretizes in a text that materializes in a signifying organization, the fictional negates the negation of the imaginary on which it is based.^v The fictional is a critical use of the imaginary.

With that established, let us pass, with even greater brevity, to the notion of the fictional. As I understand it, the fictional is a *discursive* form, that is, a type of territoriality configured through signs; as such, it is governed by rules that are normally not conscious ones. Product of mimesis, actualized by the thematization of the imaginary, nourished by the negation of the negativity of the latter, the fictional takes on the appearance of a "game" that does not contain the choice between true and false. That does not mean, however, that it does not touch upon truths (pragmatic, religious, and so forth) but rather only that it is a game that puts truths into question; that is, it is a game that does not so much expand or apply truths as interrogate them.

Now that I have explained, albeit in a rudimentary manner, the first of *Control's* articulations, my goal can be more directly grasped: I intend to pinpoint some moments in which, in very clear ways, the hostility and the endeavour employed by the dominant discourses to tame the questioning that can arise from the use of the fictional can be seen. In that way, it may perhaps be understood why the translation of mimesis into *imitatio* is by no means an innocent one: by means of that simple gesture the classical theorist could tame the poet's discourse. That discourse was legitimized at the same time that limits were imposed upon it.

What is the practical outcome of the foregoing analysis? Foremost, to show that what we fluidly and ambiguously call "literature" betokens a discursive practice subject to a powerful interplay of pressures. Only in appearance does literature seem a harmonious, pleasant, and disinterested form. The fictional is not that which estranges itself from the world, like a kind of legalized opiate; nor is it something that can be comprehended by means of a general interpretative scheme which, specifying the bases upon which a society rests, can explain all else that takes place within it as parts of its superstructure. The idea of the control of the imaginary, conversely, demonstrates the necessity for development of specific strategies of analysis that will capture in a subtler way the kind of counterposed interests that are configured in literary fiction.

COMPLEMENT TO THE "PREFACE" (2008)

I am grateful to Matthew Lamb for the surprising find that the short preface above was written for the English translation of *Control of the Imaginary* (1988), and never published in Portuguese or any other language. Since I had forgotten it, I felt somewhat embarrassed when my dear editor and friend asked me if it would not be necessary to complement it. Yes, I tell myself. Sure, it is.

Although I came to recognize in that short piece probably the best introduction to a question that was to follow me for decades, I also realized that some decisive changes had occurred. Notwithstanding that it is not possible to take into account all of them, at least the most general ones must be named.

The first to be considered concerns the decision to radically transform the meaning of mimesis itself. Although I had maintained the basic idea — that the Aristotelian conception of mimesis was misunderstood by its Latin translation, *imitatio*, as well as its immediate consequence, i.e., it had to be thought as a tense product, provoked by the confluence of two opposite components, *similarity* (to an external object or phenomenon), and a creative *difference*, accomplished in such way that the quality of the object, the *mimema*, would be correlate to the supremacy of *difference over similarity* — hundreds of pages had to be written to accomplish a definite formulation.

I stress here only four short ones: (a) 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^{vi}; (b) to delete the old tradition, established since Aristotle's

Roman readers — of mimesis as *imitatio* — was a fundamental procedure done by Kant and the first German romantics, opening the path for a potentially autonomous art – autonomous in the sense of independent from patrons and external institutions; (c) the predominant *difference* had to maintain a relationship with *similarity*, taken as its *horizon* or orienting point, since without this there would be no way to establish a process of communication between receivers and works of art; (d) to re-establish mimesis, under the proposed transformed conception, more and more seemed to be the necessary path to rescue experimental verbal fiction — at most, poetry — and painting from the situation of being almost a sort of idiolect, which is their present state. As a matter of fact, I consider that Robert Klein’s warning is cogent not only to painting: “Since ‘reference’ is given up, and the work of art is not compared but with itself, there is no more art criticism, because every commentary, even the most flexible and faithful, installs aside the painting something to which it is compared”^{vii}

I guess the reader will understand it would be impossible to develop each one of these modifications here. But the same telegraphic form cannot be maintained *a propos* the change operated inside the concept of *control*.

In our first contact with the expression ‘control of the imaginary’, a univocal meaning seems to be produced. And surely this is a negative one. Although it would be right to say that that control was clearly manifested from the very moment mimesis was taken as *imitatio*, I learned to distinguish, inside modern times, between a traditional control, grounded on moral and religious features, and a scientific one, whose presence becomes visible from Bacon and Descartes onwards. (Needless to say, the scientific pressure was fundamental to the prestige, during the nineteenth-century, of realism in art.)

From the viewpoint of my own research, however, it was only around the 1990’s — a decade later than the beginnings of my research — that, reflecting on Arnold Gehlen’s *Der Mensch*, I observed that control is a much more complex phenomenon. In order to understand its effective presence it would be necessary to start by a reflexion on man’s biological constitution. I draw from Gehlen a single expression: man is a *Mängelwesen*, “a deficient being”. A short explanation of his formulation would be: as stressed in a tradition in which Plato and Nietzsche are important names, compared with other animals, man has a paradoxical body structure: he has survived although he has not strong resources of attack and/or defense. For by surviving, man had a terrible lesson to learn: *to defer its reactions to the world and its inner stimuli*. Man is an animal pressed to learn how to defer and to reflect on this deferral. And here comes the question of control. First of all, it is impossible to defer without the strict control of man’s physical or emotional discharges. *This way, control undertakes a positive meaning*. If someone does not learn to defer his/her passions he/she is previously lost as to his/her deficient biological constitution. The crucial question now becomes to know if the human control has always the same face. Gehlen does not put the question in these terms. The responsibility for it is exclusively mine.

According to the German thinker, man’s “*constitutional risk*” appears when his “actions and impulses *will not send back to the world* but instead become even more sophisticated and will perpetuate in themselves.”^{viii} As we already know, human control is accomplished by man’s capacity to defer his impulses. Through this postponing, man acts to the benefit of his society. (For example, someone is injured; instead of reacting at once, his clan waits for the best moment to take revenge or propose an agreement). It happens, however, that this deferral may also be done only in favor of its own agent, excluding his/her society. Is there a distinction between these two situations? I see that they show two radically different consequences: the first reaction — defer sending back to the world — would be felt as a positive one. But to defer and locate the consequence of deferral out of the world means to do an action which has no interest or rather is against that which emerges as the interest of the agent’s *society*. This deferral which does not reinforce what appears as the interests of the agent’s society is a negative one. In more direct words: *I call a negative control this deferral against the established interests inside a certain society*. (I must emphasize that Gehlen is not responsible for this distinction). For what are social interests but the interests of a certain group (in a patrimonial or a class society)? And what interests could be strong enough to manifest their reaction against a deferral that is contrary to them but the interests belonging to a powerful and dominant group? So, the control of the imaginary is accomplished by the delegates of a dominant group, when this group feels that the products of the imaginary escape, react or refuse its proposed values. In other terms, control tries to mask the tensions that are fermenting inside a certain society. I hope it is clear for the reader what the relationship is here between such a control and the conception of mimesis as *imitatio*: since this is accepted or not discussed, the social and formal dimensions of *difference* are easily disguised.

I believe that these are the fundamental changes I have made to the general problematic of control in the past twenty years. A last question to myself: why have I privileged only one kind of control? For a double reason: (a) because I suppose that verbal fiction (I prefer this expression to ‘literature’, which is a quite ambiguous term) is the only subject on which I have something to say; and (b) considering the imaginary as the concretized product

of the faculty of imagination (a couple similar to Saussure's *parole — langue*), I dare to add that its product *pour excellence*, the fictional object, has been submitted to a constant negative control, along with the history of the Western world, without provoking an efficient thematization by Western thought.

Since all my knowledge concerns the Western world, I cannot assert that negative control is exclusive to our civilization or if it is inherent to mankind.

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