K. Ludwig Pfeiffer

The Imaginary and the Protoliterary:
Sketches for a Topology

ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines Pfeiffer’s own notion of the protoliterary – a cultural-aesthetic discourse prior to and external to the ‘literary’ as traditionally conceived in Western aesthetics, a more general theory of aesthetic experience appropriate to a wide range of media and geared toward performativity and bodily experience – in relation to Costa Lima’s notion of the imaginary.

BIOGRAPHY

K. Ludwig Pfeiffer is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Jacobs University, Bremen, Germany. He is author of The Protoliterary: Steps Toward an Anthropology of Culture (Stanford University Press, 2002)
I.
It is a great honour, and an equally great pleasure, to be allowed and invited to sketch relations between Luiz Costa Lima’s great book *Control of the Imaginary: Reason and Imagination in Modern Times* and my own *The Protoliterary: Steps toward an Anthropology of Culture*. In personal terms, Luiz Costa Lima is an old friend whom, after having got to know him during a series of conferences in Dubrovnik in the eighties, I continue to see, off and on, especially in Brazil. But in intellectual terms, too, the relation goes deeper than might readily appear to the English-speaking world of scholarship and literary-cultural theory: in 1990, I had the honour to write an afterword to the German edition of *O Controle do Imaginário*. It was at that time that my thoughts, ultimately leading up to the *Protoliterary*, were – very slowly – taking shape.

Debate on *O Controle* has been rich, diversified and indeed controversial. In his introduction to the US-American edition, Ronald W. Sousa points out right away that Costa Lima does not accept ‘great portions of my analysis.’ Jochen Schulte-Sasse, in his afterword, concentrates on two critical aspects: on what he takes to be the downplaying, on Costa Lima’s part, of the ‘radically different nature of a control of the imaginary in pre-modern and in modern times,’ and on Costa Lima’s notion of a ‘mimetic imagination.’ This notion, Schulte-Sasse thinks, neglects both the compensatory nature of imaginary experiences in the European 18th century and the romantic countermovement in favour of *poiesis*. In that countermovement, according to Schulte-Sasse, the distinction between, and indeed the separation of, the mimetic on the one hand, the imagination and *poiesis* on the other hand, must be made stronger than the distinction between the mimetic and expression which Costa Lima allows for.

In a very thoughtful review of the German version of *O Controle*, Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus, by contrast, holds that Costa Lima’s confrontation between imagination/imaginary and their control, between rebellious forces and repressive institutions of Church and State, between for instance the Renaissance and more recent times, between classical control and romantic liberation, turns out to be too harsh. In Costa Lima’s picture of the Renaissance for instance, there is, according to Schulz-Buschhaus, no place for writers like Ariost and Rabelais. Furthermore, the picture privileges probability as a central category of Renaissance poetics, although that category had already been pushed to the foreground by Aristotle.

Schulz-Buschhaus indirectly also draws attention to the tension between an awareness of a kind of universal ‘inevitability of the fictional’ and an ongoing, Constance School-like predilection for specific ‘literary’ (perhaps one could even say ‘canonized’) fictional forms. From different perspectives, Sousa and Schulte-Sasse keep harping on that point too. In a nice phrase, Sousa for instance talks about what ‘Control of the Imaginary sees as the abyss of *écriture* but only through the safety of *rezeptionsästhetik* [sic] and the Enlightenment project that it articulates.’

II.
Pulling the preceding aspects into my orbit, I continue to be struck by what I see as a certain – ultimately very productive – oscillation in Costa Lima’s set-up. The German version has an interesting preface by the author which I cannot find in its US-American counterpart. Here, Costa Lima emphasizes both the ubiquity of fiction and the historicity of concepts of the literary; he warns especially against any generalization of concepts which do not go back farther than the 18th century.

Let me exploit these aspects right away. In order to highlight the varieties of the control and the liberation of the imaginary, Costa Lima understandably, fruitfully and fascinatingly concentrates on texts from different times and ‘cultures.’ Thus, one cannot really criticize him for not unfolding the implications of the early chapter, devoted mainly to Jeremy Bentham, on the inevitability of the fictional – a term *not* used by Bentham who, like his editor C. K. Ogden, prefers, for good reasons, as we will see, the term fictitious. For my part, however, I have always and, in the steps leading up to the *Steps of The Protoliterary*, increasingly been intrigued by these implications. They go back to Ockham and indeed to what has been variously described as the birth of – not only literary – fiction in antiquity. In Germany, they culminated in the 19th century with Nietzsche and Hans Vaihinger’s *Philosophy of As If*.

It strikes me that the theological, philosophical and, with Bentham, also legally motivated tradition of fiction theory does not use the term of fictionality at all.

Let me therefore polemicize a little bit. We do not have either a conceptual history of this crucial term (crucial at least for literary theory) or a convincing conceptual logic. Such a logic would have to distinguish cogently...
between the fictional, fictive, fiction and some more terms. Nor does the Oxford English Dictionary really help in cases like this one. By contrast, collecting the evidence amassed by the theological, philosophical, legal, everyday and, with Vaihinger even science-related theory of fiction, we must conclude, I think, that the interplay of imaginary-fictitious and real(istic) elements forms an integral part of any type of discourse. Clear-cut, decisive differences are often very hard to establish. The fact that an – invented – story is narrated in a novel for instance, says very little about the power of reality effect and reality import of such a text. Fictitious elements – elements whose reality status is at least highly unclear and in need of massive interpretation – will creep into any narration. Conversely, the amount of imaginary investments in historiographical, sociological and even economic – to say nothing of philosophical – texts is perhaps easier to under- than to overrate. I am not only thinking of a ‘visionary’ book like C. Wright Mills’ *The Sociological Imagination* with its scathing criticism of ‘scientific’ functionalism and the like.\[xiv\] I will come back to an economic parallel later. In any case, irreducible factuality and mere invention, that is fictitiousness, do not occupy large discursive spaces.

That is why the special value of literary fictions is not to be taken for granted. Wolfgang Hildesheimer, a German writer (and painter) with a particular sensibility and sensitivity for what he called ‘the end of fiction,’ that is the end of the relevance of invented, that is merely imaginative stories, a writer suggesting, with particular sophistication, amalgamations of the fictitious and the real in texts with strong biographical gestures, has called Dickens – so full of ‘fantastic’ elements – an applied 19th century sociologist, also concerned very intensely with ‘information.’\[xiii\] In the 20th century, Hildesheimer thinks, what with multinational corporations and the remoteness of science from ordinary experience, ‘novels’ can no longer achieve that. We could extend that discussion into many directions – for instance into the way in which Carl Djerassi, in contrast to both science fiction and ‘ordinary’ novels, describes his ‘science-in-fiction’ as demanding a ‘degree of accuracy and plausibility that impart to my story-telling a high ratio of fact to fiction.’\[xiii\]

Therefore, the suspicion looms large – and has unfortunately condensed into a near certainty for me – that fictionality is a term with which literary studies and literary theory, urged on by often very dubious, e.g. national(istic) drives in the 19th century, have mapped out and reserved an object domain, a territory of investigation for themselves. That territory, demarcating what plausibly looked like the identifiability of literature and, in its wake, the self-sufficiency of literary studies as a discipline with important functions especially in the European 19th century, would be threatened if literary theory did not protect itself against the corrosive inroads, the literary metastases of the theological, philosophical, legal and everyday theory of fiction.\[xvii\] The extent, though, to which literary theory has in fact shut off itself successfully against powerful and long-term modes of universalizing fiction theory is remarkable – to put it both polemically and mildly. Even in Wolfgang Iser’s magisterial *The Fictive [!] and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*,\[xviii\] the implications, both historical and conceptual, between the fictive and Iser’s main concern, the fictional (see his chapters one and two), are not sufficiently brought to light.

It is clear that, at least since Ockham, the theory of fiction is intimately bound up with social, political and, in Bentham’s case especially legal, that is to say real matters in various senses. Literary fictions, if they are focused upon at all, remain an issue on the margin. Vaihinger, for one, at the end of the 19th and early 20th century, is much more concerned with the importance of fictions for science than for literature (or ‘poetry’). In British empiricism, in Hume for instance, poets, those professional liars, if they want to be noticed at all, must play their part in matters of sociability, in cultural and affective negotiations, that is in negotiations of what at some point must be called the real. The point that, because of such involvements (also described as the ‘work of writing’ by Clifford Siskin\[xix\]), many texts, normally called literary, could be seen as pointedly non-fictional and as ‘realistic’ or ‘historical’ instead, is also made by Schulz-Buschhaus in his review.\[xx\] Ockham’s theory of fiction, apart from its functions in the quarrels between emperor and pope, has indeed been rightly seen as an essential element of his philosophy as social philosophy.

Consequently, forms of the imaginary called fiction(s) are never merely fictitious (or fictional, if one wants to cling to this dubious term), in the same way as matters called real are never simply there. Bentham was surely right, much as his terminology about entities may look dated: ‘Every fictitious entity bears some relation to some real entity, and can no otherwise be understood in so far as that relation is perceived – a conception of that relation is obtained.’\[xxi\] Rephrasing entity-talk in the context of modern neurobiology might make it more palatable: since there are no neutral objects of cognition, we must mobilize parts of our affectively charged imaginary in order to form senses of the real. It is of course difficult, if not impossible to stipulate which commitments of our inner life might qualify for cognitive claims. That is why theories of the imagination as a substantial, epistemologically reliable faculty have failed (and will, to all intents and purposes, also fail in the future).\[xxii\] But whatever the difficulties, it is the intertwining of what can be only very provisionally separated into a real and an imaginary part which is at stake.
The European 18th century fostered the development of forms of the imaginary in which pictures and the calculus of life as patterns of risky, but ultimately ordered contingency were pushed to the foreground. The novel and the life expectancy calculus of insurance companies are two extreme, but elastic and complex forms of making projections for life patterns. The novel readjusts the older speculative notions of probability under new conditions (absence of fate and fortuna, weakening of socially deterministic life factors like rank). Life insurance replaces speculation with statistical calculus altogether – without, however, abandoning the imaginary domain completely. (After all, hardly anybody dies precisely at the time calculated as statistical average.) That is why Elena Esposito, sharpening the drift of Ian Hacking’s *The Emergence of Probability* (1975), can plausibly open her recent book on probability with the promising assertion that the calculus of probability and the novel emerged at almost the same time, that is towards the end of the 17th century. It is astonishing how far into the very midst of our own time, and its so-called financial crisis, such parallels and their varying interpretations as provisionally real or fictitious can be driven. Peter Sloterdijk, our leading German intellectual, has eloquently elaborated – before the 2008 financial crisis broke out! – upon the fairy tale core not only of fantasies about being rich, but also within the management of the ‘real’ economy itself. He does indeed speak of a ‘real-imaginary dimension in the new economic processes’. There is an uncanny affinity, though not identity, with Ponzi schemes (which have resurfaced with Madoff anyway) in which investors are paid returns from their own money or the money of subsequent investors. One could add to Sloterdijk’s Ponzi analysis that Charles Ponzi did not invent this scheme – in Mr. Merdle, in his turn a kind of portrait of the 19th century politician, financier and embezzler John Sadleir, it had been described by Dickens in *Little Dorrit* (1857). Moreover, it is in modern and contemporary art, functioning as a kind of training centre for avant garde consumerism, that the ‘psychosemantic budget’ of economic players can practise an economically crucial anything-goes mentality.∗∗∗

For a while, in novels, in different forms in so-called Romanticism, the imaginary component was so strongly on the advance that it appeared to gain its own legitimacy or even autonomy. Shelley, in fantasies of omnipotence belied by his own partly sordid realities, saw poets as the lawgivers of mankind. And ultimately, for the novel, the development toward meta-fiction seemed to corroborate the assumption of self-sufficient legitimacy.

After initial difficulties, the novel appeared, and continues to appear to usurp the title of paradigmatic fiction (at least in the bookshops). But its fall into sentimentalism and related traps made it clear that the other, the ‘real’ side of the calculus of life kept on looming large – even if it had to loom in semi-darkness. Today, even in a conventional history of novel-writing, the traditional picture of various ‘mimetic’ forms of realism, culminating, say, in naturalism and tilting into modernism and meta-fiction, would be overly simplifying. Even within meta-fictional (post)modernism, there were and are forms of ‘epistemological’ texts normally labelled novels which competed and continue to compete strongly, in terms of analytical and descriptive power, and of empirical saturation, with philosophy, psychology, sociology and historiography. The distinction between autobiographical and historiographical writing on the one, ‘fictional’ writing on the other side has become, not only in Hayden White’s meta-history, more difficult than ever. Oscar Wilde, whom I could call as crown witness for many of my arguments, makes a funny, but very strong point when he has Lady Bracknell identify what Miss Prism calls ‘the three last volumes of my diary’ as the then customary ‘fiction in three volumes’ in Act IV of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Moreover, some forms of sociological theory, like systems theory, have emphasized the increase in complexity and possibilities, in options to be shaped into provisional and transitory realities in modern societies. Even in so-called real life, the world can always be observed and experienced differently. Shifts of level in the order of observation – and in the awareness of its blind spots – have become routine. The question then pops up why one would (still) need literary fictions in order to duplicate and reproduce that process of fiction-saturated ramifications of the real and thus produce even more – but hardly more relevant – possibilities. Literary complexity, especially of the type we encounter in so-called novels, has lost its urgency because it keeps confirming what we have known all the while: the contingency of a contingent world.∗∗∗∗ Schulte-Sasse’s criticism of the concept of literature as a *Simulationsraum* above points already into that direction.

**III.**

My preceding chapter is a paltry effort to suggest the richness of implications opened up by *O Controle do Imaginário*. In a two-pronged, but still very one-sided move, I tried to work suggestions of that kind into *The Protoliterary*. The book is one-sided, because it pays a somewhat cheap toll to the media hype of the late 20th century, and, in fact, seems to replace the concept of art by the concept of medium altogether. I had assumed that there is some justification for that: if the literary fiction-fact complex has run into a kind of dead end, we
must look for other forms (‘media’) in which attractive negotiations and amalgamations between the two take place.

This has motivated a long chapter on stagings of the human body in the form modern sport as well as ancient athletics and their relation to ‘literature.’ It has prompted me to plunge very strongly, if amateurishly, into opera and Japanese forms of highly performative and only very superficially ‘mimetic’ traditional theatre. Opera, to cut a long story short, seemingly indulging in the spreading out of emotional codes, in fact dilutes and at the same time re-intensifies them, through singing as a semantically neutralizing body technique, into affective energies. As such, these come close to affective certainty. Opera uses language as a frame of symbolization, but, performatively through singing, also and perhaps more importantly functions as a technique of desymbolization. In that respect, opera could be seen as an exemplary model of aesthetically pregnant cultural configurations, whether we call them arts or artistic media (like ‘media art,’ excluding most of the so-called mass media though), with not only rock music as a – certainly drastic – 20th century variation.

Certainty on such affective, that is personal, though not really individual(ized) levels has to be paid for. It must sever any direct connection with the world (‘society’) at large. That is why the ‘libretto’ is normally not a book in the literary sense. The impression that most opera stories are silly and negligible – whether in terms of some sort of realism or artistic-intellectual sophistication – is hard to ward off. (I am aware that I would run into trouble with such assertions especially with convinced Wagnerians.) Theoretically, this situation is mirrored in and supplemented by the thesis, put forward by quite a few systems theoreticians (most of them German, it would appear), that persons can locate themselves on the periphery of social systems only, not in their operational realities, and that persons should indeed be glad that they are placed there. Such a thesis has cut short long stories of emancipation, liberation, and of the social relevance of the imagination. An early, indeed romantic model of the severance of imagination/imaginary and culture was drawn up by E. P. Thompson who kept hammering away somewhat uncharitably at the ‘great intellectual indigestion,’ the ‘pious humbug’ and the ‘self-isolation of a utopian intellectual revolutionary’ in the model case of Coleridge.\textsuperscript{xv}

This again, however, is not the last word. The provisionally last word is, quite by contrast, inspired once more by Luiz Costa Lima. If The Protoliterary appears to replace the concept of art by that of a medium or the media in order to widen the cultural sphere of negotiations between the control and the liberation of the imaginary, the very title indicates that a kind of basic literary grounding of culture is to be maintained after all. In that respect, The Protoliterary would appear to veer back towards a neutralized version of O Controle: neutralized because, as we will see, the imaginary remains crucial, although it cannot claim any systematic or definite social and perhaps even cultural relevance.

Guiding assumptions are borrowed here from Nietzsche, according to whom we are always observing (and need a ‘protoliterary’ language for that) and always passionately involved (and need strong, performatively oriented arts, or media, in order to get attractive shapes of that involvement which, in language, would be, and indeed has been, quickly liable to parody). Further assumptions are taken from evolutionary anthropology, especially André Leroi-Gourhan’s *Gesture and Speech.*\textsuperscript{xvi} According to him, even societies need something like the imagination as the ‘ability to create symbols’ in order to keep their ‘vital’ chains of action going.\textsuperscript{xvii} The term symbol here refers to signifying flexibility, not to fixed meanings. Leroi-Gourhan rather sees Western (purportedly ‘rational’) alphabetic writing systems on the road towards a problematic, for instance scientific and perhaps positivistic narrowing of thought. He contrasts these writing systems somewhat unfavourably with the associative, the graphic potential and ‘halo’ of especially Asian systems. This is important for me because associative imagery can cling to or be suggested by performative artistic modes with particular force. I therefore felt justified to use Leroi-Gourhan for my purposes in The Protoliterary: performatively produced certainty strikes me as an important fusion of the real and the imaginary. I would call Luiz Costa Lima as a witness for my related thesis, mentioned above, about the ‘dialectics’, if you allow me that pompous term, of linguistic symbolization and performative desymbolization. That dialectics, if anything, needs a lot of imaginative projections. In that sense, too, The Protoliterary represents, I hope, a widening, but certainly not an abandonment of O Controle do Imaginário.

Needless to say that, in talking about (especially performative) fusions of the real and the imaginary, I am ignoring the conceptual fate of these terms in Lacan and other, again mainly ‘French’ theory. I am confident that I can do that not only because Costa Lima does it too, but also because Lacanian and related concepts of the imaginary and the real would have to be revised in the light of performative certainty anyway.
REFERENCES


Ibid., 215.

Ibid., 218-21.


Ulrich Schulz-Buschhaus, review of *Die Kontrolle des Imaginären*, 547-8.

Sousa, “Mimesis, why can’cha be true?,” xvii, cf. xvi-xvii; and Schulte-Sasse, “Afterward, 212, 222 (here on ‘literature’ as ‘a kind of testing ground or Simulationsraum’).


Ibid., 12-13.


Sousa, “Mimesis, why can’cha be true?,” xiv, is very eloquent on related disciplinary matters.


Schulz-Buschhaus, review of *Die Kontrolle des Imaginären*, 548.


Ibid., 125.

Cf. Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975); Elena Esposito, *Die Fiktion der wahrscheinlichen Realität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 7; Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit. Politisch-psychologischer Versuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 303, 308. See also 300, 307 and especially 312 concerning operetta as a reflection and an agent in the early transformations of bourgeois desire.


For Nietzsche and his ideas, taken here mainly from *Human, All too Human*, see *The Protoliterary*, 63. See also 36, 59, 89-90. To my dismay, I note that this US-American version of my book (different from and especially much shorter than the German), does not really make the source (*Human, All too Human*) explicit. For Leroi-Gourhan see *Gesture and Speech*. Anna Bostock Berger (trans.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993).

Since I have only the German version *Hand und Wort. Die Evolution von Technik, Sprache und Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), 267, I also indicate the chapter (VI), a central chapter indeed. By contrast, I did and do not find Mark Turner’s neurobiologically inspired *The Literary Mind. The Origins of
Thought and Language (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), very helpful, much as the central thesis that the literary mind is ‘not a separate kind of mind,’ but ‘our mind’ (Preface, no page given) supports my own basic argument.