ABSTRACT

This is intended to be a critical introduction to the concept of *mimesis* as it is laboured by the Brazilian author Luiz Costa Lima. Costa Lima’s *mimesis* has its earliest roots both in the skepticism with which he regards current literary criticism, as well as in his absorption of Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory. As an historical-analytical tool, it relies on its own distinction from its Latin translation as *imitatio* as a means to recover the profound implications of the ancient Greek term for the theory or representation – implications that remained obscured after *mimesis* was viewed with suspicion by the concept of ‘free art’ and by avant-garde poetics. In an effort to bring literature back to its historical soil and to reassess its social relevance, through the concept of *mimesis* Costa Lima intends to forward some new paradigms for literature and for literary critique, thereby touching upon a broad range of theoretical and philosophical topics. While retracing Costa Lima’s quest, this presentation wants to reveal the many important and provocative issues his work brings to literary scholarship.

BIOGRAPHY

Pedro Dolabela Chagas completed a Masters in Literary Theory at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (U. F. M. G.), with a dissertation on the role of mimesis and criticity in the work of Luiz Costa Lima. He has a PhD in Comparative Literature from the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (U. E. R. J.), and a PhD in philosophy from
U. F. M. G. His doctoral research was on the comparative epistemologies of Thomas Pynchon, Wolfgang Iser, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
COSTA LIMA’S MIMESES: A SCRIPT FOR NEWCOMERS

How can one appropriately do justice to Luiz Costa Lima’s concept of mimesis in a paper-length text? It is not an easy task, since mimesis covered many hundreds of pages and over two decades of his intellectual production. Nonetheless, here I will outline an overall mapping of his perspectives on the theme; given that Costa Lima’s books are not easily (or fully) available to the English reader, this might be of use.

His earliest writings on mimesis date back to 1979. Over the last three decades he constantly returned to the theme, always approaching the concept’s fate in modern aesthetic thought as a means to recover its fertility for contemporary debate. In Costa Lima’s work that ancient concept is invited to shed a new light on current critical, historical and analytical practice; mimesis is used to reveal aspects of modern and contemporary literary thought that had remained unseen, and to suggest ways to overcome deadlocks and shortcomings.

In the next sections I’ll try to disentangle the many issues that underlie his positions, so that Costa Lima’s personal and intellectual motivations might become clear. Through mimesis he simultaneously triggers a large number of topics. His mimesis affects (as well as derives from) an interconnected range of subjects, giving each of them a new description. So let’s start from the beginning – back in 1979.

AN ENCOUNTER

Costa Lima narrates his encounter with aesthetics of reception as a turning point in his career. This is quite significant, because for years he had been in close dialogue with structuralism (especially with the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss), starting from his 1973 doctorial dissertation until (at least) his 1976 study on Cornélio Penna. Yet already in 1979 he is found translating Jauss and Iser into Portuguese, which reveals that for him, too, a new paradigmatic definition of literature was at stake: literature was not composed of ‘texts’ anymore; it was now a complex of meanings produced by readers through ‘the act of reading.’

This open reference to Iser’s great book anticipates that he will soon become a greater influence on Costa Lima than Jauss would ever be. As Jauss places reading as its object of study and methodological paradigm, defining it as a series of historically-specific relations between readers and the synchronically-consolidated ‘horizons of expectation,’ aesthetics of reception (in practice) functions as a (sophisticated) variation of sociology and history of literature. Following a somewhat different direction, Iser’s reader-response theory understands reading as an individual event, which is to be described and studied (in all its implications) not in an historical or sociological manner, but through a phenomenological approach (which never necessarily disregards history or sociology, it should be said). Iser’s main question is: how does an empirical reader read a literature book? Which is the same as asking: what determines the specificity of literary reading (as opposed to any other kind of reading)? It probably seemed to Costa Lima that Iser’s propositions were better suited to investigate how literature empirically exists for readers – which is different from studying a text in its immanence. It is no mere detail that in Iser’s work reading is an act: he wants to examine the factors and preconditions that join together to produce its ‘typical’ or ‘usual’ results, the factors and preconditions that characterize the special kind of production ventured by the reader of literary texts.

Therefore in 1979, when (to many of his contemporaries) it seemed that Costa Lima was incorporating the novelty of the Constance School as a whole, he was actually ‘digesting’ it. He preserved Jauss as a somewhat distant reference while making Iser his ‘brother in arms.’ Cutting between immanent textual analysis and a cultural-sociological understanding of literature, reading (and its effects on the reader) had become, for Iser and Costa Lima, quintessential to the very definition of literature – so that if a theory of literature wants to make serious claims to being a science of literature, the act of reading must co-define its object of study.

This is the point from where Costa Lima’s theory of mimesis departs.

TO DEFINE LITERATURE

At this point it is necessary to skip over fifteen years of his academic production, in order to arrive at Costa Lima’s understanding of literature. Examining this moment allows us to gain a full appreciation of his concept of mimesis.

In Limits of Voice: Montaigne, Schlegel, Kafka, he says that literature acquired its function in modern times as society felt the need to deal with a ‘Law’ that refused to make itself visible, or refused to be conceptualized. What Costa Lima calls ‘Law’ is the unwritten set of codes, norms and expectations that orientates and defines
human thought and action. Our supposedly unlimited capacity to think is actually circumscribed by socially- and historically-specific concepts, expectations and prohibitions that determine what is thinkable. In modernity, ‘Law’ appears – to soon become an instrument of the status quo – with the rise of (legitimated and self-assured) subjective reason: progressively, any realm that could not be taken over by either divine or scientific legislation would be governed by a set of ethical, moral and aesthetic codes that were positively imposed and experienced, but hardly self-declared (and even less theorized). The ‘Law’ is a modern socio-historical mental frame, moulded by the current horizons of power, ethics and knowledge, but without fully coinciding with them. The ‘Law’ is unstable (or flexible) and almost invisible, for it encompasses thought by giving it its own (‘natural’) shape. The ‘Law’ is power, because it is the silent framework that determines thought and speech. It is certainly a vague framework, but nevertheless effective: it has power of determination exactly because it is vague. Yet being so illusive, how could the ‘Law’ become known and rendered visible? Costa Lima’s answer is sharp: through literature, which between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century becomes consolidated as an autonomous modality of discourse.

Between the self and the experienced reality, there is a gap that the ‘Law’ can only partially fill (for there is always a ‘lack of completeness’ in experienced sense, as it is impossible for the ‘Law’ to bridge all the lacunae that the available structures of meaning – including the ‘Law’ itself – leaves open). In Limits of Voice literature is defined as the type of discourse to provide readers with some access or view to the ‘Law.’ Contrary to what philosophy might try to do, literature will not theorize (or even try to represent) the ‘Law.’ Literature is not about the ‘Law;’ it is a perspective on reality that tries to expose it, if not in its essence (for such an essence barely exists), at least in its operation or practical use. Literature preserves enough similarity with conventional beliefs and daily experience to make itself familiar to the reader; at the same time, it does not fully obey the ‘Laws’ that those beliefs and experiences (in their empirical manifestations) rely on. Literature is different and similar to the ‘Law’ and this is how it makes the ‘Law’ visible, allowing us to see what remains hidden in daily social practice, i.e. the ‘Law’ as a constitutive social power. In Limits of Voice literature is defined as a discourse that distances itself from reality in order to access reality in a new (and specific) way, thus making literature appear as a by-product of modern subjective reason.

**WHY MIMEESIS?**

From Limits of Voice and its definition of literature we return to our main topic. It remains to be understood how his encounter with the Constance School helped shape Costa Lima’s mimeesis, specially knowing that in the 1960s and 70s that concept had become mistrusted by literary critique.

In 1979 that mistrust made it necessary for Costa Lima to justify his choice. He does it partially in a negative way, in an effort to undermine the reasons that had lead to the concept’s abandonment. In the years to follow he strove to make this point clear: that the ‘banishing’ (as he classifies it) of mimeesis had been caused by a too-formalistic understanding of the notion of ‘free art,’ from the beginning in the conceptualization that the term ‘art’ underwent since the late eighteenth century. Costa Lima was suspicious of the idea (derived from Kant’s third Critique) that modern art had become free from its previous institutional ties and also from representing any ‘content’ available in the ‘external world.’ His suspicion lay not with the idea of artistic ‘freedom’ itself, but with some of its unintended consequences.

Two problems characterize this suspicion. First, Costa Lima felt that this so-called ‘liberation’ carried with it some normative notions: should art simply ‘enjoy’ that freedom, or should it compromise itself with non-representation? Second: from the standpoint of perception, was it actually true that ‘reality’ – be it physical or imaginary – could ever be absent from aesthetic experience? Even when we stand before an ‘abstract’ painting, is it true that no reference to ‘external reality’ will take part in the experience it provokes in us?

This second point straightens his ties with Iser’s reader-response theory. The issue is mainly epistemological: How can we keep our minds from associating what we see (on the canvas) to images we relate to the pre-existing world and to concepts we use in order to understand it? I emphasize the ‘we’ pronoun because a reader-response theory is also concerned with the images and concepts which readers attach to the objects that provoke them aesthetically. (This is notwithstanding the fact that their personal participation in the phenomenon of aesthetic reception is certainly motivated by the work; it is a circular relationship between work and receptor, not a linear one). This perspective clearly distances itself from strict formal analysis. A formal approach to representation would inquire whether the work itself makes clear references to pre-existing reality; reader-response theory makes this point partially senseless. Whereas one would define representation as a defining asset of a text or image, the other defines it as a phenomenological precondition of aesthetic experience. In this respect, there is no way a work of art could avoid the attribution of reality to it by the receptor, especially
because since ‘language,’ ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ cannot simply be erased even momentarily from our minds. Rather, they are always present.

As to the first point mentioned above – remember that Costa Lima also mistrusted the concept of ‘free art’ for being insidiously normative – it led him into a different path of inquiry. The concept of ‘free art’ had always been considered politically positive, for it released the art system from the control or surveillance by other social systems. However, critique’s insistence upon non-representation, especially after structuralism and deconstruction, was only possible through the notion that artworks were self-referent (i.e. referential to themselves as forms, as well as to the art system itself and its history). According to this description art is ‘absolute poiesis’: just as it does not follow any model or norm, any reference it makes to the ‘world’ should not be deemed as copy or representation; not being ‘self-transparent media,’ art builds up meaning aesthetically. Art would thus be uncompromised with meaning as it is experienced in daily social exchange, but only as it is artistically produced, i.e. as an immanently aesthetic fact. Taken to the extreme, this would force a sharp divorce between aesthetically- and empirically-experienced meanings.

However, at what cost was this notion established? What was the cost of associating aesthetic difference to formal difference, and formal difference to the self-referentiality of aesthetic language? At a time when artistic language was becoming inextricable to the majority of the public, did not this conception help alienate art from regular social intercourse? Did it not help make art the territory of a ‘privileged few’? Hence the poignant question: Was critique not partially responsible for this alienation? The two issues of non-representation, first as a disregard to the phenomenology of literature and second as a normative definition of literature, will be dropped for the moment, to later reappear below. At this point we realize that the question that opened this passage has not really been answered: Why mimesis?

Actually, the answer has been at least initiated. We will see that Costa Lima’s reasons for bringing in the Greek term and the precise shape he gave it came from the necessity of giving a response to those contemporary deadlocks in the theory of artistic representation.

**A RENEWED CONCEPT OF MIMESIS**

Costa Lima’s mimesis could not not be more distant from its Latin translation as imitatio. In his work the ‘similitude’ associated with the term is displaced: as it is substantiated into ‘text’ and ‘reading,’ similitude is understood, and appreciated, as difference.

Mimesis is not imitatio because it is built through a series of selections from external reality that produce an impression of reality only as long as they differ from reality. It is no surprise that on Costa Lima’s work mimesis will eventually lead to a theory of fiction, since fiction’s specificity lies in its capacity to depart from recognizable reality in order to build up a different construct, which arouses in the reader a certain ‘representation’ of reality that is not offered by reality itself. Fictions feed on reality, selecting therein the elements through which they make themselves understood and experienced, but that do not simply repeat or reinforce ‘what is already there.’ They re-present reality, i.e. they present reality in ways that differ from its usual (or ‘daily’) perception.

This is why Costa Lima’s mimesis does not rely on bare ‘representation,’ but on what he calls ‘representation-effect.’ The accent now lies not upon the extent to which works of literature ‘absorb’ the pre-existing world, but upon the extent to which they differentiate the world as they absorb it, thereby allowing the reader to differentiate his/her usual perspectives on it. ‘Effect’ then refers to the (unpredictable) perspectives literature opens up for readers as it creates and exposes a (literary) world that re-creates the (everyday) world. Mimesis is production (and not reproduction) because its sameness produces difference (understood not as substance, but as effect). Because it is not imitatio, it does not contradict the foundations of modern art; as creation, it not only confirms the expectations regarding art as an autonomous (and subjective) production but also grants it a unique social function – as a production that is counterproductive, as an encounter that brings displacement, as a similarity that reveals otherness.

At times the otherness brought on by mimesis will stimulate the reader’s critical faculties. As Costa Lima puts it, mimesis has the (potential) power to estrange the reader from the tranquility of routine, as it is able to detach common sense (which we are never aware we ourselves incorporate) from its inertia towards what’s already known, already felt, already thought. Mimesis can produce unrest as it exposes man’s (and man-made institutions) insufficiency in a permanently unstable world.
It may be that this understanding of _mimesis_ sounds too modern to justify the recurrence to the Greek term. Despite this, as he rereads Aristotle, Costa Lima suggests that even though a thinking of difference ‘in itself’ couldn’t have been possible in the Greek ambience, the awareness Aristotle had of the distance between fact and ‘fiction’ allows us to think that already in the _Poetics_ there was (an embryo of) the idea of the non-substantiality – of the merely _apparent_ substantiality – of fictionally-represented reality. Be that as it may, even if we are forced to agree that Costa Lima’s _mimesis_ finds its only true legitimacy in the post-Romantic ambience (which is most likely to be true), the choice for the Greek term still preserves its polemic edge. Rather than flowing with the tide, Costa Lima took a step back (in his conceptual apparatus) in order to put his own time under scrutiny.

But why ‘under scrutiny’?

**A Perspective on the Current State of Literary Critique**

Returning to literary critique, for Costa Lima the predominance of sociological and immanent textual readings in the twentieth century enforced a dichotomy that left little choice between understanding literature as a ‘text’ or as a social (or historical) ‘document,’ a pair of options that obliterated any fecund understanding of literature’s specificity. Costa Lima’s theory of _mimesis_ cannot be detached from an extensive questioning of the role assumed by critique in defining literature and in shaping the literary field – a role we must now fully develop.

Once again his work becomes historical. He identifies the many varieties of sociological readings and of immanent textual analysis as the two most widespread branches of twentieth century analytical practice. As we said, the danger of the former was to transform literature into social document. As to the latter, it ran the risk of estranging literary analysis from a truly critical practice. Let us examine these two possibilities.

To understand literature as document was not new in the twentieth century. It began in the aftermath of Romanticism, when scholarship and state-run teaching transformed literature into a national patrimony (with great consequences in Latin America, where newly created countries wanted to erase their colonial pasts in search of their own national identities). It was a time when writers occupied a central role in Western public debate, since it was generally accepted that literature had some kind of social function to perform – and that therefore the writer’s voice was one to be heard.

In the twentieth century, as theories of literature began to be written, sociological analysis renewed this (by now doubtlessly weakened) function through its commitment to the apprehension of the ‘social content’ of literary works, whose values would be thereby judged. But as it focused on the presence and political value of the ‘social content’ of literary works, sociological analysis regarded literature as ‘reflex’: as a (more or less active) ‘response’ to social matters. As a way to avoid this trap, in the late 1970s Costa Lima declared _mimesis_ as a means to describe how literature is rooted in society and history without being strictly determined or explained by them.

Running parallel to his critique of sociological analysis, Costa Lima’s debate against formalistic readings took him via an extended route. We already know his claim (following the Constance school) that formal analysis doesn’t respect the phenomenology of reading: literature is not written for philologists to read, and the effects it produces on readers do not coincide with and do not derive from textual minutiae, which are rarely perceived as such by the common reader. It is as if formalism tended to regard literature as a ‘body’ to be dissected by experts – but there was something else to it.

Conceiving literature as a ‘document’ invested critique with the power of establishing (‘once and for all’) the meaning of a text, by ‘finding out’ what its ‘precise’ socio-historical content was. Interpretation thus stabilized meaning in quite arbitrary ways, a practice that has been so extensively deconstructed over the past decades that we do not need to linger any further on it. Nevertheless, what about trying to ‘deconstruct’ the ways through which formal analysis also (forcefully) stabilizes our appreciation and understanding of literature? For instance, back in 1979 very little had been said against formalism’s raw distinction between literature and empirical reality: since texts cannot ‘reproduce’ reality, they were said to be self-referential entities. Furthermore, since literary texts were built upon the (more or less) conscious knowledge of their own estrangement from reality, for critique it was their _textual construction and deconstruction of reality_ that became an object of study – under the notion that ‘reality’ could be textually represented only as paradox (the paradox of representing although being aware of the impossibility of representation). This in turn gave rise to a conception of literature as the _self-questioning of textually-produced sense_.

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These notions rely on the assumption that texts are either capable of representing reality faithfully or that they are not, there being no room for a third alternative. On the contrary, Costa Lima will claim that yes, there is a third alternative. He grounds his claim on the distinction between what he calls ‘semantic instability’ and ‘interpretive undecidability.’ One thing does not necessarily lead to the other; even if we agree that semantic instability is a central characteristic of Modern literature this does not make interpretation impossible. To be instable is not the same of being entirely missing: the rarefied substantiation of ‘external reference’ in Modern literature doesn’t implicate that ‘external reference’ is not there to be grasped. Of course, semantics is extremely complexified in Modern literary texts. However, Costa Lima sustains, with mimesis, that literature has strong and inevitable links with society and history. If we believe – and here the issue becomes power-related – that reality is not at stake in literature (if it is only ‘text’ that matters), the critic is allowed to ignore the text’s concrete relations with society and social life (in the historically-specific loci where literature happens to generate impact). As a consequence, the critic can also direct himself exclusively to the social environments and media (academia, specialized publications, etc.) he directly belongs to. Critique can then attribute to literature the features and expectations carried only by a reduced number of people; not a properly ‘social’ fact anymore, literature becomes the ‘property’ of a few. As we said before, in Costa Lima’s view this kind of critique helps reduce literature’s social impact by ignoring its concrete social ties and privileging (analytically) the very aesthetic codes that keep it from achieving a greater social presence.

Costa Lima understands that both sociological and textual analysis substitute real critique for some arbitrary (although at times sophisticated) definitions of literature. In his view critique should consider the primary relevance of aesthetic experience. Furthermore, because the critic himself was initially nothing more than a reader, he should notice that this is not a minor point. If the critic is at first a (mere) reader, in order to theorize critique one has to investigate how aesthetic experience stimulates the production of a form of communication (the critical text) that does not equal or replace the ‘original’ communication between the work of literature and the reader (the critic, in this case), but that necessarily derives from that original moment. In other words, one has to cope with the fact that if ‘the act of reading’ underlies both common and specialized reading, these two varieties of reading cannot be radically different from each other.

So also critique departs from reading, and reading is what allows for the experience of mimesis. As experience, mimesis produces a link between literature, society and the reader – but as such it is inevitably as individual phenomenon. However, can critique be understood as personal testimony? Can it give up its claims to objectivity? Costa Lima states that critique originates from aesthetic experience, although it could never coincide with it since experience is not translatable into language. Even if it were, only personal and non-transferable experiences could be thereby communicated, without necessarily offering any knowledge about the work in case. How could (supposedly objective) knowledge arise from personal experience?

THE CRITIC AS A COMMON READER

Keeping those matters open for a while, it is time to tackle in more detail the convergence Costa Lima identifies between common and specialized literary reading.

For Costa Lima the critic is at first a reader like any other, by which he does not mean to deny relative differences in knowledge and familiarity with the object. What he wants to point out, again from a phenomenological perspective, is that a literary critic experiences reading just as anyone else would: the critic experiences effects that will impact on his ‘fractured subjectivity.’ This is a term Costa Lima creates to describe that fact that, even though we are not integral Cartesian subjects (even if our subjectivities are ‘manifold’) we still somehow experience subjectivity under an appearance of unity.

By saying that a critic is a reader ‘like any other’ Costa Lima wants to draw attention to the fact that he will write his critique after experiencing an effect that cannot coincide with the properly ‘academic’ kind of knowledge he will put forward about the work. Specialized training surely interferes, but not ontologically: his reading can be different in its results, but not as a process.

This partition between analytical and ‘common’ knowledge surrounds Costa Lima’s theory of mimesis. His point is that receptors are not exactly distinguished by their bigger or smaller ‘aesthetic sensibilities’ or critical capacities. Distinction lies somewhere else, in the gap between experiencing and thinking about literature, activities that nevertheless originate in the experience of mimesis. For if critique is born from experience and if aesthetic experience implies some kind of rapport to experienced reality, it is impossible to erase ‘reality’ from the critical endeavour. Mimesis lies therein, as the sameness-difference that makes us share the fictionally-
produced world through the ‘real’ or ‘previously-experienced’ world, and vice-versa, for (as Costa Lima likes to insist) *mimesis* is not a one-way street. But as Costa Lima bridges the gap between critical and common reading, what is the task left for critique? What remains as its specificity?

**Critique as Paradox**

Here Costa Lima will search for inspiration in early German Romanticism. Romantic critique was built around a paradox. It posited the task of discovering the ‘immanent law’ of literary works despite knowing that such ‘immanence’ can only be ‘found’ by a ‘subject’ (the critic): whatever belongs to the work can only be grasped by outside observation. This paradox was not meant to be a paralysing one, though, and Costa Lima will face its challenge.

In *Limits of Voice* he presents two different late eighteenth century perspectives on aesthetic experience. According to one of them aesthetic experience is essentially ‘mute,’ i.e. it cannot be communicated. *Aísthesis* is deemed as pure intensity and therefore alien to speech (for language would immediately establish another kind of regime, one that can be used to talk about experience, but never to ‘reproduce’ or ‘transmit’ it to someone else). It follows that experience cannot be legitimately criticized or judged: pertaining to one single subject, it can not be offered to public debate. But even though he agrees with the ‘untranslatability’ of experience, Costa Lima cannot accept this conclusion, for it takes art away from public interchange and secludes the individual. Costa Lima identifies this as part of the (unintended) historical heritage of Kant’s third Critique, especially in its late twentieth century reception.

Friedrich Schlegel would attempt something quite different. Costa Lima portrays him as the true founder of literary critique, as he was the first author ever to have faced the challenge that is still ours: given that we cannot erase ourselves from the observations we make, and given literary works’ radical specificity (or uniqueness), how is it possible for us to speak objectively about them? If the critic cannot operate under laws that are universally applicable to the kind of phenomena he studies (as any scientist would), he must nonetheless search for the ‘law’ he understands to be imminent to a given artwork; not a universal law, but one that is proper to a single phenomenon. According to Costa Lima, that was how literary critique was born in Schlegel’s work: as a subjective search for an objective judgment, and as a theoretical formulation that cannot be universalized – a doubly paradoxical enterprise, as we see.

Costa Lima believes in the subjective uniqueness of aesthetic experience, but not that it leads to critical muteness. He does not agree with the idea of a positive ‘law of the text’ whose existence would be independent from the reader who appoints it, but to him that does not mean that no objectivity pertains to literary texts: this notion is to be abandoned, for it legitimates impressionistic reading. Between the texts and the projections of the critic-reader, something should be stabilized, yet the question remains as to how this can be done. As we see, Costa Lima faces Schlegel’s paradox.

Again *mimesis* appears on the scene. In the critical practice idealized by Costa Lima, the stabilization of the interpreted matter produces in fact a meta-stability: it is the contingent positing by the critic of what he believes to mark the belonging of the literary work to the world it was produced in. Moreover, it cannot be accused of naïve epistemological realism, because as interpretation is shaped by aesthetic experience (through the act of reading), the critic must know that his own claims to objectivity are not enough to make his interpretation literally objective: Costa Lima’s critique admits the paradox of being simultaneously objective and subjective; it admits its own finite condition as an historically momentary proposition. In other words, Costa Lima posits a clear – although surprising – distinction between objectivity and *truth*. 
**CRITIQUE AS DEBATE**

To assume the meta-stability of interpretation is by no means a sign of resignation. Costa Lima is not taking a step back and suggesting that the subjective rooting of interpretation makes it essentially individual (with the consequence that ‘anything goes’). Quite to the contrary, meta-stability only discloses that interpretations, being historically-determined, are never ‘definite’ or ‘right.’ Being rationally organized pieces of intellectual work, interpretations seek for validation by confronting themselves with the texts they talk about, as well as by exposing their own theoretical underpinnings as clearly as possible (as clearly as the critic himself can be aware of them).\(^{xxxiii}\) It is only by clarifying his own assumptions that the critic can claim that his interpretation does not derive exclusively from his own experience with the work. Furthermore, it is only by way of the clarification of his own presuppositions and methods that a critic can settle out a theory designed to explain it. Unlike scientific theories (which are universally applicable) these are ‘theories’ designed for one single object: they’re theoretical constructs made for the study of objects that are, unlike natural objects, always unique.\(^{xxxiv}\) It is by seeking for strong theoretical consistency that critique, although being subjectively made and historically-specific, can nonetheless lay claims to truth. This is the maximum of objectivity they can achieve.

The meta-stability of critique brings a consequence: being contingent, critique gives rise to debate, and not to ‘discovery,’ ‘explanation’ or ‘learning.’ There is nothing more senseless than ‘learning’ from critique ‘how to understand what a book is about’: critique is not truth in the same way that a scientific law is truth, but only in the way that a political statement is truth: it is truth only as much as it can lay claims to truth, and this is all. So the function of critique is not to ‘end up’ debate by giving it a final word, but to open and reopen it endlessly.\(^{xxxi}\) Critique produces thought from literary reading, thereby finding its proper status in the intellectual world: just like any other kind of (non-applicable or non-pragmatic) thought, critique aims at doing just what thought wants to do: to produce more thought.

A piece of critique can only become ‘effective,’ can only provoke some impact as it establishes a link between itself and the experience its reader firstly had with the work in focus. This is how critique can insert the work in a broader debate. At this point mimesis establishes another junction between common and specialized reading. It is because of mimesis that ‘reality’ can orient the debate impelled by critique, and it is through mimesis that literature makes readers think. Mimesis returns the reader to the ‘world’; critique makes the reader return to the literary work, and also to the ‘world.’\(^{xxiv}\) If critique departs from mimesis, it can only be understood by having mimesis as a reference.

However, critique must do this ‘scientifically,’ i.e. by facing the paradox of producing objective knowledge subjectively. Such objectivity, or claims to knowledge, impedes critique from merely translating the critic’s personal relation with the work. This relation must be confronted and tested so that critique is not hierarchically posited.\(^{xxxv}\) As it is not ‘better’ than common reading it should not ‘tell the reader what to think,’ and it is by exposing its own underpinnings that critique can expose itself to debate without trying to impose its own acceptance. Costa Lima thus proposes critique as some kind of intervention, even when this intervention looks as promising as throwing a message in a bottle.

**THE VALUES BENEATH THE THEORY**

As a rapport between literature and reality, for Costa Lima the phenomenon of mimesis is located both in the texts and ‘in’ the readers. It is an immanent feature of a literary work as well as a product of the act of reading. This is why critique originates from the experience of mimesis (this is simply unavoidable) and why critique should have mimesis’ dialogue with reality as its main target: this is where literature and critique can find their (however minimal) social impacts. Mimesis is also what makes literature and critique finite and always open to change: their belonging to society and history can never be stable.

At this point we meet the values that have given shape to Costa Lima’s mimesis right from the start. Mimesis is central to literature because it connects it to society at large – to individual experience and to random social exchange. Mimesis is what allows literature to make sense beyond literature itself, providing readers with a different belonging to reality. At the same time this applies to critique: as thought produces more thought that opens debate from itself, critique renews the links between literature and society (links that have become endangered as literature lost much of its former popularity).

What Costa Lima (literally) wants to reinforce is the claim that ‘somehow, art educates’ (words translated from the introduction of his Mimesis: desafio ao pensamento). This is an actualization of an old Schillerian rôpos, one that never disappeared from aesthetic debate: the idea that art promotes Bildung. But if we follow the impact of
Friedrich Schiller’s – and very soon Romanticism’s – ideas about what the relation between art and society should be, we realize that they helped legitimate the divorce between one and the other – between art as an autonomous social system (represented by the art of genius) and society ‘at large’ (supposedly determined by the political and economic systems in its deep structuring, and by petty philistine or mass-moulded taste in its aesthetic structuring). This was not even straightforward divorce: it was clear-cut hierarchy, with the ‘good community’ of taste taking the lead. Costa Lima’s personal values as a critic of culture must be found somewhere along this line: for if he does not contradict the higher excellence of ‘Great Art’ (as opposed to ‘popular art’ or to the so-called ‘cultural industry’) his epistemology of aesthetic experience and literary critique somehow ‘popularizes’ the field. It does so not by trying to make ‘great art’ popular (something not even Quixote would try to do these days) but by complexifying the presuppositions that established its (and critique’s) longstanding ‘ivory-tower’ positions. xxxi This reveals Costa Lima’s uneasiness with our current state of affairs – it reveals how much he feels our ‘ivory-tower’ condition as a problem, not as a given.

It is a stalemate situation: in order for literature to have the social relevance scholars often attribute to it, it cannot remain as a ‘property’ of a small number of readers; but if it acquires a larger audience, how could it preserve the formative function Costa Lima believes it has? The deadlock has no solution on sight, but Costa Lima places his bet. He believes we must rethink the means of communication between literature and experienced reality, therefore rethinking the role it can play in society through common and critical reading. He proposes to do it by reattaching literature to its social-historical soil without damaging its autonomy, thereby renewing the bet that late Enlightenment and early Romanticism had idealized. However, Costa Lima does this through a concept that had been banished as that very autonomy was declared and legitimised: he brings mimesis back to the front.

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