From Mimesis as Difference to Control of the Imaginary

ABSTRACT

This article traces the reflections of Luiz Costa Lima regarding the interests which during the Renaissance sustained the translation of Greek *mimesis* as *imitatio*. To answer this question, the author analyzes the moment in which the relationship between world and language become problematic, coinciding with the passage of the word magico-religious to the word dialogue of the *polis* in ancient Greece. Costa Lima presents the debate on *mimesis* and returns to the Greeks the force of the concept which perhaps not necessarily there, became reduced to poetic discourse or simply to *imitation*. Through Costa Lima's concept of *mimesis* as engenderer of difference, we seek to understand the potentiality and the dangers of the imaginary when, in the modern world, the scholastic armour must live alongside other representational possibilities and interpretations of human actions. The translation of *mimesis* as *imitatio* and its mainspring: verisimilitude, according to Costa Lima, was a way to guarantee that mimetic imagination, with its potential for ambiguity and illusion, come to occupy the lowest scale of knowledge. The legitimacy of the poetic linked to the forms canonized by the Renaissance reading of ancient text guaranteed control of the imaginary.

BIOGRAPHY

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FROM MIMESIS AS DIFFERENCE TO CONTROL OF THE IMAGINARY

It is a long road for the man who "acts and suffers" until the recognition of the fact that he is, ultimately, a man "capable" of certain accomplishments.¹

Writing about Luiz Costa Lima’s reflections requires recognition, right from the outset. Beyond the accepted use of the word’s common usage, beyond the lexicon-ruled polysemy, I would like to situate recognition as the value of a work which, certainly, is intertwined with the lifetime trajectory of its author in the resolution of an enigma regarding the nexus between language and world, or, more specifically, between literary discourse and the representation of reality in the Western world.

However, beyond finding possible answers to the enigma, Costa Lima has the merit of recognizing a problem expressed in the tradition of mimesis-as-imitatio in the Renaissance and then of posing just the right question, i.e.: just which interests did the identification of mimesis with imitatio serve?²

For Costa Lima, the representations are social in origin and precisely because of this, demonstrate an ideological consistency. They unite thought and world discursively and become concretized – as much in the linguistic plan as in the extra-linguistic. There are behaviours with quotidian rights and relations of power that enter into the discursive framework in which society recognizes (and fails to recognize) itself.

The fertility of Costa Lima’s reflections lie in questioning the canonization of mimesis during the Renaissance as imitatio (a meta-historical concept) and its relation with social conditions which might affirm or negate its presence in certain products then recognized as poetic. Since the representations (i.e., that which is poetic is a non-substantive differentiator) are, for our author, originally socially based, the path he blazing leads us to the very historicity of the concept proper. Thus, contextualized in its historicity, mimetic discourse is that which cannot be confined to imitation in order to guarantee unity or permanence to representations of reality. In this sense, Costa Lima defines mimetic discourse as that which always delineates differences, of variable content, in the face of institutionalized realities in each period and each society. Costa Lima’s reflections, with their emphasis on the alterability and on contingencies which affect institutionalized realities, also ensures a space which does not allow itself to centralize around the instantiation of an ostensibly omnipotent subject, as was the subject ‘modern.’

In order to arrive at this point, Costa Lima travelled down the long road to Ancient Greece: he wanted to know when, and under what conditions, the theorization of mimesis was possible.³ Coherent with the hypothesis that determined social conditions are necessary for the relationship between language and reality to be open to question, Costa Lima locates an historical period in which the theorization of mimesis was impossible. In doing so, he arrives in the Mycenaean world, heralded by Homer (ninth to eighth century B. C. E.), in which the noble exercise of speech presupposed the capacity to fixate it in memory. At that time, Mnemosyne (‘Memory’) appears as a goddess who would tell the poet about the truth of the past, the present, and the future. The voice of Mnemosyne was not subject to time, to any debate or doubt: ‘the word is truly conceived of as a natural reality, a part of physis.’⁴ The word of the poet sung the truth (‘aletheia’) and this truth was in apposition not to lies, per se, but rather, to forgetfulness (‘lethe’). As well as celebrating the sovereignty of the king of Mycenae, poetic speech also celebrated the immortal gods and heroic warriors. At no time in this case, however, could the warrior be recognized as an agent, as the source of his acts. The hero’s feats were to seek the favour of the gods and only took shape when sung by the poet. In sum, logos was defined not by the correspondence with the scene it described, but rather with the place at which the described scene was related.

For Costa Lima, in that poetic speech which established that which was worth remembering and that better forgotten, there was an intermediate zone, where a positive forgotten thing might be deposited. After all, forgetting could also mean release from suffering. In this case, the univocality doubled in ambiguity: sometimes remembering was positive; sometimes negative. The master of truth could also be a master of deceit. However, mimesis was still not possible here, since the logic of the contrarians was part of this word that looked back at itself. In order to situate the question of mimesis, it was necessary for social conditions to transform this ambiguity into a contradiction to reason. For Costa Lima, as long as poetic logos remained univocal and spatially determined, a discursive differentiation between the assertorial and the apodeictical capable of provoking a word into a state of mimesis was impossible.

In recognizing a Greek debate in the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. E., which held aletheia as a capital term in the inquiry regarding the relationship between language and reality, Costa Lima finds the crux of his question. In this sense, the ambiguity of speech only becomes a problem when the institutional service of the poet, allied
with the interests of a warrior aristocracy, is no longer sufficient to explain world order. For Costa Lima, mimesis may only develop when there is a difference, that is to say, when there exists an intellectual tradition and a reality that may be considered by such a tradition. Reality functions, then, as a potentiality of meanings which, in effect, only awakens upon contact with the meaning of the tradition.

In sum, for Costa Lima, only when the effective and univocal word of sovereign power and of the warrior aristocracy was no longer able to sustain the polis system (one which demanded debate and dialogue) did the theorization of mimesis become possible. It was necessary, therefore, that the declarative word and the declared reality coincide no longer. This questioning of the relationship between language and world was a product not only of an intellectual development: it was caused, above all, by the new social relations of the polis who used speech less for teaching purposes than for reflection and questioning about the relationship between men and gods, men and their passions. In order for mimesis to develop, certain historical conditions became necessary that might place face-to-face an intellectual tradition and a reality that might be considered by such a tradition. For Costa Lima, mimesis became possible only with the collision between the mythical and the rational, and the production of a difference along a horizon of semblance. Thus the question unfolded which today we locate in the arbitrariness of the sign, i.e., in the disparity between the modes of enunciation and their meanings: we can never say with precision what we want to say; we never even express the exact sense of what we do, in fact, say.

In *Mimesis and Modernidade*, Costa Lima fully develops the thematization of mimesis, and sees in Aristotle the liberation of the mimetic from the rigid legislation of the discourse of truth – a discourse developed, above all, by philosophy. On the other hand, for Costa Lima, Aristotle kept mimesis subordinated, by the principle of the cathartic effect, to the pleasure of release, to the pleasure which accepted the play of imagination as long as this play drives towards a tranquilizing discharge. It is important to emphasize the reservation that Costa Lima notes in his reading of Aristotle (in particular) and Greek thought (in general) in the sense of mimesis not pertaining solely to art, not even when Aristotle used the concept of mimesis as the key to his poetics. In art, mimesis would present merely its most transparent manifestation – the basic impulse being to experience oneself as another in order to know, in this altered state, one’s self.

The ambiguity of *aletheia* and the persuasive force of the word – which before were imposed by the contradictory logic of myth – are now taken up once again and the problematics reanalyzed. For Costa Lima, mimesis has a marked social function, being a form of recognition of the community itself. The infinite capacity of the word to cast light while at the same time casting a shadow on the illuminated is, however, always limited by the role it lends itself to: being a means for capturing social identity in as much as it enables the allocation of meanings.

In *O controle do imaginário* Costa Lima leaves as a backdrop the question of mimesis-difference, in order to dedicate himself to developing his hypothesis that modern reason, constituted starting with the Italian Renaissance, places under suspicion, attempts to control, those products of the faculty in opposition to reason, i.e., the products of the imagination, especially the product that is to be defined as fictional work.

The hypothesis of control exercised by reason correlates with the question of the historicity of the modern subject. In direct terms, such control begins to manifest itself parallel to the rise of a subject defined in psychological terms, which we can delimit to the last centuries of the Middle Ages or, working back, starting in the 12th century. With the records of reports, songs and liturgical pieces written in the vernacular, tensions surge between the oral tradition and the new forces which seek to impose a rationality on the word to the detriment of live speech. In the Renaissance, according to Gumbrecht,” instead of being an intrinsic part of the world, as in the Middle Ages, the common man now sees himself as being eccentric, something which enables him to see himself taking on an active role in the production of worldly knowledge and interpretation. This man, in abandoning passiveness in the face of God’s intents, or a destiny immutable and guaranteed by the stable values of a hierarchical society (as was the medieval) now takes on the world as something to be unveiled and interpreted.

In contrast, this opening up of the world now makes it possible to establish distances and differences with time itself. The new perspective of the relationship between ‘antiquated’ and ‘modern’ in the Renaissance introduced uncertainty with respect to the meaning of life during the latter’s course through time. A destination ever more humane and grounded placed the problem of uncertainty on political and social life. In the face of such a scenario, it was important to create limits which might attenuate the terror of the emerging subjectivity. It became fundamental to marshal, minimally, a camp of conviviality in the field of discourse as well.
Inasmuch as the truth could no longer be assertorial, it had to be persuasive. From this perspective, the role of education with the humanist aim of teaching man the art of persuasion through the transmission and adoption of example models taken from Antiquity. Humanist writing, with its potential for the exaltation of civic life and ethical truth, was able to help in the organization of public life. This education competed with the Church in conducting and orienting men in social space.

Humanism, by incorporating rhetorical discourse regarding ethical ideals for human action in public space, emphasized an idea of virtue that could delimit the action of Fortune. In this regard, the teaching of rhetoric and eloquence portrayed precepts concerning the affirmation of certain worldly configurations such that the latter not harm important truths. It was fundamental to awaken internal vigilance within men so that social masks might sustain and thereby enable social participation and familiarity. Humanist teaching manifested itself as having the capacity to frame human impulses within a moral law in order to avoid the imagination and spectres that the new subjectivity might potentially bring. In order that this goal could be attained, the Aristotelian concept of verisimilitude was once again invoked.

Verisimilitude, an intrinsic Aristotelian category and springboard for the figure of imitatio, dealt with the elaboration of a set of hidden norms which moulded the moral coordinates of the self and the relation between the forms of discourse and world visions. The submission to imitatio of the Ancients was a potent mechanism for social control, to avoid the change of theoretical centre and to not transform self-examination into an occasion for sin and impiety.

Establishing conditions to provide another discursive framework, one which would provide regularity to the objects of the world, was of vital importance. Because of this, the tension between reality and knowledge was resolved through a theorization which placed the supremacy of a logos (which was to name everything), leaving scant room for the unreal. Semantic saturation of the cosmos was the only way to absorb the inconveniences of the vulgar understanding of the wondrous in the interior of a well-defined instance of values. According to this theory, poetry was by nature an imitatio of reality and was, therefore, obliged to conform as much as possible with this reality in order to produce desirable moral effects in men as well as in the State.

In this sense, the rediscovery of ancient texts established a secure footing of common measure in which ethical conscience was invested in the interpretive act. Analogy was used as a surrogate for an adequation between words and things. Thus, the exercise of subjectivity, via mastery of the noble word, was obliged to use the resources of the classic tradition in order to understand, with a certain confidence, the world it experienced analogically. The humanist perspective over the world cast interdependence on everything in its quest for knowledge. Personal values, social norms and legal sanctions were interwoven, adjusting the emerging subject with his intellectual creativity to the options taken up once again from tradition.

For the purpose of balancing the act of writing with social structures, the concept of imitatio appeared. Such a concept demanded predetermined rules that might govern words and things, discourse, and that which was written. The attention to human desires and anguish had, then, to obey pre-existing principles of codification. In the face of the polysemy of the world it was necessary to guarantee a modicum of understanding and, in this sense, the force of the poet’s individual subjectivity was regulated from outside to within.

In order to avoid language traversing acutely unstable paths, reinforcement was sought in the authority of Aristotle. By means of its ethical rationalism literary creation could be accepted as long as its objective was to reveal the innate good to be found in all things in the world. Awakening to moral virtue was one of the ethical obligations that respect to Aristotelian dignity wielded as the major function of writing, in order to excommunicate the internal sources of disorder.

The knack of the Renaissance man was in adopting this new potential of human capacity to the needs of public life in courtly society. The stability between words and things in the public sphere was guaranteed by a normative artifice which limited, more and more, chronicles of concrete experiences to a refined erudition that pacified the world’s understanding from appearances through edifying examples. The distancing between the truth of the heart and the lie of the tongue thus became accentuated. The opposition between an ‘inner’ purity and an ‘outer’ lie marks its place, not only in relation to a new truth, permeated by the pain of a loss, but also, more explicitly, by social figures who dominate the discourse of the period. Those of the madman, the child, the literate, who bear, perhaps, a supernatural virtue, and those of the humbled – humbled by their own dominion of thought.

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According to Costa Lima, in *O controle do imaginário*, the legitimacy of the poetic grounded on such presuppositions was due to the need to confirm the universal with respect to the particular. After all, in the sturdy scholarly Cathedral guaranteed by the transcendence, man’s new eye, along with all of the ramifications thereof, had no predefined place. However, the indeterminate condition of man cannot dispense with the confirmation of the universal over the particular, at the risk of nothing making sense. Therefore, in the early days of the Renaissance, belief in the inalterability of man and nature was fundamental. Only thus, could both be governed by permanent laws, in the physical domain as much as the moral. Moreover, the idealization of nature, implicit in Renaissance *imitatio*, prevented the adoption of an unforeseen path: artistic texts, under the supervision of decorum, could not escape the orbit outlined for the use of depictions (rhetoric *imitatio*). In this sense, Costa Lima highlights two points: (a) the excellence achieved by rhetorical tricks depended not on their resemblance to life (which was confused with reality: life – fortuitous and personalized; reality – constant and not refined); (b) the quality of coherence, prized by works of art, depended on the author’s capacity to select images as a function of their property in verbal artifacts, a property measurable by its surpassing of the singular dimension and coming into contact with the universal.15

Costa Lima questions the reasons which led the Renaissance epoch to accept the understanding of mimesis as *imitatio*; however, he considers the explanation that verisimilitude was confirmed by the alliance between the court and the city to be lacking. Enriched Nobles and bourgeoisie would behold in the exercise of the imagination both the presence of a barbarian and undisciplined mind, as well as a challenge to their arrogant rationalism. So why was that timeless and restrictive reason accepted and incorporated by the intellectuals of the time? And why did it harmonize with the dominant political interests? The answer appears only to the extent that human productions are radically historicized: only thus may one remove the perspective of the world as a vast mirror by which to view the pitiful self. For Costa Lima, if mimesis was saddled with connotations completely contrary to Aristotelian thought from its 17th and 18th century commentators and interpreters, this was not because the latter were particularly narrow-minded, but because at that time, reason had the burden of deciding with respect to the wrongness or rightness of individual subjectivity’s strength.5

In the immense transformation fulfilled in the statute of Renaissance man it can be noted that, initially, the emerging subjectivities could be controlled by ethical and moral principles. However, from the 16th century it was becoming clear that the word had lost its legitimate purpose, by revealing an *I* that could destroy moral illusions. That ‘ungoverned’ *I* could certainly believe everything without being capable of evaluating the ravings of the imagination.

Finally, it was necessary that man’s productions be subject to adaptations to reality criteria appropriate to discourses in order that the unreal never represent a de facto threat. Unable to always bend to the needs of the universal, according to Costa Lima, poetry and poets became relegated to the domain of lies. The loss of the relative transparency in medieval language implied a search for analogies and similarities such that no meaning fails to refer directly to the essence of things. The task of language was thus to bring to the fore the divine inscription of things. Such substantialism drove the interlinking of the signs that always related to other signs, on a scale uninterrupted by similarities. In this scheme, the eloquence that learned men sought to control was not an empty pomposity of language or merely an extravagant artifice associated with rhetoric: it was the harmonious union of wisdom with style – style whose objective was to lead men for civic virtue. The possibility to ensure, even if minimally, an articulation between words and things in a semantically saturated cosmos, situated interpretation as the manifestation of knowledge.

Ethical responsibility was, therefore, the basis for acceptable insertion of the forms of interpreted reality. Its legitimacy rested in the articulation of the individual an order that, substantially conceived, still indicated a divine providence associated with the moral universe. However, the same movement that urged those men to search the world in search of similarities opened up the way for the great revolution initiated by Copernicus, for the Discoveries, and for the affirmation of an historical truth. Human autonomy and its capacity for intervention in the world became ever stronger. The living image of God on earth, man became responsible for his actions in an absolute sense and was exalted by his actions in reciprocal fashion.

In this sense, in the direction of creative man, it is that one can understand the attempts to control the emerging subjectivities during the Renascence. Equating mimesis with *imitatio* slowly relocated poetry into a controllable place. On the other hand, as the principles of an historical truth were founded, the place occupied by poets and poetry became identified with the false and misleading. The reinterpretation of historical truth obliged poets to resort to a series of sleights of hand in order to enable speech and text to cohabit and to ensure a territory for themselves. Thus, as history established itself as the camp of the truth, it also assumed an ethical-pedagogical commitment against the dark powers of the imagination. It then remained up to poetry to combat
the excessive didacticism of the model of excellence imposed by tradition. The exemplarity of the ancient, in this case, worked as a governor of the contingencies caused by the breaking up of the old transcendent order.

It was important that there be some level of correlation between figurative speech and some convenient/mundane point of reference so that poetry might exist as narrative. Poetic license allowed for a certain degree of fictitiousness as long as it co-articulated verisimilitude with pleasurable tricks and language. It was necessary to maintain a discursive plausibility based on truths required by the concept of the world itself. The ‘lies of fiction’ hid under the clothes of the belief in the powerful virtue attributed to Renaissance Man. But up to what point could the I, now being liberated as it was, remain hostage to so many conventions?

Without plunging the future back into the past, the Renaissance epoch may be understood as a multifaceted time, one that sought to unscramble a world opening analogically to their own eyes and experiences. Therefore, stresses Costa Lima, between the dominance of the religious concept of the Middle Ages and the forward march towards secular life, ‘magic’ science is interposed on a science that sees no limits for the determinations it makes. During the Renaissance, this issue was well represented by role played by astrology. As the celestial bodies could no longer be taken as absolute determinants and came to be regarded as prone to polar effects, a new conception of man, with the role of free will, became more imminent. This imminence, once appeared, constitutes the modern conception of the individual.44

When this program was accepted and identified as the basis of the unity of Western culture, it became necessary to preserve it, regardless of cost. As its emergence occurred within the framework of the opening up of the world itself by the explorers, new demarcations were proposed that followed a sense of exclusion. The ‘other’ only existed by negation. In this way, the law of the other was diabolical – his faith was the religion of the antichrist – his king, a tyrant or usurper. Thus, this tripartite scheme of recognition and protection of a unit was supported by a rhetoric which uses a fantastic bestiary and transforms antitheses into absolute categories of thought: God and Satan, evil and good, truth and deceit, the angel and the beast.45

Costa Lima points out the close relationship between the breakdown of medieval cosmo-vision and the new forms of control meant to minimize disturbing readings about the world. In this case, the mimetic potential was linked precisely to its ability to re-categorize this material and place it in new places and for other people. Thereafter it is possible to understand the discursive separations which characterize and order our representations.

In short, Costa Lima’s hypothesis is based on the Aristotelian reading of mimesis. Accordingly, mimesis was anchored in a concept of physis that dealt with an idea of power and action, i.e., with that which still did not exist but which could possibly exist. Among Renaissance men, the status of the possible was occupied by the category of realism, which, of course, depended on what already existed, that which had already developed and which was taken to be true. Thus, for Costa Lima, the renaissance election of mimesis as the ancient imitatio avoided both the esteem of poetic products (which would not comply with the pre-established models) and the confrontation with the theological truths.

The work of Costa Lima certainly makes us think!

REFERENCES

2 For Costa Lima, when identified merely as *imitatio*, mimesis becomes an atemporal, single concept capable of resisting the variations of history, as is the case of Auerbach in *Mimesis: Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Willard R. Trask (trans.) (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953). For him, Auerbachian realism is the concrete index of the one-way path between reality and language, and that which permits the establishment of the thread that runs from Homer to Virginia Woolf. In *Mimesis e Modernidade*, however, in addressing the problem of the concept of mimesis, he is to define it as the discourse that always points out differences in the face of the institutionalized realities of each period.
5 We have sketched out here four capital moments, developed by Costa Lima, in which Greek thought is dedicated to mimesis. The first would be the Pythagorean, in which mimesis meant the expression or the
representation of psychic states. There was, in this case, an immediate medical function since the showing of emotions would enable its liberation, whether by the actor, whether by the public. At the Gorgian moment, mimesis would be considered to be a deceptive creator, one distinct, however, from the judgment of falsehood. For Costa Lima, if Gorgias merits having practiced the characterization of mimesis outside of the principal of the adaptation to something previous or logically understood as superior, his fragment presents, nonetheless, a vessel, i.e. since there is no tertium comparationis capable of showing how deceit is not to be confused with falsehood, the only criterion capable of distinguishing them would be given by persuasion. Thus, the only legitimate way to talk about mimesis would be to conceive of another mimetic discourse that would be false only if it reached an equal degree of persuasion. For Costa Lima, this Gorgian failure facilitates the triumph of Platonic subordination of the mimetic camp over the useful/conceptualizing camp. Despite the fact that Costa Lima indicates a fertile path for the characterization of mimetic discourse as a non-definitive discourse, unpreoccupied by a pragmatic appropriation of his results, his work shall be received as the monument to the subordination of the mimetic, to a platform both ethical and gnoseological. Cf. Costa Lima, *Mimesis e Modernidade*, 45-35.

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vi Mimetic discourse always exhibits a necessary variability and, as such, is distinguished from non-mimetic discourse. Poetic discourse says what does not exist, but which may come to exist. Cf. Luiz Costa Lima, *Mimesis e Modernidade*, 55.


x Ibid., 45.
