

Notes on the Structures of Literary Authority in Brazil, 1945-1980¹

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During the last decade the question of the formation and perpetuation of canons has become increasingly prevalent in American literary and cultural criticism. Discussions of the canon inevitably remit to broader questions of aesthetic, literary and cultural value as well as to the constitution, preservation and reproduction of authority and symbolic power in the field. The literary canon itself has become both the site and the stakes of contention as different groups have argued for its rearrangement along lines more favorable to their divergent interests and agendas.

One of the more significant outcomes of the debate over literary values has been the recognition of the canon as an institutional construct rather than a natural formation based on the inherent superiority of the values it represents. This recognition does not necessarily negate the values the canon expresses, but it does help situate it in relation to the social conditions of their production, circulation and consumption. Contemporary criticism and its values, which shape and preserve the canon, inhabit and cannot be isolated from such historically specific institutions as the university and the press. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has argued, aesthetic value is radically contingent on the dynamics of a complex, multi-faceted and constantly evolving system in which

multiple symbolic and material interests are at stake (11, 15-16).

The legitimacy and authority of a specific critical interpretation derive at least in part from the legitimacy and authority of those who propagate it, or, to put it another way, from their objective position as authorized *readers* in the literary field. A canonical vision of a literary school, movement, or writer represents a structure of authority in the field. We would be naive to assume that it is innocent or disinterested. There is often an interest in disinterestedness (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 40).

At stake in the literary field, and more specifically in the field of criticism is, among other things, the authority to determine the legitimate definition of the literary work and, by extension, the authority to define those works which guarantee the configurations of the literary canon. Such a definition is both positive, through selection of certain literary values, and negative, through its exclusion of others. The establishment of a canon in the guise of a universally valued cultural inheritance or patrimony constitutes an act of "symbolic violence," as Bourdieu defines the term, in that it gains legitimacy by misrecognizing the underlying power relations which serve, in part, to guarantee the continued reproduction of the legitimacy of those who produce or defend the canon (121). Or as John Guillory has argued, "The process of canonicity is geared to the process of reproduction, whatever [may] be said of individual works" (495).

In this paper I will attempt to outline the constitution of authority in the field of Brazilian literary criticism between 1945 and 1980 using, as a case study, transformations in interpretations of the Brazilian modernist movement of the 1920s. Since the 1930s successive layers of critical interpretations of Modernism have settled into a rather homo-

geneous canon. The current hegemonic norm of modernist studies centers on artistic or linguistic rupture as the movement's central feature and has allowed critics to establish a literary hierarchy of values according to the radicality, creativity, or complexity of aesthetic propositions.

I would hypothesize that the development of the modernist canon along these lines, with its insistence on rupture, is inseparable from the institutionalization of literary studies in the Brazilian university and from the general socio-political conjuncture of the post-1964 period. To thoroughly analyze the development of the modernist canon and the specific configurations of symbolic power in the field of Brazilian literary criticism today one would have to relate "the space of works or discourses taken as differential stances, and the space of the positions held by those who produce them" (Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, xvii). Although such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present essay, I will attempt to give a sense of its parameters by outlining the major steps in its evolution.

The roots of this particular vision of Modernism, with all its implications, are to be found, first, in the internal differentiation within the modernist movement in the 1920s, when the relative unity of its initial moments splintered into competing groups, factions and sub-factions. In some cases the movement's fragmentation replicated the struggles between contending political parties. This is most evident in the split, in 1926, between the traditional Partido Republicano Paulista, around which congregated such writers as Cassiano Ricardo, Menotti del Picchia, and Oswald de Andrade, and the vaguely dissident Partido Democrático, which counted Mário de Andrade and Sérgio Milliet among its founding members. The political division

between competing factions of São Paulo's political elite reverberated in a somewhat simplistic division between a literary "left" and a literary "right" which would have more significant repercussions in the following decade and, much later, in the establishment of the modernist literary canon.

By the late 1920s or early 1930s the modernist movement had come to occupy a dominant position in the literary field. The modernist's heretical struggle against the practice and symbols of literary orthodoxy was rather easily won, perhaps as much by atrophy and the death of the dominant figures of Brazilian literature as by the arguments of the new generation. The aesthetic achievements of Modernism may have been "routinized" in the 1930s, in accordance with Antônio Candido's well-known Weberian interpretation, but many critics, especially those directly or indirectly affiliated with the Catholic *Festa* group in Rio de Janeiro, were unwilling to grant the movement total consecration and legitimacy. The major critiques of Modernism thus came from the right, which tended to identify the movement, rightly or wrongly (but no doubt simplistically), with the left.

The continuing debate over Modernism, now largely in ideological rather than aesthetic terms, constitutes one facet of the highly politicized struggle that occurred throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s concerning the legitimate definition of literary practice. This is especially evident in the struggle, among a new generation of writers, between what has been called the intimist, psychological, or Catholic novel, whose proponents tended to be identified with the political right, and the social or documentary novel, often associated with the left. The dominant principle of legitimation came to be entirely *external* to the literary work itself, deriving from political positions assumed by the

writer. Questions of literary form arose only infrequently in relation to the novel, and rarely among those most passionately involved in the debate. This is true of both the right and the left, as writers and critics, often one and the same, attempted to deny literary status to works, especially novels, of different orientations. The point here is that struggles between competing factions of the political field, which were exacerbated by the perceived bankruptcy of liberalism and the appeal of radical solutions on both the left and the right, epitomized by the struggle between the communist backed popular front movement Aliança Nacional Libertadora (1934) and the fascist Ação Integralista Brasileira (1932), found resonance, in refracted terms, in the struggles of the literary field.

Such literary struggles, with explicit political overtones, would continue into the 1940s. Their resolution is important for understanding the develop of the modernist canon along the lines mentioned above, for the defeat of fascism in Europe and the end of the corporative Estado Novo (1937-1945) led to the delegitimation of the right in Brazilian cultural discourse. In his memoirs, Cassiano Ricardo recounts the virtual exodus, in early 1945, of intellectuals from the staff of the government newspaper he directed, *A Manhã*, presumably to establish oppositional credentials or fearful of being identified with the now discredited authoritarian regime (169-178).

Since 1945 the putative left has maintained a hegemonic position in the cultural field, which amounts to a sort of inverse relationship between political power and elite cultural discourse, since the left has never held power in Brazil. This situation has had several consequences. First, writers clearly and openly aligned with the right have often been excluded from the literary canon and very frequently from

even the most elementary forms of analysis. Secondly, the word "conservative" has largely become taboo in Brazilian cultural discourse.

It would be simplistic, however, to attribute inclusion in or exclusion from the canon exclusively to a writer's politics. Starting in the mid-1940s, the literary field underwent a profound restructuring. The country's first comprehensive universities had recently been established (University of São Paulo in 1934, University of Brazil [now Federal University of Rio de Janeiro] in 1937, Catholic University in Rio in 1941), and with them the first formal university-level courses in Brazilian literature. These events and the critical analyses they generated mark the true beginning of systematic studies of Brazilian literature in the country.

The creation of university programs in literature and the training of a new generation of critics led to the appearance of new tensions and struggles in the field of criticism in the 1940s and 1950s. On one side, defending their until-then dominant position in the field, were journalistic critics who saw themselves as "men of letters" and as the self-appointed conscience of the reading public and who defended the impressionism of the short review as an exercise of style, wit, and intelligence. In opposition to them was a new generation of university-trained critics more interested in specialized analysis, a critique of impressionism, and sustained research into the literary phenomenon.

Afrânio Coutinho, who introduced Anglo-American New Criticism to Brazil starting in the late 1940s and argued vehemently that the university, not the newspaper, was the proper site for the development of a "scientific" literary criticism, exemplifies this second tendency. Coutinho's frequently virulent campaign against journalistic criticism

corresponded with the appearance of a new generation of poets—the so-called “generation of 1945”—advocating a return to more traditional aesthetic form. Both represented attempts, with different degrees of success, to reshape the Brazilian literary system. Flora Süssekind correctly suggests that Coutinho’s campaign attempted to create new relations of power in the literary field, based no longer on the personality, articulateness, or rhetorical eloquence of the reviewer, but rather on aesthetic criteria and textual analysis. The university would substitute the newspaper as the “temple” of literary culture and the sole grantor of legitimacy in—and, in the final analysis, access to—the field.

The shift of literary criticism from the press to the university had implications regarding the position of criticism in the field of social relations. One of the costs of this displacement was the inevitable decrease in the size of the public exposed to (and disposed to read) literary criticism. Although weekly literary supplements in leading newspapers continued to be important sites of critical debate throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, by the late 1960s or early 1970s most such supplements had either ceased to exist or had been transformed into supplements with a broader, and frequently watered-down, cultural orientation. The reduction of space in the press devoted to literary criticism led to a restriction of its sphere of influence and, especially, to the available avenues of dissemination for much academic production. And this occurred precisely at the moment when the number of graduate students and professors of literature was increasing, along with academic output. Criticism’s audience increasingly came to be comprised of other literary critics as the field closed in on itself within the confines of the university.

The professionalization of criticism in the university entailed a

focus on the internal articulations of the literary text as the primary and predominant domain of literary analysis. As suggested, in Brazil this form of analysis began to be institutionalized only in the late 1940s, although it has long been the rule in much European criticism. It has since become the dominant mode of analysis in most if not all of the nation's undergraduate and graduate programs in literature.

But one should not assume that the restructuring of power relations in the field of criticism derived from or led to a unanimity of purpose or perspective. New tensions and struggles arose within university-based criticism, involving questions of methodology and, more fundamentally, ideology. Two major tendencies, thus two major *loci* of critical authority, each with a different institutional base, are paradigmatic of the new situation. On one side, institutionally located, along with Afrânio Coutinho, in the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, was intrinsic or aesthetic criticism (encompassing Anglo-American New Criticism and stylistics of Spanish or German origin), with its focus on the literary text as an autonomous aesthetic object, on the other, the more sociological tendency issuing from the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), especially under the sphere of influence of Antônio Candido.

USP was founded in 1934 by intellectuals previously associated with the Partido Democrático (thus the relevance of the earlier reference to the PRP/PD split in Modernism). The university was one component, along with the Escola Livre de Sociologia e Política (1933) and the municipal Departamento de Cultura (1935), of a program of institution-building on the part of a progressive faction of São Paulo's ruling class. Antônio Candido sees these initiatives, and especially the Department of Culture, as a conscious attempt on the part of a "moderate left" within the PD—a "cultural vanguard in the shadow of a

ruling oligarchy that accepted and supported it”—to take culture from the privileged and “transform it into a factor for the humanization of the majority through planned institutions” (xiv).

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was one of the European professors hired to form the university’s initial faculty, offers a slightly different perspective when he writes that “it was because the oligarchy felt the need of a civic and secular public opinion to counterbalance the traditional influence of the Church and the army, as well as personal political rule, that they undertook to make culture available to a wider audience by creating the University of São Paulo” (101-2). The university’s purpose—as expressed on numerous occasions by its founders—was to participate in the transformation of society through the formation of new elites.

Given the close association of many modernists, including Mário de Andrade, Sérgio Milliet, and Rubens Borba de Moraes, with the Partido Democrático in the 1920s and the group that founded the Universidade de São Paulo in the 1930s (not to mention kinship ties—to give just one example, Antônio Candido’s wife, Gilda de Mello e Souza, herself a professor of aesthetics at USP, is Mário de Andrade’s cousin), it is not surprising that USP became the major center for the reevaluation of Modernism. The university’s Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros houses the Arquivo Mário de Andrade and once housed that of Oswald de Andrade. Much of the best work on Modernism, despite an almost exclusive focus on those writers associated with the Partido Democrático or, in the case of Oswald de Andrade, with the political left, has in fact been generated at USP or by graduates of USP with professional affiliations at other universities.

Equally significant for the current argument regarding the institu-

tionalization of critical authority with a radical veneer are 1) the theoretico-critical work of the Concretist poets and especially Haroldo de Campos; 2) the impact of formalism, structuralism, semiotics and, eventually, post-structuralism on the field of criticism; and 3) the politically radical reinterpretation of Modernism undertaken in diverse field of popular culture in the mid to late 1960s.

Haroldo de Campos (b. 1929), who defended his doctoral dissertation on Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma* at the Universidade de São Paulo in 1972, under the direction of Antônio Candido, called attention to the aesthetic radicality of Oswald de Andrade's use of language. Despite the self-serving component of the Concretists' own avant-garde project, which can be at least partially interpreted as an attempt at establishing their own legitimacy and consecration as heirs apparent by contributing to the consecration of Oswald de Andrade, the very least one can say is that they—and especially Haroldo de Campos—indelibly altered the terms of debate in Brazilian critical discourse, taking it to unprecedented levels of theoretical sophistication. It was largely with the Concretists (Haroldo and his brother Augusto de Campos plus Décio Pignatari) that rupture itself became canonized. Through their formidable theoretical sophistication and polemical bent, the Concretists exerted what might be called a "censorship of erudition" on the critical field, not in the sense that they impeded others from expressing their opinion, but rather that they created a situation in which critics could not take issue with or challenge them without risking frequently virulent counterattacks or "embarrassment." They implicitly, if not explicitly, passed judgment on which writers were deserving of study and which should be swept into the dustbin of literary creativity, inevitably defined in their own image.

In addition, the increasing importance of theoretical elaboration, stimulated to a very large extent by the Concretists, tended to create a hierarchy of values within the critical field itself, providing more prestige to those who were up-to-date with recent critical trends in Europe and relegating more traditional forms of research and criticism to an inferior position. This has an impact on the kinds of research graduate students are inclined to undertake since career interests are frequently at stake and some areas are clearly more profitable (symbolically) than others. Roberto Schwarz has argued that, "O gosto pela novidade terminológica e doutrinária prevalece sobre o trabalho de conhecimento, e constitui outro exemplo, agora no plano acadêmico, do caráter imitativo de nossa vida cultural" (30).

The impact of formalism, structuralism, semiotics and post-structuralism occurred almost simultaneously with the consolidation of graduate programs in literature at major universities throughout the country. As Silviano Santiago suggests,

Até então, as faculdades de letras adotavam três posturas complementares que pouco tinham a ver com as ousadas modernistas: a postura estilística de inspiração germânica e espanhola, a sociológica de inspiração marxista e a estética de inspiração anglo-saxônica. A atualização metodológica em curso nos anos 70 trouxe não só o interesse pelo discurso mítico (antropologia estrutural e estudos interdisciplinares, sobressaindo a figura de Lévi-Strauss) e pelo discurso dos contos maravilhosos (formalismo russo, sobressaindo V. Propp), como também a valorização dos jogos intertextuais que organizam todo e qualquer texto literário (o russo M. Bakhtin e os pós-estruturalistas franceses, entre eles, Jacques Derrida e

Julia Kristeva). (134-135)

The introduction of structuralism and subsequent theoretical and methodological novelties did not occur without controversy and polemic. Examining the question in a more critical sense, Roberto Schwarz observes the following:

Nos vinte anos em que tenho dado aula de literatura assisti ao trânsito da crítica por impressionismo, historiografia positivista, *new criticism* americano, estilística, marxismo, fenomenologia, estruturalismo, pós-estruturalismo e agora teorias da recepção... Mas é fácil observar que só raramente a passagem de uma escola a outra corresponde, como seria de esperar, ao esgotamento de um projeto; no geral ela se deve ao prestígio americano ou europeu da doutrina seguinte. (30)

Being up-to-date in relation to the latest European theoretical fashions became one of the major strategies for legitimation and consecration in the field.

Important reevaluations of Modernism also took place in the late 1960s in radical theater and cinema, starting with José Celso Martinez Correa's staging of Oswald de Andrade's play *O Rei da Vela* (1937) in São Paulo's Teatro Oficina in 1967. The play, a virulent critique of capitalism, economic dependency, and authoritarianism, was recreated as a parody of all theatrical styles, as an aggressive attack on the hypocrisy of the national bourgeoisie, and as a radical critique of the economic and political model then being imposed by the military regime. Two years later, Joaquim Pedro de Andrade's Cinema Novo adaptation of Mário de Andrade's novel *Macunaíma* (1928) uses cannibalism as a metaphor for all social relationships. The film not only criticizes the exploitative nature of Brazil's "savage capitalism" and the

country's relations of dependency with advanced industrial powers, but also criticizes the Left and its penchant for self-destruction, or self-cannibalism. The film constitutes lucid rereading of literary Modernism in the light of the Brazilian socio-political conjuncture of the 1960s by politically radicalizing elements which are only latent in Mário de Andrade's novel. These works provided a model for the political reinterpretation of Modernism in the field of literary criticism.

All of these things—the critical work of the Concretists, the impact of new theoretical trends from Europe, and the radical revision of Modernism in other areas of the cultural field—came together in what Silviano Santiago has referred to as a “Dadaist” revalorization of Modernism which occurred in and around 1972 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*. The revaluation of Modernism qua rupture also coincided with the most repressive period of military rule. The timing is significant, for it represents at least a partial displacement of oppositional or radical discourse from the political field, where it was prohibited, to the metaphorical discourse of literature and literary criticism.

To summarize and conclude this necessarily brief and superficial overview of an extremely complex process, the insistence on textuality allowed critics to extract modernist texts from the social conditions of their production, circulation, and consumption, from, in short, the institutional framework in which they arose, and to analyze them in terms of their aesthetic difference from previously dominant modes of literary expression. The politicization of the cultural field in the 1960s contributed to a reinterpretation of Modernism in political terms, especially in certain areas of mass or popular culture, notably film, theater, and music, and had at least an indirect impact on literary

interpretations of Modernism. The undeniable *aesthetic* rupture of Modernism thus began to take on a *political* coloration as critics projected the political stakes of the post-1964 period onto literary production of the 1920s, still ignoring that production's objective position in the field of social relations.

The professionalization of criticism in the Brazilian university resulted in the development of highly specialized and exclusionary forms of discourse and systems of classification which embody certain unrecognized relations of symbolic power. The structure of the field—with its hierarchies, forms of recruitment, agents of legitimation and consecration, and monopolization of certain forms of discourse—replicates, in terms of its own logic, the structure of the field of power, of which it is part. The insistent focus on rupture constitutes an inverted homology with Brazilian society, in which change is normally based on conciliation among elites and a lack of rupture in the basic structures of domination. Through its appropriation of the discourse of social transformation, which coincided with the increasing isolation of literary criticism within the confines of the university, it also constitutes an inverted homology with the critical field's own objective position in the field of social relations.

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Notes

¹ This paper was to be presented at a session of the MLA meeting in San Diego in December 1994. The untimely death of Roberto Reis, session organizer, made its presentation in that forum inappropriate. The paper, part of a

larger research project now in progress, elaborates on a number of issues first raised in my "Rereading Brazilian Modernism" and "The Institutionalization of Brazilian Modernism."

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