Luiz Costa Lima

CONTROL OF THE IMAGINARY

Reason and Imagination
in Modern Times

Translated and Introduced by Ronald W. Sousa
Afterword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse

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Theory and History of Literature
Edited by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse

Preface

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

The basic terms in the first articulation deserve special attention. The first of those terms, mimesis, undergoes a significant reversal with respect to its common usage. We all know that from the Renaissance rediscovery of Aristotle's *Poetics* on, mimesis has been taken as the equivalent of the Latin word *imitatio*. What the prominent critic Ingemar Düring notes — "The artist, the musician, or the poet reproduces or imitates the things of the sensible world"[1] — could be repeated by the most undiscerning of commentators. That agreement, however, does not see that when mimesis and *imitatio* are taken as equivalents, with regard to the Greek outlook and especially with regard to Aristotle's thought, an irreparable deformation is established. If, to the Greek mind, mimesis presupposed a correspondence with the cosmic order, in Aristotle that correspondence also became dynamic in nature. That is, mimesis presupposed adequation not with the powerful, sensible appearance of things but rather with their internal potentialities. Its product, *mimema*, was not understood as the copy or imitation of something previously given, for, conversely, it presumed the actualization of the *dynamis* of a cosmos harmonic because ordered by laws. Even though that concept of a dynamic yet ordered universe was lost with the end of the ancient world, under-

standing mimesis as *imitatio* implies turning the former into a grotesque carica-
ture of what it was.

Using a logic like the one that A. MacIntyre develops about ethics in *After
Virtue*,[2] we can say that, at the outset of modern times, poetics suffers a catas-
trophe similar to the one that that English philosopher believes took place in moral
philosophy after the Enlightenment. For poetics too came to rely on a vocabu-
lary whose systematicity had been lost. Obviously, there can be no way to recu-
perate it and restore the Greek sense of mimesis, for the very mentality of modern
times, and within it the way that *physis* is conceived, has dramatically changed.
It seems to me, then, that someone interested in art has at hand only two alter-
natives: either to abandon mimesis to the list of tools no longer serviceable or to
revive its sense. I have opted for the second route.

Let me explain in simple terms. In the Greek cosmological model, mimesis
presupposed an external modeling element to which the *mimema* naturally had
to subject itself, namely the ordering law of *physis*. As I use the term, mimesis
does not presume a cosmological conception but rather a network of psycho-so-
cial meaning. As Mauss and Durkheim demonstrated in "De Quelques formes
primitives de classification,"[3] every human society presupposes a classification
of beings and things by means of which those beings and things are invested with
meaning and value. To be socialized is, then, to internalize classificatory net-
works that locate the individual along the different scales (family, community,
professional milieu, social class, and so on) within the social environment.
Mimesis is, first and foremost, one — or *the* — mode of learning socialization, that
is, a mode of internalizing social values.

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

difference. Rather than imitation, mimesis is the production of difference. It is, however, not an idiosyncratic difference similar to an idiolect but a socially recognizable, potentially acceptable difference. Recognizable and acceptable according to the expectations engendered in the members of a given community by the criteria of classification in force in that community.

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

Between mimesis and fictional precipitation lies the imaginary. Along with Sartre[4] I take the imaginary to be one of the two forms of thematization of the world. Whereas the other form, the perceptual, locates things as present, the imaginary annihilates (*néantise*) them, thematizing them as absent. (I perceive what surrounds me, but I can imagine only what is absent.) To be sure, I agree with those who criticize Sartre because his criterion does not allow for distinction between day-to-day use of the imaginary and its specific use in the production and reception of the fictional. But, although I cannot develop the critique here, the problem is not insoluble. As Wolfgang Iser would say, because the fictional concretizes in a text that materializes in a signifying organization, the fictional negates the negation of the imaginary on which it is based.[5] The fictional is a critical use of the imaginary.

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

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

What is the practical outcome of the foregoing analysis? Foremost, to show that what we fluidly and ambiguously call "literature" betokens a discursive

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

The initial work of a series in progress, *Control of the Imaginary* is far from being an exhaustive book. At the moment when I write this note, a second volume is on the eve of publication and a third is in final stages. I therefore incur the temptation of communicating to my new reader what in fact I have concluded since *Control*'s initial publication. Were I to accede to that temptation, I would merely create an area of deception by announcing problems that either have not been treated here or have been broached in an unsatisfactory manner. Every book has its own life, independent of its creator. This volume now begins its American experience, at the moment when its author has concluded his.

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Translator's Introduction
"Mimesis, Why Can'cha be True?"

Control of the Imaginary will, I suspect, seem to many readers—especially North American and European readers—a highly unusual work, tracing as it does a problem-ordered pattern through an unlikely set of texts from late medieval times through classical Europe to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Brazil. The last two chapters, which deal with Brazil, will raise some questions on other scores as well. For, in contrast to the very general scope of what precedes them, each deals quite narrowly, in the language of contemporary professional debate, with an ongoing problem in Brazilian cultural and literary criticism. The book's general focus on the problems involved with reason and mimesis on the one hand, in opposition (and a far from simple opposition it is) to something called "imagination" on the other, is clear enough. But why, it will undoubtedly be asked, that particular choice of materials and why the summary, hopscotch treatment to which they are submitted? What, in sum, is this volume's overall purport, its "general interest"? It is a multifaceted question and one to which I shall return more than once in this short preliminary meditation.

There are a number of answers that might be assayed in response to such questions. In the ensuing pages I shall explore what is merely one avenue of response—one which in fact corresponds to what fascinated me about *Control of the Imaginary* when I first read it in its original Portuguese version, long before it was proposed to me that I undertake its translation.

I must, however, add two notes here before beginning my meditation. The first involves the nature of my undertaking itself. The translator's introduction is a curious form of writing, for it draws upon few of the closely directive genre

markers that characterize other forms of writing and thus is highly variable; translators' introductions do indeed, in the midway hawker's jargon, come in all shapes and sizes. Perhaps this is the case because the translator is to some degree seen as speaking in the voice of a second author, having undergone the complex effort of attempting to grasp the details and idiosyncrasies of the original author's discourse and having produced, as the result of that process, the new but hybrid details and idiosyncrasies of the text that is about to be read. There is, then, a sense that two discourses have met, each activating the other in manifold ways, to a single end result of shared responsibility. I here avail myself of the freedom betokened by the presumptions surrounding that activity, and I do so to take up a line of thought that crystallized for me during that very translation process and to extend it beyond the frame of the translation itself to speak of some dimensions of *Control of the Imaginary* as they have entered into dialogue with my own thinking. Moreover, that analysis comes in a presentation that—as the reader will see—is a somewhat associative one. In short, I call upon the translator's position as license for a considerable amount of informality, license, ultimately, for my reading and systematization of some of my own reactions to the text. Some of the associations that suggested themselves to me as I worked through the Portuguese original, associations that clearly—perhaps, for me at least, even frighteningly, since they move from experimental literature to pop music—betray my own diverse cultural directions, are taken up and used in what follows.

Second, the issues that I shall be raising in my own voice are decidedly not ones that my friend Luiz Costa Lima was concerned with in writing the book. Indeed, as a cursory comparison between what follows and the argument of *Control of the Imaginary* makes amply clear, he does not accept great portions of my analysis. To be sure, my remarks do not constitute an attack on the book; nor, for that matter, do they amount to a defense of it. Instead they constitute a line of thought, quite apart from the book's own goals, that goes some way toward responding to the questions I have anticipated—as well as toward treatment of the issue, left dangling in my first paragraph, of the specificity of "general-interest readership" as it relates to such a work as this one.

* * *

An exceedingly pedantic note by Morelli: . . . "Like all creatures of choice in the Western world, the novel is content in a closed order. Resolutely opposed to this, we should search here for an opening and therefore cut the roots of all systematic construction. . . . Method: irony, ceaseless self-criticism, incongruity, imagination in the service of no one."

Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*

In order to leap into the matter that I wish to explore, let me, in one summary statement, cast a net that is not only much wider than the scope of Costa Lima's book but also extremely narrow both in its focus and in the implications that I shall be drawing from it. The statement is as follows: *Control of the Imaginary*, for all its effort to trace the lineaments of the culture of Aristotelian and post-Aristotelian mimesis in the realm of literary and historiographical theory, to point out the prescriptive gestures therein involved that have endeavored to exclude other possible bases for the organization and analysis of human experience, and to involve itself in the contemporary critique of that culture of mimesis, nonetheless itself falls into that very culture in many ways.

The tradition of academic publishing does, after all, depend to a great extent on such notions as language's ability to capture thought, to reproduce argument, and to inform readings that are primarily reproductive, among other similar notions. The traditional academic book is positioned as a sort of two-way mirror that presumes to guarantee a relatively distortion-free transmission first from the writer and his or her sources to itself (there may, of course, be other, intermediate sources that represent relays in a series seemingly originating in a set of paradigms analytical of human experience) and then from itself to the reader. What is presumed, then, is the smooth double transmission of relatively stable identity. To be sure, variation is admitted, perhaps even required, in the system, but the sense of transmission of identity from source to reader is the controlling concept involved. The self-arrogated viability of the very notion of such publishing depends upon acceptance of those stabilizing notions, and if any of the steps in that transmission come to be put into doubt, the entire enterprise so structured is threatened with collapse.

Some of the traditional guarantees of that smooth, multiply reproductive transmission include the scholarly activity of consultation, transmission, and referencing of sources, a principled, at least semitechnical language register, and a relatively consistent analytical attitude within that discourse on the part of the author, to "guarantee" relative uniformity of "treatment of the subject matter"—that is, relative reconcilability, via expository practice, of the divergent analytical paradigms from the various sources being incorporated into the text. The receiver/re-activator of the language so organized is, of course, the specific "general reader" to whom I have previously alluded, one in fact so specific as to have actually been trained in the reading techniques necessary to the presumably distortion-free reception of that purportedly stabilized language.

There can be no doubt that *Control of the Imaginary* intends to participate in that traditional stabilization of the academic discourse system—as does, in even more crucial ways, its translator, since, at least in contempory usage, translation is largely a genre-and decorum-stabilized language practice. The rule of a kind of mimesis and of reason is, then, unmistakably, and multiply, inscribed in the between-covers format in which *Control of the Imaginary* participates—and is

so inscribed in ways that are wholly unavoidable if one chooses to participate in the academic enterprise in that manner.

To be sure, I do not precisely follow Costa Lima in my use of "mimesis," for he uses the concept in a broad manner to deal with the poetics of literature, literary theory, and historiography within a wide chronological frame, and he endows the term with the basic contours that it has in classical literary representation theories. My relocation of the term is nonetheless consonant with his usage, both in the analytical and the cultural-organizational import accorded mimesis, but I extend those values to a different bundle of interrelated discourses and genre markers, namely, those of the traditional academic study. And I allude to the Enlightenment-project organization of culture, of which that genre is a basic part. Simply put, I understand the purported stabilization of language in texts such as this one and consequently the supposed univocity, and hence analytical power, of the terminology therein employed as vouchsafed by a series of implicit arguments. Those arguments are grounded in one area of the culture of mimesis as it is formulated within the Enlightenment project of eventual historical sublimation of reason within human culture. The claims involved in a book like *Control of the Imaginary* ultimately involve faithful reproduction-with-change of phenomena of various sorts, from historical events to cultural processes to prior analyses of them, the last of those reproductions often effected with the stereotypical — and telltale — allied visual reference "thus we see in X's work that . . . ".

There is some question, however, whether the process must in fact be carried out with the uniformity that it arrogates to itself or whether there is, or at least may be, even in its own terms, some degree of slippage, of subversion, within it.

And as regards *Control of the Imaginary*, the question is one of no small interest, for the degree of mimesis's inscription in/on the volume is far from clear. The space of subversion comes most obviously in the question of authorial attitude, for rather than adopting the theoretically uniform, magisterial attitude of the traditionally prescribed writer of works like this, Costa Lima engages in a rather more complex procedure. Whereas he guarantees technical-level consistency through analytical terminology, a discourse register well within the allowable bounds of the academic tradition, and other gestures to be expected in the genre, his point of view is far from consistent; it is, in fact, quite elusive. If one attempts to read *Control of the Imaginary* with an eye to deciding where its analytical discourse locates itself, one notices a fascinating process. Read that way, the text shows itself to be built to a great extent on a series of hanging attitudes, not only among the various chapters as they move in concentration from Guillaume de Machaut to Machado de Assis, but also within individual chapters. In fact, there seem to be key critical-theoretical turning points in the text, moments in which analysis becomes intense, argument deepens, and implications for the overall project multiply. In truth, the verbal realization of those moments is some-

what clearer in the original Portuguese than in the English, for, in obedience to the genre dictates involved and in consonance with the guidance they provide, I have, perhaps inevitably, masked those moments somewhat in the translation process. They are still strongly present, however, represented by several key theoretical figures. At the places in the text where those figures are invoked, their analytical import can be said to irradiate the text, the authorial voice seemingly taking up their position as well. Indeed, it is but a minimal exaggeration to suggest that the book's expository procedure—especially in its first three chapters—involves movement from one of those figures to the next, movement, then, from one focal point to another. It is a curious series of sojourns moving from Rosemond Tuve to Friedrich Schlegel to Wolfgang Iser to Alfred Schütz to Hannah Arendt to Ian Watt, with other stops of greater or lesser moment along the way—or, rather, to be sure, sojourns in aspects of the work of such figures, aspects invoked and developed under specific discursive circumstances. Each of those stopping places, however, takes on central analytical import for some portion of *Control of the Imaginary*, only then to be moved away from in its turn.

Now all but needless to say, even seen in respect to the reduced dimensionality of their appearance in this book, figures such as those just mentioned—and several others could easily be added to the list—are hardly compatible in and of themselves. And yet their import is by no means controlled by the technical authorial voice. The—as I call it—shuffling from one figure to the next that characterizes *Control of the Imaginary* does not, then, describe the traditionally prescribed academic-authorial stance.

Indeed, a similar tension between traditions from the culture of mimesis and procedures that seem to subvert that very culture can be seen at work on a general level in the book—in a way that ultimately proves to be structurally ironic. I refer to a dual attitude toward the discourse tradition of academic publication itself—that is, toward the very mimetic stabilization of language that I have just remarked on. Costa Lima, in analyzing the prescriptive power that has over time been assigned to various discourse functions grounded in mimesis, at the same time finds it very difficult not to reproduce a version of those same prescriptions in both the analytical and the discursive dimensions of his own work. Indeed, although there are instances where such is definitely not the case (e.g., the beginning of chapter 3), *Control of the Imaginary* seems intent, overall, on embracing the traditional academic enterprise—through deliberation over analytical terms, citing of field sources, and defense of historical reconstruction.

The clearest instance where that duality is profiled—in a complexity that I think to be the key interest of the book from the viewpoint of methodology—comes in relation to Costa Lima's attitude toward history. *Control of the Imaginary* is a book imbued with the methodology of German *rezeptionsästhetik* and most specifically in the line within that movement dedicated to reconceptualizing literary history. The number of references to *Poetik und Hermeneutik* and to

works by a number of the collaborators in the Konstanz project clearly bespeak that orientation. That project has, of course, done much to change the way literary study looks at critical categories and to put into question the naive historicism that it has regularly cultivated, as Costa Lima in fact points out in his brief treatment of Hans-Robert Jauss. Nevertheless, as regards the aforementioned issue of analytical discourse, *rezeptionsästhetik* itself embraces the Enlightenment historical project in the presumption that, through its radical historicizing of immanentist critical categories, it has in effect created some sort of script according to which it can on the one hand simply indicate a historical text from a given period and on the other hand then stand apart from that text, at least momentarily, at the outset of analysis, and fashion/invoke, via contextual reconstruction, analytical discourse unproblematically adequate to the text. The much-proclaimed adequacy of literary works to their own historical horizon of expectations alone, becomes, then, nonetheless both analyzable, because that horizon is itself analyzable through an ecstatically initiated analytical discourse, and also subsumable into a historical series that is made transhistorical methodologically. Despite original statements seemingly to the contrary, then, works can finally be read in what is, in functional ways, an objective mode and can, in the last analysis, be organized historically.

To be sure, *Control of the Imaginary*, in its proclaimed intent to see if a specific analytical category, mimesis, can be accorded a transtemporal critical role (that statement of purpose is to be found in the Portuguese introduction, which has not survived the translation and editing process), flies in the face of the proclaimed intent of *rezeptionsästhetik*. It in fact, however, can also be seen to act as a kind of test of *rezeptionsästhetik*, for *Control of the Imaginary* admittedly pursues transtemporal goals and yet takes up major facets of the Konstanz critical project to explore the possibility of that transtemporality. Thus each of the two positions illuminates a complementary aspect of the other. Both, however, will obviously, as a part of their procedure, have to claim exemption from any ongoing critique of the transcendent elements that they hold in common. Much as *rezeptionsästhetik* has a conflictive investment in history, *Control of the Imaginary* both questions the historical place and critical potential of mimesis and ultimately relies upon it methodologically to carry out that very historical examination.

Such academic stabilization of discourse becomes most evident where *Control of the Imaginary* conflicts with a contrary position: in this case, with the possibility that language use and reception may be much more diverse than the academic project would like, rendering historical understanding more heterogeneous and terminology less centralizing and general than an approach such as *rezeptionsästhetik* would find comfortable. That possibility manifests itself in the passages in which the language of the book meets what Costa Lima calls, generically, the theories of *écriture*, which present themselves primarily in the work of

Roland Barthes. There *Control of the Imaginary's* stance is one that virtually proclaims its own interrogation by another mode of analysis, and it rejects the threat to its own integrity—albeit as a prelude to introduction of the work of such figures as Richard Harvey Brown, Robert Nisbet, and Hayden White, additional figures in the series of sojourns the text comprises. Costa Lima would have them approach what *Control of the Imaginary* sees as the abyss of *écriture* but only through the safety of *rezeptionsästhetik* and the Enlightenment project that it articulates.

What sort of discourse does all this ultimately describe? It is one that in the final analysis accepts—indeed, trades upon—academic stabilization but in a manner not wholly controlled by the discourse traditions of that genre. At the same time it even suggests the relativity of those traditions, both in direct thematic terms and in the process of shuffling from intellectual position to intellectual position in its own exposition and in the wider reverberations of that process within the text.

Moreover, there is in fact another sort of shuffling involved as well, one that is somewhat different schematically from the thematic and discursive ones but that ultimately contributes to their operation—indeed, I think, is ultimately their basis. For the texture of chapters and sections dealing with Brazil is remarkably different from those dealing with Europe. In the former, one senses an assured control of language analytical of the subject area, grounded in understanding of the cultural peculiarities and language-production systems of a society permeated by analytical categories transferred from the European culture sphere and unable to describe itself independently as a result. *Control of the Imaginary's* Brazil is a society living, in a hypersensitive way, what amounts to a dream of European cultural history, but whose very hypersensitivity bespeaks a degree of awareness that the dream is nothing but that, a dream. In the initial chapters dealing with Europe, by contrast, one senses not so much a deference toward the several figures of key critical import there invoked—although deference there is—as an unwillingness to operate in a similar manner, a hands-off attitude, perhaps multiply motivated, that simply does not engage the issues involved in the same way as it does with Brazil. It is as though those figures—with the notable exception of Friedrich Schlegel—must have their import transferred to the pages of *Control of the Imaginary*, located but unabsorbed culturally, relevant in a distant way not subject to close scrutiny. Thus is created another sense of shuffling, a culturally based one that has the ultimate effect of freeing the script of the "European" part of the book to act as the holder of a series of relatively discrete viewpoints on experience, identifiable as such in the final analysis because they come in one way or another to traverse the more tightly and quite differently held analytical space of Brazil.

Through that set of multiple shuffling processes in the book, critical terms are relativized and cultural operations are shown to be historical and local while