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The World-Literary formation of Antonio Candido

Antonio Candido, a central figure in post-Second World War Brazilian literary criticism, wrote an essay in 1988 entitled “The Right to Literature”¹. He claims there that our age is marked by extreme hypocrisy in relation to the ideal of justice. Never before has it been as technically feasible to achieve social equality. Never before have human rights been so widely proclaimed. Never, in fact, has civilisation been so advanced and so pervasive. And yet, social injustices remain, inequalities are aggravated and barbarism is rife. But it is *because* of this situation, in which “barbarism is directly connected to a maximum level of civilisation” (Candido 2011b: 172)², that human rights are being pursued more intensively than ever before. Being a dialectical thinker, Candido sees in other words not merely incoherence, but a dynamic relationship between contradictory phenomena. Hypocrisy can therefore, in Candido’s view, be given an optimistic interpretation. Contrary to earlier eras, it is no longer possible for leaders to valorise barbaric deeds. Instead, they must be denied or camouflaged, since there has developed at least a minimal consensus concerning the right to human rights.

Literature enters Candido’s argument in two ways. First as an anthropologically generalisable phenomenon: “[A]ll poetic, fictional or dramatic creation at all levels of society and every cultural context, from what we call folklore, legends, jokes, to the most complex and difficult written artifacts of the great civilisations” (Candido 2011b: 176)³. The verbal organisation of the imagination has what he calls a “contradictory but humanising role in society (or perhaps humanising because of its contradictory nature)” (Candido 2011b: 178)⁴. This is why, he says, there is a substantive *right* to literature that should count among the human rights. But, importantly, Candido also connects literature and human rights historically by

1 Original title, “O direito à literatura” (my translation here and elsewhere, unless otherwise indicated).

2 “uma barbárie ligada ao máximo de civilização”.

3 “todas as criações de toque poético, ficcional ou dramático em todos os níveis de uma sociedade, em todos os tipos de cultura, desde o que chamamos folclore, lenda, chiste, até as formas mais complexas e difíceis da produção escrita das grandes civilizações”.

4 “o papel contraditório mas humanizador (ou humanizador porque contraditório)”.

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reminding his readers how literature itself has contributed to shaping the public conception of human rights. As examples, he mentions how “the poor” enter literature through the work of Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens, but also how a Brazilian poet such as Castro Alves brought the horrendous practice of slavery to the readership’s awareness. Not unlike Erich Auerbach, who in his *Mimesis* saw the “mixing of styles” (Auerbach 2003: 313) in the long history of realism as being connected to a gradual process of democratisation, Candido grants literature a privileged role in the historical and, indeed, global emergence of egalitarian ideals.

For those who know their Candido, this mode of reasoning will seem familiar. In his work, he consistently maintained a very un-postmodern, non-Foucaultian faith in Enlightenment universalism. A faith in universal reason forms both the precondition and ultimate horizon of his thinking. Without speculating too much on why, one could point to the time he spent in Paris as a boy, as well as the strong French influence on the University of São Paulo and Brazilian intellectual life generally – this faith is evident in his countless critical essays which then *de facto* engage the historical particularities of writers and texts. To the extent that his work deals with Brazilian literature, he never treats the national context (at least not explicitly) as an end in itself. As Roberto Schwarz has often pointed out (1999: 18–26, 54–70), national literature, and even literary nationalism, is *an object of study* for Candido, but the impetus of his critical interventions is to understand and explain the emergence of national literature from a supposedly universal standpoint. In that respect, “The Right to Literature” is both consistent with his other work and a logical end point to a trajectory that begins with his first emergence as a critic in the 1940s.

This universalist tendency does, perhaps, go some way towards explaining why I am writing about Antonio Candido in the context of a volume devoted to World Literature. It is a universalism that notionally places literature outside of national constraints altogether, but it is also a universalism that needs to be approached sceptically and as a work-in-progress that shifts during Candido’s career. The central claim of this short essay, then, is this: in his work, Antonio Candido consistently combines a supposedly universal but *de facto* Eurocentric conception of literature with a historicising sensitivity towards the locally grounded ways in which literature evolves, especially in colonial and postcolonial Brazil. This doubleness in his thinking could be seen as a weakness or a contradiction. I argue instead that it invites a conceptual-historical analysis of how “literature”, pressured by social conflict, becomes semantically layered. From his early reading of Brazilian literary history to later essays on “underdevelopment” and human rights, one can detect a continuous process of such semantic layering in Candido’s work. This has important implications for how we approach World Literature. If World Literature were only a matter of geographical extension, then

Candido is impossibly limited. (And the limitations are real: my claims on behalf of Candido are restricted). If, however, World Literature is a matter of investigating how literature is imbricated with local as well as distant histories, then there are methodological lessons to be learnt here. The word “formation” in my title alludes thereby to three things: Candido’s famous study *Formação*, the gradual formation and development of his own position, but also to “formation” as a paradigmatic concept in Brazilian intellectual history that could be exploited to world literary ends. As an illustration of the latter, I will conclude by briefly discussing the extent to which the African reception of João Guimarães Rosa – not discussed by Candido – can be understood through Candido’s framework.

Think of this as an attempt at reshuffling the terms of the World Literature debate. The concept of World Literature has generated much scholarly energy over the last two decades, but it has also provoked hostile reactions, particularly on two counts. The first concerns language and the untranslatable, as discussed most famously by Emily Apter in *Against World Literature*. Apter’s key charge is that World Literature scholarship has relied on a “translatability assumption”, which thereby elides the messy, incommensurable and irreducibly specific qualities of literary texts (2013: 3). World Literature has, in her view, promoted “an ethic of liberal inclusiveness” which tends to blunt political critique (2013: 41). To counter this, her ambition is instead “to activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature” (2013: 3). In a somewhat related vein, the second accusation against World Literature concerns its complicity with capitalist globalisation, especially its flattening bias towards spatial extension. A recent instance of this criticism can be found in Pheng Cheah’s *What is a World?*, the gist of which is that World Literature studies, as it has been developed by David Damrosch, Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, has too readily acted as a handmaiden to the neo-liberal reconfiguration of the humanities and the cultural needs of a globalised but stratified economy. Cheah argues that all three scholars pursue an analogy between World Literature and “the circulation of commodities in a global market”, which diminishes what he calls “literature’s worldly force” and reduces it to an epiphenomenon of capitalist globalisation (2016: 28). The most problematic manoeuvre, for Cheah, is the “conflation of the globe, a bounded object in Mercatorian space, with the world, a form of belonging or community” (2016: 30). His alternative is instead to approach the world in terms of time and duration – as something that persists and is constructed gradually.

The critics, I find, tend to overstate their case by making it appear as though literary scholarship were a choice between mutually exclusive methodologies. Both Cheah and Apter seem to ignore that studying the circulation of literary texts across spaces and languages is a fully legitimate (and difficult) endeavour which can by no means just be reduced to an ideological function. To mention one

prominent example: Gisèle Sapiro's work on the sociology of translation testifies to the enormous scholarly potential of mapping the conditions and practices of publication across languages and continents. Indeed, anyone who has empirically tried to track down translations of works in different languages will know just how challenging and unpredictable such a task can be. It presents precious little of the flattening smoothness of which Apter and Cheah complain.

This being said, the theoretical point in Cheah's work I find useful for my purposes here is his attempt to think the world as time rather than space. To think of world as a temporal category means emphasising that "[a] world only is and we are only worldly beings if there is already time". Therefore, the unity and permanence of a world are premised on the "persistence of time" (Cheah 2016: 2) – and it is by engaging this temporality that literature can acquire the normative authority needed, within a radically cosmopolitan ethos, to hold the world together. However,

Unlike teleologies of world history, the unity at stake here is not that of the whole of humanity. It is more modest and fragile: the gathering- and holding-together that maintains a place of habitation in the face of the leveling violence of global technologies of temporal calculation. The survival of these worlds is necessary to the constitution of a larger world of humanity that is truly plural. (Cheah 2016: 12)

Not unlike *Candido*, then, Cheah is enlisting literature in the long and uncertain march towards human freedom. Transposed to a slightly less philosophical vocabulary, the point here is that literature – also World Literature – needs to be understood historically, as being involved in, and produced by, historically specific circumstances. Its force (to use one of Cheah's favourite terms) need not be reducible to the categories of social and political history, but it is in history, and in and with time, that the literary unfolds. The question is, however, how this fundamental and obvious claim can be factored into World Literature studies generally, and into a discussion of *Candido* specifically? As will become clear, the main methodological proposition of this paper is to pay attention to the very concept of literature and its (productively) incoherent history, an angle which proves particularly illuminating both for a reading of *Candido* and the World Literature debate.

Always closely connected to the University of São Paulo, *Candido* entered the public arena in the early 1940s and would thoroughly reconfigure Brazilian literary studies with his magisterial *Formação da literatura brasileira* and subsequent work in the 1960s and 1970s. The novelty of *Formação* was, among other things, its combined approach to literature as both a social institution and an aesthetic phenomenon. Against the New Critical tendency at the time spearheaded by Afrânio Coutinho, but also in resistance to Marxist reductionism, *Candido's* interest lay in the gradual autonomisation of Brazilian literature as a coherent, self-reflexive tradition and corpus of works. By dismissing the scattered production of

texts in the early colonial period as “literary manifestations”, he reserved the term “literature” for the fully fledged *system* of writers, publishers, critics and readers that together enabled the consistent local production of aesthetically valued texts. This is arguably the most important methodological manoeuvre in all of *Formação*, as it brings together the spatial predicament of colonial society, exiled across the ocean from what is valued as “great literature”, with the temporal sedimentation of local production. In the terms of this essay, one could say that he approaches literature both as an *inherited* concept and an *emergent* historical phenomenon.

The question of inheritance is a familiar problem in World Literature studies, not least in Christopher Prendergast’s identification (*pace* Arjun Appadurai) of “Eurochronology” as an obstacle to thinking literature globally (Prendergast 2004: 6). If the aesthetic notion of literature we make use of today took shape in a very particular, romanticist moment in Europe, is it even possible to apply it to verbal art from other parts of the world without committing epistemic violence? The most elaborate and pessimistic answer to that question can be found in Aamir Mufti’s recent book *Forget English!*, which sees World Literature as steeped in the legacy of Orientalist epistemology. What Mufti does is locate the European shift from neo-classicism to romanticism in the larger context of the emergence of philology, particularly the study of Asian languages. The work of Johann Gottfried Herder and William Jones, the emergence of romanticism and the subsequent flourishing of national literatures are therefore ultimately all part and parcel of European imperialism and the “assimilation of human life into an expansionist bourgeois order encompassing the world” (Mufti 2016: 243). World Literature, in his view, resurfaces as a problematic at times of crisis for the management of cultural diversity within this bourgeois order, and it does so by transferring difference to “the plane of equivalence that is literature” (Mufti 2016: 250), a turn of phrase that recalls the concerns of Apter and Cheah.

There is much to be said in favour of Mufti’s thorough argument. World Literature scholars are destined to return to the momentous but complex transition from classicism to romanticism – which is, moreover, Candido’s focal point in *Formação*. Even so, my own approach in this paper is almost diametrically opposed to Mufti’s. Rather than assume that “literature”, by dint of its association with imperial history, has a deterministic stranglehold on our thinking, I am arguing – under inspiration from Reinhart Koselleck – that the semantic content of the concept is *never* fully settled, never quite coherent. It carries authority, yes, and this authority is derived not least from Euro-imperial histories, but the meaning of that authority is not uniform to begin with, and becomes even less so in its continued deployment. As the intellectual historian Christopher Hill puts it, “the quality of universality” in a concept emerges only when it is used “*outside* [its] point of origin” (Hill 2013: 148). Hence, literature *cannot* simply serve as a “plane of equivalence”, but is better

thought of as a site of negotiation between the inertia of inherited meanings and the disruptions of history. It is in this respect that Candido's work can illustrate both the problems and possibilities of engaging the concept.

At first glance, *Formação* and later essays by Candido seem to confirm Mufti's critique. In *Formação*, Candido famously claims that he intends to produce a study of the Brazilians "in their desire to have a literature" (Candido 2012: 27)⁵. This desire gathers force in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which is precisely when national literatures in Europe begin to be conceptualised *as such*, as national and vernacular. Brazilian literature is in other words imbricated with the European Herderian moment, undergirded by a slave-owning, white creole elite and predicated on a violent disavowal of indigenous voices that later become recoded symbolically in romantic terms as a figure of national origin (and hence of symbolic rupture from Europe).

Candido would provide numerous accounts that roughly corresponded with this narrative to Brazilians and outsiders alike. "Our literature", he wrote in *Formação*, "is merely an offshoot from Portuguese literature which, in turn, is a minor shrub in the garden of the muses" (Candido 2012: 11)⁶, a statement whose self-deprecating tone indicates a cosmopolitan desire that underwrites all of Candido's work. The "national" element in his thinking is always conceived in this way in relation to "the universal", as I mentioned before, but the universal is linked to a (western) European heritage. Candido's project was never to provincialise Europe, in the spirit of the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, but rather to bring the critical appraisal of Brazilian and Latin American literature to the same level as corresponding European criticism. Arguing *against* a particular Brazilian discourse of hybridity which saw the Portuguese, Indian (indigenous) and African cultural traditions as the three currents that make up Brazilian identity, he had the following to say – in English – to a North American audience at Cornell University in 1966:

Upon the evolution of the written literature the Indian and African cultural traditions worked only in an indirect manner, in that they brought about a transformation of Portuguese tastes, favoring a new approach to life which, in turn, came to influence literary creation. What occurred, then, was not an initial confluence to create a new literature, but rather a widening of the universe of a pre-existent literature, imported so to speak with the conquest and undergoing during the colonial period a general process of adjustment to the New World. (Candido 1968: 29)⁷

5 "uma 'história dos brasileiros no seu desejo de ter uma literatura'".

6 "A nossa literatura é galho secundário da portuguesa, por sua vez arbusto de segunda ordem no jardim das Musas".

7 Candido 1968: 29.

In this respect, Brazilian literature was purely the expression “of the culture of the colonizer and, later, of the Europeanized colonist”, whereas the direct influence of the African and indigenous populations was noticeable “only in the area of folklore” (1968: 29). Candido’s tendency to work from within an already established hierarchy of values is evident here in so far as “African” and “Indian” cultures are confined to the parochial sphere of folklore, leaving the European version of literature with exclusive access to the universal. Tellingly, in that same North American lecture, Candido speaks of how the Brazilian classicists of the eighteenth century “made it possible for the intellectual to create a world of spiritual autonomy and liberty” within “the universal republic of letters” (1968: 40), which once again demonstrates the ultimately – and paradoxically – Eurocentric framework within which Candido’s approach to literature is played out at this time.

However, Candido’s conceptual Eurocentrism is always combined with an acute awareness of the historically grounded and textually specific quality of literature – ultimately leading to a semantic crisis or shift in the concept. It is at this point worth rehearsing Koselleck’s understanding of temporal sedimentation in concepts. Since “history is never identical with its linguistic registration” (Koselleck 1985: 164) a concept will, throughout its life-span, encompass “persisting, overlapping, discarded, and new meanings” (1985: 83). Koselleck even suggests that the very definition of a concept resides in its capacity to embrace a “plenitude of meaning”, which is what distinguishes it from mere words:

The concept is bound to a word, but is at the same time more than a word: a word becomes a concept when the plenitude of a politico-social context of meaning and experience in and or which a word is used can be condensed into one word. [...] A concept binds a variety of historical experiences and a collection of theoretical and practical references into a relation that is, as such, only given and actually ascertainable through the concept. (Koselleck 1985: 84)

It is here, in respect of what I call the conceptual worlding of literature, that I am somewhat more optimistic than Mufti and find methodological inspiration in Candido. For it is not only the case that Candido’s own position evolves – the definition of “literature” provided in “O direito à literatura” is far less elitist and restricted than in his early criticism. It is above all the way he develops arguments through an incessant dialogue between opposing positions, discrete methodological foci and different types of material that manifest in practice how World Literature can be understood as a temporal process – and that national literature in the post-colonised world must be understood as one dimension of World Literature.

The 1969 essay “Literature and Underdevelopment” is a pivotal moment for Candido’s own thinking on these matters. This is the first time he confronts the implications of illiteracy and poverty for his elite notion of literature. It is also the first time he places Brazilian literature in not only a Latin American but also

a more general “Third World” context. This recalibration of his thinking begins with his identification of a fundamental shift in the Latin American horizon of expectation, in the very quality of the future. If the dominant narrative until the 1930s had framed Brazil, optimistically, as “the new country” that hadn’t yet come into its own but possessed a glorious future, an increasingly pervasive sense of “underdevelopment” emerged from the 1940s onwards. According to the temporal structure of underdevelopment, the future would not entail transcendence but only – at best – an evening out of differences with the “advanced world”.

This had its advantages, since it discouraged delusions of grandeur. Instead of producing literature for an imagined ideal audience in Europe, works that were like “false jewels unmasked by time, contraband that gave them an air of competitors for some international prize for beautiful writing” (Candido 1995: 127)⁸, and, likewise, instead of producing regionalist works that ultimately reproduced the exoticising gaze of the elite European readership, the acceptance of “underdevelopment” could result in a stronger understanding of what was aesthetically adequate in the current historical situation. Aesthetic anachronism may in fact be perfectly legitimate, as he says with reference to the extended life of naturalism in Brazil. Indeed, this type of legitimacy is the only durable antidote to the extroverted predicament of Latin American literature, which the successes of Latin American writers testify to. Here, Candido is at one with the moment of the Latin American “boom”, but not as a translational phenomenon produced in North America. Rather, what he sees in these writers is a reconfiguration of the aesthetic field that takes the inherent anachronisms of Latin America as its substance and point of departure, rather than anxiously locate the centre of aesthetic gravity elsewhere, in Paris or New York.

It is here, finally, that we arrive at the African reception of João Guimarães Rosa (1908–1967), mentioned in Candido’s “underdevelopment” essay as one of the foremost among the later wave of Latin American writers. Possible to describe in parallel with William Faulkner as a vernacular modernist, Rosa has something of an African history as well. The clearest and most famous instance is when the Angolan writer José Luandino Vieira (persecuted at the time by the Portuguese for his anticolonial activism) discovered Rosa’s work in the 1960s. It has also been argued – most insistently in an early article by Mary L. Daniel – that the Mozambican writer Mia Couto should be regarded as a literary heir to Rosa, particularly on the basis of three characteristics: “(1) the major role of children, (2) the importance, respect, and affection accorded animals, and (3) the joco-serious linguistic creativity that is a constant, especially in his short narratives” (Daniel 1995: 3).

⁸ “muita joia falsa desmascarada pelo tempo, muito contrabando que lhes dá um ar de concorrentes em prêmio internacional de escrever bonito” (Candido 2011a: 179).

Couto's vast literary output since the 1990s has complicated that early assessment, and it is certainly wiser in general to think in terms of resonance rather than direct influence among writers. But not only is the question of resonance directly relevant to my argument here – it is *also* the case that with Vieira, the impact of Rosa's work was direct and dramatic, as he himself once explained:

I had already understood that it was necessary to make literary use of the spoken language of the characters, who were the people I knew, who reflected – from my point of view – the true characters that should figure in Angolan literature. It's just that I hadn't yet seen how it could be done. I knew how it should *not* be done, as for example in the case of Oscar Lewis and his *The Children of Sanchez*, where tape recordings produce a good sociological documentary but fail to produce literature. In other words, the process of registering language in naturalistic detail wasn't worth the effort, since a tape recorder would do it much better than me anyway. What I still hadn't grasped – and this is what João Guimarães Rosa taught me – was that a writer has the liberty to create a language that is not the same as that spoken by his characters [... W]hat interested me was not just the phonetic deformations but the structure of the phrase, the structure of the discourse, the internal logic of the discourse. [...] So this was Guimarães Rosa's lesson: that the way one can mangle the classical language, the language of learning, in order to suggest a more popular form of the language, must be done on the basis of an intimate knowledge of the language and not by not knowing it. What I am saying is that the people mangle things out of "ignorance", but that a writer can only legitimise these mistakes by way of his "erudition", quote unquote. (Quoted in Trigo 1981: 438–440)⁹

At this level of linguistic embeddedness, it would seem that we are leaving the context of World Literature behind completely in favour of a national and even

9 “Eu já sentia que era necessário aproveitar literariamente o instrumento falado dos personagens, que eram aqueles que eu conhecia, que me interessavam, que reflectiam – no meu ponto de vista – os verdadeiros personagens a pôr na literatura angolana. Eu só não tinha ainda encontrada era o caminho. Eu sabia qual não era o caminho, sabia, por exemplo, que uma experiência como a de Lewis, *Os Filhos de Sanchez*, as experiências chamadas de registo magnético, dão um bom documento, e dão um documento sociológico, mas que não é literatura. Portanto, que o registo naturalista de uma linguagem era um processo, mas que não valia a pena esse processo porque, com certeza que um gravador fazia melhor do que eu. Eu só não tinha percebido ainda, e foi isso que João Guimarães Rosa me ensinou, é que um escritor tem a liberdade de criar uma linguagem que não seja a que os seus personagens utilizam [...] não me interessavam só as deformações fonéticas, interessava-me a estrutura da própria frase, a estrutura do próprio discurso, a lógica interna desse discurso. [...] E foi, isso é a lição de Guimarães Rosa: os atropelos que se possam fazer à língua erudita, no sentido de propor uma linguagem mais popular, têm que ser atropelos que se fazem por conhecimento muito íntimo da língua e não por se desconhecimento. Quero dizer que o povo atropela, digamos assim, por ‘ignorância’ entre aspas, mas que um escritor só pode legitimar esses atropelos desde que seja por, entre aspas, ‘erudição’”.

nationalist conception of literature. But this would be once again to miss how multiple historical experiences and meanings are sedimented in a concept such as “literature”. The writer’s “erudition”, or knowingness, of which Vieira speaks is precisely an indication that his poetics do not spring organically out of the Angolan soil, but are shaped historically in a process that brings the distant and the proximate, the theoretical and the experiential, together. There are in fact two distinct ways of reading Vieira’s appreciation of Rosa in world literary terms. The first would be to see it in a purely spatial frame, as an after-effect of the Portuguese imperial expansion and its establishment of a Lusophone, trans-oceanic discourse network. This would ultimately reaffirm the known facts of political dominance and cultural hegemony, yet bypass the impetus Rosa provided Vieira to write *differently*, to approach “literature” from an unexpected and liberating angle. Hence, the second option would be to approach Vieira’s statement in temporal terms, as an indication of certain resonances between the historical predicaments of Brazil, Angola and Mozambique – in shorthand, “underdevelopment” and “anachronism” – that make Rosa’s peculiar combination of vernacular language games, existential philosophy, folk tales and myth aesthetically valid, as Candido would say. In this sense, World Literature need not merely be a matter of consecration in Paris or New York, or an epiphenomenon of capitalist globalisation, or Orientalism in disguise, but the story of “literature’s” contradictory and inevitably incomplete ways of achieving relevance in social contexts that are both world-systemic and irreducibly specific.

If Candido’s essay on literature and underdevelopment could be read as an attempt at discerning how local aesthetic validity could be nurtured *within* a transcontinental condition of unevenness between centres and peripheries, and if Vieira’s statement (and writerly practice) retraces the gist of Candido’s critique of both regionalism and ungrounded aestheticism, what we arrive is a dual optic for World Literature studies. The spatial and geographical dimension of colonial history and globalisation cannot be ignored. Yet, it is the temporal formation of belonging and community by literary means, within this predicament of distant and diffuse power, that require closer and careful attention. Vieira’s language labour – to borrow a term used by Nicholas Robinette (2011) – is in this respect not just a local or national matter, but yet another chapter in the aesthetic and well as semantic formation of literature in the world.

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