National Adequation and Critical Originality

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Let us take as our starting point António Cândido’s study on Aluíso Azevedo’s *O cortiço*. Written in the 1970s, it was initially published in two partial versions with the purpose of generating local ballast for debates on method. In the earlier version Cândido sought to point out dimensions of that debate that escaped the structuralist readings then in vogue. In the second, the author set out to show by example the legitimacy if not the necessity of passing back and forth between aesthetic analysis and sociohistorical reflection, an oscillating movement *from the left*, that, among those up-to-date on French and American trends, was considered a methodological error, an offense against artistic freedom.

The complete version of the essay has only recently been published. Here, too, the terms laid down by international debates, after being set forth, are relativized. The opening paragraphs pose a venerable theoretical problem, later to be surmounted in the process of the analysis: is the novel constituted by the direct stimuli of reality? Would it not be more exact to locate this constitution in the novel’s reworking of other earlier novels? In place of the either/or, revealed as a false problem, Cândido will claim that the two processes coexist and that *their combination is regulated, case by case, by means of a unique formula*, which in its turn becomes the key to the individuality and the historicity of the work itself.

Later we will get a better sense of the scope of this argument. For now it is enough to note how one and the same analysis enabled...
Cândido to intervene in three quite distinct theoretical debates, always carving out a path of his own, different from better traveled ones. Here we intend only to emphasize and comment on the peculiarity of that trajectory, which although unique to Cândido was not the least bit idiosyncratic, but rather engaged with the objective needs of criticism in countries such as ours.

Cândido, to use his own programmatic expression, seeks to study “a problem of the filiation of texts and the fidelity to contexts.” In that vein, the essay points out the presence in *O cortiço* of topics, figures of speech, and episodes from *L’Assommoir*, as well as from others of Zola’s novels; but it points out also the differences in composition, conceived here as adaptations of the foreign model to the local context, as literary effects of the reordering and filtration to which local experience submits “universal” models. Thus the comparison of forms leads to a reflection on their direct relationships and on those of their respective societies, bringing into focus a complex of interconnected questions of clear importance—questions that the current habit of dividing the aesthetic from the social leaves obscured.

For example, Cândido observes that the level of differentiation achieved by French society had separated the worlds of labor and wealth, so that a novelist like Zola, striving for a cyclical work, could treat them in separate works; while the stage of primitive accumulation in Brazil led Azevedo, the local naturalist—however inspired by *L’Assommoir*—to contrive a plot in which exploiter and exploited live at close quarters, a plot, as it happens, with certain aesthetic advantages thanks to its spontaneous highlighting of class polarization.

Note the counterintuitive thinking prompted by this cluster of observations. To the less differentiated society, notwithstanding its tributary relation to its metropolitan other on another cultural plane, there does not necessarily correspond a simpler or less powerful work: not because literature is independent of society or because it hovers in an unconditional space, as the new idealism suggests, but because the socioliterary connections are not the expected ones.

Another paradox: the naturalist desire to transcribe reality directly, without the intermediation of earlier literature or the artifices of language, proves chimerical, but that does not nullify the naturalist works themselves, as supposed by an antimimetic criticism,
for which realism can be reduced to an illusionist undertaking; rather it forces us to understand the value of Brazilian Naturalism in non-doctrinaire terms. Moreover, the demonstration that even a naturalist text is the offspring of other texts and not the simple registration of the world does not exclude as false the moment of such registration itself. Against the premodern idea (still in tune with mass media consciousness) that literary works are simply procreated by others in a kind of social vacuum without reference to extratextual realities, Cândido’s argument suggests a kind of salvaging of contents and forms within the gravitational field of another historical experience—an experience that bears upon the imported model itself, potentially destroying or revitalizing it, transforming it properly or improperly, and in all cases reorganizing the model as if by remote control while leaving something of its own imprint on it.

There is also the possibility that the *copy* (i.e., a second work, as opposed to a first) will turn out to be superior, thus relativizing the notion of *original*, taking from it its mythical dignity and challenging the preconception—basic to the colonial inferiority complex—at the heart of such mythologies. But neither, in the meantime, do the originals become superfluous, as supposed by the friends of intertextuality and of Derrida who, innocently or not, posit a literary space that does not exist: without borders, homogeneous and free, where everything, even the original—and therefore, of course, nothing—is a copy. Only out of arrogance or thoughtlessness would someone say that the occasional superiority of a Latin American artist over his or her European model indicates the cultural parity of their respective national spheres, *for this would be to conceal, in the process, the inequalities and subjections that must surely be our own subject matter* par excellence. Deconstruction achieves something, it is true—or at any rate makes us feel better—when it lets us know that we Latin Americans are not metaphysically predestined to suffer the inferiority of imitation, since in fact the Europeans imitate as well (hence the relativization of originality). But the greater blindness is that which fails to see that innovation is *not* distributed equally over the planet, and that if the causes of that inequality are not metaphysical, they are perhaps something else. Apart from the commendability of its civilizing endeavor, the use of a model with European social presuppositions was indeed a way of copying—in the pejorative sense—inasmuch as
the “copy” was not recycled through local conditions, which would have freed the “copy” from its artificial form, or better put, overcome the inadequation of contemporary culture to local conditions. Thus the “problem of the filiation of texts and the fidelity to contexts,” with all the contradictions that it engenders, opens onto an international space that is polarized by hegemony, inequality, and alienation—a space where we find the historical and collective hardships of underdevelopment. The matter of originality is redefined, beyond the confines of romantic individualism, and in terms both solid and ... original.

Meanwhile, with the problem laid out and a few comparative lines sketched in, the essay seems to forsake its object. For reasons that will become clear only later, it moves on to the study of an infamous saying popular in the Rio de Janeiro of the day: “For the Portuguese [immigrant], black man, and donkey, three p’s: bread to eat [pão], clothes to wear [pano], and a stick to work with [pau].”4 Cândido’s analysis shows how both the structure and alliterations of this expression beckon us to play at a kind of combinatorie, a degrading equation between donkey, black man, and Portuguese immigrant, foregrounded by the pejorative notions of labor that had formed in slave society. The final butt of the “joke” is the Portuguese, since the likening of a slave to a beast of burden had no reason to be thought scandalous. Who is the implied author of the jest?

I think of the free Brazilian of that time: an individual with a more or less accentuated tendency toward idleness, favored by the slavocracy, and regarding labor as a derogation and a lowering—almost, as in the saying, to the sphere of animality. The Portuguese immigrant could be reduced to the level of the slave because, in clogs and a knit shirt, he seemed to belong (to use the typical image of the time) in the dregs of society and because “he worked like a donkey.” But while the black slave and later the freed man were in fact hopelessly confined to the lower strata, the Portuguese, falsely consigned by a spurious genealogy to being a “son of the earth,” could eventually accumulate money, better himself and himself become the boss in a semi-colonial country.5

Now then, this outlook of the free Brazilian, the ever resentful “customer owing money to the local merchant” with his “curious mixture of lucidity and derangement,” is reencountered here within
the narrative focus of *O cortiço*, where it has taken on a structuring role. The critic has digressed from the book, but only in order to identify a component of its deeper structure.

Thus, a detour in exposition is taken in order to prove the extra-literary existence of a controlling focal point within the novel (which is not to say that it controls the novel as a whole). So as to avoid misunderstandings, note that we are on a pole opposite to that of *reductionism*, since it is not a matter of fitting the work into a pre-established sociological template. On the contrary, only a highly reflective intimacy with the text has allowed Cândido to recognize in the Portuguese anti-immigrant joke, with its ideological bad faith, a pertinent term of comparison, endowed with great suggestive power. As one can see, exploring the structural correspondences between literature and social life must deal with obstacles much more real than those typically associated with sociohistorical method. Such exploration requires the kind of knowledge that can only come from the close study of spheres distant from one another, together with an intuition into the totality that then emerges—requirements generally beyond the ken of the run-of-the-mill academic specialist. Given this, we can say that a good eye for a historical likeness *between unlike structures* is perhaps the key faculty of materialist criticism—a criticism for which literature is understood to work with materials and formations engendered (in the final analysis) outside of its own literary domain—materials and formations that give to the literary its substance and that make possible its dynamism. Let us reiterate that the goal of this mode of conception is not to reduce one structure to another, but to reflect historically on their mutually formed constellation. Here we follow the *stereoscopic* line of thinking developed by Walter Benjamin, with its particular acuity for noting, e.g., the importance of market mechanisms in the overall shape of Baudelaire’s poetry.

In other words, the three-p’s joke and narrative focalization in *O cortiço* have in common, though they do not treat it the same way, a nationalism born out of contempt for work, for the black man, for animality, and for the Portuguese immigrant. Cândido’s analysis brings to the fore the obfuscation and resentment replete in such dubious patriotism, noting as well the strange ambivalence of the
colonized Brazilian toward Brazil itself. Of course there is, in principle, no question that such an ideological formation could be revealed through a study restricted to the novel itself, thus dispensing with the discovery of its ideological affinities for the mocking popular saying. What has been gained, then, by thinking together something that is literature and something that is not? Why the interest in fitting out a space with objects of a heterogeneous nature? Let us consider some answers.

Starting in the decade of the 1960s, a portion of António Cândido’s essays have taken up the theoretical challenge of demonstrating a reversibility between literary and social analysis. Believing in the interest of such connections, and wary of their difficulty, Cândido tries to render them as something truly judicious, avoiding, if possible, the gross imprecision and oversimplification typical of positivist and naturalist historiography and carried over into vulgar Marxism—“scientific” traditions for which the particularity of the literary sphere barely existed. Now, if there has been progress in criticism in this century, it has certainly been the “discovery,” under the aegis of a variety schools, of the incredible internal complexity of literature, of the protean nature of form, and especially of the decisive role of the latter. The greater the familiarity with literary works and their essential power, the more apparent has become the error of simple content-based criticism, and the stricter the veto against isolated scrutiny of contents taken apart from their formal specification. The question that remains, however, is how to evaluate the gap—a point of honor of the new critical studies—between the wealth of aesthetic meaning and the banality of its everyday, nonaesthetic forms? One may, it is true, want at this point to question the question itself, one whose very intellectual asymmetry can become an excuse, especially where academics are concerned, for combined specialization in some fields and naïveté in others.

In the end, possible answers to this question will differ according to no less differing conceptions of what form and reality are in themselves. At one extreme, the study of the internal organization of the work can become an end in itself, as happens in certain kinds of formalism, for which reference to the external world is not an artistic or critical issue, but merely an impurity to be expunged. This is another
front where António Cândido’s essay comes to the fore, an essay whose careful understanding and description of literary form is matched by its account, no less structured and original, of the pertinent historical realities. What are these realities? It is a question for which there is no general reply, but can only be addressed case by case, and which always depends on an actual critical find, in which the internal and differentiated relation between the two fields, literary and sociohistorical, adds to the intelligence of both. At a time in which the most influential trend in international criticism was to abandon the question of external reference, derisively considered as a kind of photographic reproduction, Cândido was thinking hard in the opposite direction, seeking to pin down and deepen the terms of referentiality. But instead of fruitlessly debating over general propositions, he undertook to develop a more precise account of actual modes of continuity and of rupture as well, thereby beckoning the debate toward matters of fact, that is, toward the knowledge value of critical readings themselves.

Together with the novel, the anti-Portuguese joke reveals an ideology of the age. The essay, though, does not point directly to this, but rather toward something less palpable, if real enough in its way. What Cândido makes explicit is the system of social relations presupposed by this fragment of popular culture, a system whose virtual logic he articulates by passing it through the prism of one of its principal figures, in this case the native Brazilian, free, idle, and presumably white (as opposed to the Portuguese immigrant, the slave, the worker, and the man of African descent). Cândido’s paraphrasing of this logic, simple and crushing, a kind of didactic invention, has remarkable critical power:

“I, native Brazilian, free and white, cannot be mistaken for the brutish workman, who is a slave and of another color; and I hate the Portuguese, who works like him and winds up richer and more important than me, and who is, moreover, whiter than I am. The louder I proclaim my fragile privileges, the more possibilities will I have to be considered white, refined, a viable candidate for the benefits that Society and the State must reserve for its favorites.” ... A sordid game, expressed in these and other mots d’esprit [the p’s expression], which form a kind of ideological jargon of class, with all the traditional uncouthness of the “refined.”
We will return below to the demystifying intent of this analysis. For the time being let us note only that this prismatic structure, the product of a specific social history interwoven with the basic lines of the latter’s formative process, is an objective form, with the power to regulate a novel no less than a formulaic insult or, for that matter, to regulate a political movement or even a theoretical reflection. For all of these become liable to comparison through the reconstruction of this one—its practical and contingent—mediating factor.

Let us examine certain aspects and consequences of this social idea of form. We have here to do with a practical model, imbued with a specific logic, programmed according to the historical conditions that foreground it and that, in their turn, rehistoricize it. The model is not exhausted in its individual manifestations, which can belong to different spheres of reality and with whose makeup it is already articulated. In the case already described, it translates into a political-economical interest, an ideology, a verbal game, a narrative focalization. As for its theoretical affinities, we are clearly within the universe of Marxism, for which the material constraints of social reproduction are themselves fundamental forms that, for good or ill, are impressed on the different areas of spiritual life, where they circulate and are reelaborated in more or less sublimated or falsified versions: forms, therefore, working on forms. Or better—the forms discovered in literary works are seen to be the repetition or the transformation, with variable results, of preexisting forms, whether artistic or extra-artistic.

From the perspective of literary studies, the strength of this conception is its refusal to distance itself from the heterogeneous cluster of sociohistorical relations of which forms themselves are always the articulation. It is a conception that sees in historicity, as the object of critical decoding, the very substance of literary works themselves. Its critical advantage becomes apparent in the comparison with the various “formalisms”—a confusing term, meant as a pejorative reference to the theoretical overestimation of the role of form, when it is perhaps a matter, to the contrary, of an underestimation. In effect, the formalists are wont to confine the category of form, seeing it as something distinctive and exclusive, as the privilege of art, as that which does not exist in the extra-artistic sphere, to be celebrated as a species of structure without reference. Consider, for example, the question
of narrative point of view, commonly analyzed in spatial terms, according to whether such a point of view is close to, far from, above, below, inside, or outside the given characters. Without undervaluing observations of this sort, which can clarify a great deal, it is clear that an understanding of the practical-historical substance of what seems a purely special, abstract nexus inserts another reality entirely into studies of narrative position. Cândido’s account of the narrative focalization nourished and regulated by the mix of aspirations peculiar to a certain Brazilian elite at the end of the nineteenth century well exemplifies the advantages of this kind of approach.

On the matter of formalism, the comparative (dis)advantage of a linguistically inspired structuralism becomes especially relevant. Unless I am mistaken, by adopting the ideal of scientificity as it is imputed to the concept of structure within structuralism, literary criticism incorporates a model indifferent to decisive aspects of its object. It is worth recalling that, though made of words, the literary object does not work like a language, since it is a singular artifact, the work of an individual in the presence of a situation that is artistic, social, etc. Surely, the focus on the universal mechanisms of language and of the human being per se gestures in another direction, toward the historically unspecific—with progressively more damaging consequences for the study of literature. The eminence of the theoreticians notwithstanding, the theory of the general laws of narrative (Barthes) or that of a universal poetic function of language (Jakobson) have in them something of that generality without an effective object to which Marx, on reminding us that labor “in general” does not exist, referred to as Abgeschmacktheit [insipidity]. Insofar as structuralism squeezes its study of form into the mold of linguistics, where reference, by definition, is but a horizon, historical relations become relegated to the realm of contents that are without formally shaping potential, and that thus end up, moreover, stripped of any real critical interest. The irony of things literary seems to have arranged it so that, in many cases, the belief in the relevance of form leads to form’s castration and to the loss of its specificity. This is out of all proportion with the real movement of literature in the last two and a half centuries, during which time formal invention has thought of itself as a succession of eminently historical acts (acts that are in no way closed off to language itself or to the idea of a literary series).
Thus, to sum up, let us say that a form framed by historical relations and by their dynamisms, both intra- and extraliterary, seems closer in essence to what artists in fact do and to whatever value is to be found in their works.

What is the method for (a) defining the “implied narrator” of a humorous expression, (b) analyzing its social significance, and (c) recognizing its features, its tacit presence—which is itself an authentic find—in the narrative focalization of a major work of Brazilian literature? The diversity of operations, here linked to different disciplinary knowledges, coincides with the composite nature of the form itself as just described. Such diversity unites a technical category, developed by the theory of the novel, to a figure unique to Brazilian history and society, a figure whose national generality and whose problematic substance, never before fully comprehended, are emphasized and explained here by Cândido for the first time. The persuasive force of Cândido’s exposition does not derive from the authority of a famous—i.e., a ready-made—method, but from a diversity of significant and evidentiary findings, from its exactitude of description, as well from the rigor of its analysis. Cândido’s study does not pledge itself to any particular field of expertise, though it is solidly grounded in the whole of the human sciences and is generous of the spirit of scientific discipline—as indicated by its willingness to debate constructively and according to academic standards—something quite unusual in Brazil.

This said, it is clear that the essence of the critical act, in what we have seen so far of Cândido’s essay—the fixing and anatomizing of the social type underlying Azevedo’s prose—does not depend only on literary and historical erudition, but also on a political and moral sensibility. Cândido’s likening of the three-p’s joke to the formal structure of O cortiço is not motivated by an interest in mere similarity, but rather by the author’s unambiguous aversion for a certain kind of authoritarian and opportunistic nationalism, characteristic of a jingoistic stratum of “patriots” who considered themselves to be the Ur-menšchen of Brazil, with a natural right to the spoils of the State—and indirectly characteristic, too, of a widespread willingness to wink at vulgar mockeries of Portuguese immigrants—long known to be a local Brazilian pastime. Roughly at that time, moreover, Machado de Assis had recommended that one “scratch the surface
of laughter to see what there is inside.” In other words, Cândido’s identification of the problem, his explanation of its sociohistorical basis, his signaling of its tacit presence both in a major novel and in a favorite if dubious expression of the national soul have as their precondition a reflective act of independence, an enlightened refusal to be complicit with the mental habits of the elite. It is not a matter here of the distanced, impartial description of an ideology, but of its unmasking at crucial points, revealing the class motives behind its operant preconceptions. Flanked by its intellectual effects, such a critical stance forces one to reconsider the whole panorama of Brazilian ideas and literature, within which the critical stance itself is reinscribed as a modifying reflection, an advance within the self-knowledge immanent to a real historical process.

Thus, though arising in the context of an academic debate over methods, where it set out to make the case for a more wide-ranging methodological orientation, Cândido’s essay finds its place within a literary-ideological-political confrontation over the very nature of Brazilian social experience. Let it be said parenthetically that, since he was one of the first to pass through the Faculdade de Filosofia in São Paulo (created in 1934), António Cândido is often cited as among the first Brazilian critics to benefit from a modernized education in the human sciences, an education rescued from our traditional auto-didacticism and in synch with the new intellectual dynamic—all of which certainly is true. But with the passing years, the value of Cândido’s writings—writings that improve and gain prominence over time—seem to shift its source. They are of interest precisely for not depleting themselves in the ready-to-wear universalism of the current “theoretical” debates, or rather, for their reflective continuity with the stances, ideas, and contradictions generated from within Brazil’s own historical experience. With Cândido we stand inside, outside, and before universality, hosts to an experience whose course is different and possibly more real than expected.

The critical impulse to link the work to its milieu and to its time is nothing new. The consecrated model for this kind of study requires that one begin with the panorama of the era into which the books one wishes to explicate are then inserted. The art of explication consists, in this case, in accentuating common traits and family resemblances, thus making literature and society inherent, so to speak, in one
another, with the latter category even thought to include such items as landscape, etc. This model was not always a conservative one, and in its origins, when it opposed courtly norms such as universalist and atemporal conceptions of beauty, it had an extra-ordinary critical and innovative impact. To appreciate its inspirational thrust, read the autobiography of Goethe, who strove to see himself, his generation, and contemporary European culture in terms of the new anticourtly orientation. Nevertheless, once defined within the subsequent orbit of nationalist historiography, with its attendant ideological priorities, the demand for contextualization acquired conformist, if not apologetic, connotations. In different versions, the patriotic mindset imposed its coordinates on literary analysis, for which this mindset became not only a priori, but precisely wrong. In point of fact, national borders are a limit—or context—arbitrary in relation to the life of the modern spirit. For purposes of her art, the emancipated writer does not define herself as a citizen, and nothing stops her from ignoring that boundary and searching outside of it for her art’s inspiration and the subject matter. It is a small step from there to saying that the social conditioning of literature does not exist and is nothing but a backward-looking myth. At the same time, the very sense of the relativity of political boundaries certainly bespeaks a real, contemporary social experience, conditioned and subtended by more wide-ranging processes. Let us say then that artistic freedom, as shaped within modernity, exempts the writer from bending to the precepts of the homeland or of any other form of officialdom. But it does not exempt him from consistency and profundity in the relationship with his materials, which he takes wherever and however he finds them, and upon which he works. In passing through such a metabolism there is processed, consciously or otherwise, a link between artistic form and historical necessity, a link whose coordinates are to be defined case by case—coordinates, moreover, that today can include poles so seemingly remote from each other that they render unreal the very idea of context, with its postulation of a closed and obvious story line. This apparently strained combination of freedom at the point of departure and necessity in the actual execution—a necessity to be discovered in each individual case and that is immanent to the very historical experiences worked upon—typifies the audacity in the calling of modern art, as well as its effectively outlandish position.
in relation to the national sphere and its sense of order—these latter being factors that, for all that has been said, do not cease to exist. We will see that the surprising and abrupt transitions that characterize the composition of Cândido’s essay respond in a critical but no less modern way to problems of this order.

We have noted how unexpectedly the three-p’s joke and its analysis make their appearance in Cândido’s essay. After introductory thoughts on the “filiation of texts and fidelity to contexts” and comparisons to Zola’s novel, followed by observations, likewise comparative, on French and Brazilian society, Cândido suddenly goes into a detailed examination of a phrase that was making the rounds in the street at the time the novel was authored but had given us no hint of its pertinence. In an initial version of this piece, meant for a meeting of professors of literature, Cândido asserted that it is as possible to go from literary to social observation as to go in the opposite direction and that his talk was meant to exemplify the second alternative. This would be a simple explanation for social analysis as a point of departure. Yet if we examine the functioning of the latter in the general economy of Cândido’s study, we see that it entails more complex questions. In the first place, note that society does not appear here in its habitual guise, with a known external environment whose broad outlines are disclosed in works of literature, even when they contest them. In this case, on the contrary, society is portrayed through one of its results, a phrase in which its very particular class problematic is condensed—but not explained—by starting from a no less particular, and abject, point of view. Cândido’s reasoning here is that it is that same point of view that unconsciously gives life to the narrative focalization of O cortiço, within which it is therefore a dynamic internal element. The social effect has become the literary cause, with consequences, in turn, that are redoubled in fiction.

To repeat: society does not appear simply as an enveloping modus vivendi, but, without ceasing to be consistent with the latter as its result, as an active, formally intrinsic element with a dynamism specifically its own. Society becomes a power internal to the novel, where it will cause friction with other forces and reveal something of itself. It should not be forgotten that we are talking here about an authoritarian and prejudicial point of view or model, unaware of
its own caricatured features, and which, on top of this, is without thematic presence in the novel, being placed instead in the influential but intangible position of a formal overdeterminant. This cluster of social elements—negative elements, so to speak, but as real and effective as they are troublesome—takes its own risks (and becomes a kind of risk for other, competing elements) in the overall movement of the novel, which it enlivens in a manner simultaneously uncouth and rich. Its fictional resultants, discretely shaped but still tacit—whence they become the object of paraphrase by eventual critical interpretation—diverge from official, commonsense views of Brazil, as they do from the explicit outlook advocated by the novel itself, whose class blindness functions as an involuntary ingredient of the work’s artistic complexity.

Understood as the external trapping of literature, society appears in the form of a frame—a role that it would, of course, be preposterous to ignore. But conceived as an internal force, encapsulated within a formal device that reconfigures itself autonomously, its logic escapes that of external comparison, achieving a kind of verisimilitude that owes nothing to received notions and officially sanctioned limits. Both operations, extrinsic and intrinsic, are real, but the interest in fathoming deep structural forces must clearly take its point of departure in the latter. Paradoxically, it is in this guise, stripped of the endorsement of empirical immediacy, that the work directly participates, in ways to be specified, in actual world developments.

Returning to our initial question, we now see how Cândido’s abrupt deployment of a peculiar yet evidently germane social mechanism accentuates rather than masks the nonliterary component of literature, a component that immediately allows one to appreciate the specifically literary labor of assimilation, valorization, and transcendence that had itself seemed socially extrinsic but was not. Thus counterweighted, the earlier question of “fidelity to contexts” also changes character. Instead of a given, ready-made model to be copied, functioning as a mere external stimulus, we have a structured presence—internal? external?—confined to specific social practices and part and parcel, through them, of contemporary history. From yet another vantage point, what we have is an essayistic interpretation that adopts the contingency and the self-consistency peculiar to the adventure of modern art.
That said, the defining moment of the essay is not its identification of a class perspective, for Azevedo’s novel is not exclusively tied to a given social focal point. The question is another: what is, rather, the **literary yield** of that social focal point? That is, in the author’s dialectical terminology, what is the “truth of the p’s?” This “truth” unfolds in the encounter with the novel’s plot, which moves briskly. João Romão is a Portuguese innkeeper, a miserly fanatic, who is not afraid of hard labor, of depriving himself of everything, of stealing what he can, or of becoming friends with a slave girl, of whom he takes advantage in all manner of ways. After a while he erects a slum tenement, where he indiscriminately exploits Brazilians and Portuguese, white and black, until he gets rich and enters decent society. His rise to wealth, pursued with crazed determination, confers on the novel a central plotline of considerable consistency and clarity. In one obvious sense, this results from the motives and personality of João Romão. Less obviously, the critic notes that such a portrayal registers, for the first time in Brazilian literature, the actual rhythm of capitalist accumulation in its specifically national, Brazilian form. Thus, the book’s unity—an internal reality of both self-construction and prior structuredness—also reveals a mimetic aspect—a fact belonging to the order of *external* reference—thus joining together literary elements that recent theory is not wont to consider in their unity. On the other hand, in keeping with the essay’s principal observation, such dynamism of plot not only does not confirm but incisively and painfully gives the lie to the system of beliefs that foregrounds the novel. According to standard appraisals of *O cortiço*, the novel subsists on naturalist stereotypes in matters of race and environment, and on nationalist stereotypes when it is a matter of portraying the former colonizer. Yet consider that the respective polarities that organize and give a touch of “science” to the narrative spectacle—those between black and white, tropical and European, Brazilian and Portuguese—are disregarded and overthrown by the unfolding of the plot, something to which the novel clearly attests. The action of the plot sets a man rapidly enriching himself against the others whom he exploits, both camps being shot through to the core, albeit differently, by semicolonial labor conditions, which therefore are not unique to one or another camp nor of any service in distinguishing them. The protagonist is Portuguese, and the exploited
are, indiscriminately, other Portuguese, Brazilians, blacks, mulattoes, and whites. In this light, where and how stands the ideology that sets the Brazilian against the Portuguese, the black, and the donkey—an ideology that precisely asserts the differences and conceits that the accumulation plotline disqualifies? The development of this plotline shows that

in the final analysis, of the figural entities to which the three p’s [pão, pano, and pau] would apply, the Portuguese is not Portuguese, the black is not black and the donkey is not a donkey. On a deeper plane, we have a different trio, whose presence plainly asserts its truth: first, the capitalist exploiter; second, the worker reduced to a slave; third, the socially alienated man, degraded to the level of animal.

To recap the steps in Cândido’s argument: the humoristic expression formalizes ideologically and aesthetically (but not within the field of institutionalized art) a cluster of class biases that also governs certain features of O cortiço, for which reason it could serve as an introduction to the literary analysis of the latter. But once submitted to the dynamic of the novel, that very same cluster appears as a set of detestable, if ideologically efficient, fallacies—fallacies that obscure, in their functionality and conservativism, the class interests at stake, as defined on the level of plot. This artistic result of the novel’s own movement is then brought to bear once more on the three-p’s joke, even though it remains a piece of extraliterary and, so to speak, street-level ideology: the latter now makes clear to us the nature of a racist and xenophobic delusion derived from a specific and peculiar labor relation and from an equally specific mode of the accumulation of wealth, “in which a man can be confused with animal and treated in accordance with this confusion.” Therein we can see, with perfect clarity, something quite inconceivable to certain literary theories: a formally literary dynamic that produces knowledge about external reality. Note that the discrepancy between the novel’s movement and its system of beliefs can be viewed in many ways. A less generous, and less interesting, reading would consider it simply a flaw of composition. Discredited by the plot, the novel’s naturalist and nationalist perspectives would seem to parade about as mere empty chatter, which in part they are. But they can also be understood as ideology, in which case the contradictory composition acquires critical
functionality and *mimetic value* in relation to Brazil. It is a matter here of the *objective* features of the novel’s configuration, where they exist *in an active form*, but without being *stated*. Their formulation is the work of the critic and does not belong to the horizon of the novelist, which does not mean that this formulation is arbitrary. As Cândido writes, “the social violence [of the book] is greater than its author imagined.”

As for mimesis, the essay proceeds along a nuanced and differentiating path, which in itself disputes the summary “theoretical” oppositions in vogue. Could the system of prejudices deposited within the narrative focalization be itself an *imitation* of reality? It would seem more appropriate to call it an unconscious *tracery*, the migration of the thoughts of the ruling class into the literary realm, where they act as an ordering principle, playing out their ideological role of presenting particular perspectives as general truths. On the voluntary plane of the novel’s choice of subject matter, the Portuguese innkeeper’s enrichment is narrated deliberately so as to confirm these “truths”—the Brazilian stereotypes in the chapter—which in exchange lend it a verisimilitude steeped in bias. It was seen, however, that strict consistency in the search for economic advantage, while it unifies the narrative, also redefines the conflict and its fields, forcing the clichés that the plot was meant to consolidate to, so to speak, sit twiddling their thumbs. The artistic and *formal* diligence with which narrative is made to cohere acts as an independent factor, with involuntary critical force in relation to the set of ideologies that the plot, through *mimesis*, reproduced and illustrated. In that sense, the formal consistency ignores the established order, its limits, and its equivocates, within whose field it refuses to adapt and in relation to which it takes on the value of a rupture, in opposition to the redundant and conservative role of mimesis. But even despite this, Cândido will still go on to observe the *mimetic virtue of formal consistency itself*, one which, without prejudice to its own formal-constructive character, and as if *within* it, paradoxically imitates and brings within the novel’s dynamic the rhythm of a certain type of accumulation of wealth. This imitation of a society on the level of one of its laws of motion acquires a critical power of its own, since it frees the novel’s self-consistency from self-indulgence and bias—a self-consistency that is not due to the accident, mechanically
repeated, of a subjective fixation (the economic avidity of its main character), nor to that character’s Portuguese nationality. The novel’s overarching formal unity is assured neither by the basso continuo of an obsession with profit, nor by the architectonic contrasts between races, environments, and national types, nor yet by the class viewpoint that steers the narrative—though all are main ingredients of the latter. Each of these is itself a form, complete with its own dynamism, that will first be drawn into and then actively discredited by the movement of the whole—a whole whose general form has its truth in the untruth that the other, partial forms, overcome by something more substantive, will allow us to glimpse over the course of the narrative process itself.

But if this is so, is not then literature reduced to a mere capturing and repositing the social? What is its own productivity? In what terms are we to conceive of literature’s capacity for innovation and rupture? Would such a view not rest on a presupposition—naively realistic—of the neutrality and transparency of language, leading one to disregard the constituting role, the irreducible reality of the latter? I hope to have faithfully reproduced here the issues that Luiz Costa Lima raised in a debate that followed the first presentation of this study. They are objections that help us understand the unique features of António Cândido’s standpoint. We might start here with the presumed antagonism, palpable in Costa Lima’s questions themselves, between the representational capturing of the social and the specific productivity of literature and of language. But this antagonism is not self-evident, and in my opinion does not square with the practice of great modern art itself, though it may square with one of its theories. Without forcing the point and with a sense of humor, I believe that the division as conceived by Costa Lima could be formulated in the following way: on the one hand, the backward looking, the mere imitation of historical reality, the absence of formal anxiety, the ideological redundancy, the illusion of an unbounded linguistic transparency; on the other hand, the forward looking, the literary production of the new, the antimimetic rupture, the awareness of the efficacy specific to language, the disconnecting of the antennae of reference. But need one do more than recall the social and imitative precision of the best experimental novelists of this century in order to cast doubt on this tried-and-true distribution of roles?
Returning to António Cândido’s essay, we have seen that he did not point out one, but several types of relations between the novel and reality. Population, social environment, and landscape are each presented according to the theories of Naturalism, “scientific” for the time, but today patent examples of ideology. This low-mimetic rhythm highlights a set of national convictions regarding the rapacity and brutality of the Portuguese innkeeper, but it registers, too, on another level, the impersonal course of the accumulation of wealth, whose incentive is not war between the races and between nationalities, but capital itself. The anonymous and unreasoning mechanism of the novel’s narrative focalization is governed by ambivalences characteristic of an increasingly neurotic turn-of-the-century nationalism, the so-called Brazilian Jacobinism. These ambivalences were not the invention of the novelist and existed no less outside of literature, where they could give rise to infighting as well as to outbursts such as the above-cited three-p’s joke. From today’s perspective, in short, the most significant relationship with reality is that born of the problematic constellation, intrinsic to the book, between the movement of accumulation and a dense complex of more or less crude ideologies and forms current at the time. Thus the critic shows us that a novel as real as O cortiço is assembled from, among other features, a foreign narrative model, dubious scientific theories, an intuition of the new economic dynamic, prejudicial projections, and a niggardly class perspective. Considered in themselves, these different moments of mimesis range significantly in their value and run the gamut from the brilliant to the lamentable. But even the worst are of interest, once upended by the broad narrative current of the novel as a whole, and it is possible that the most acute and enlightened notions that the novel today might have to offer are inseparable from its most racist outpourings. In other words, mimesis can have critical value, can ally itself with obscurantism, and can even have a critical effect on account of this last alignment, all depending on its position relative to the whole. The same goes for the novel’s formal-constructive aspect, which lays out a generalized picture of conditions (those of accumulation itself) irreducible to bias at the same time that it derives from something like a systemization of bias itself. In the face of such a detailed, reflective description, the generalizations of literary theory for or against mimesis or imaginary, formal construction
prove groundless. To complete the picture, it seems clear that the sought-after breakthroughs of formal construction actually benefit from their tension with the conformist aspect of imitation, and that the critical value of the latter can be made more emphatic by the sometimes mechanical aspect of the formal construction, which only thus reveals itself as a shackle. The critical spark does not leap forth from one spot alone, and to stipulate abstract disjunctives is not always more radical and productive than discerning relations.

The form of which we are speaking here is entirely objective, by which we mean that it foregrounds subjective intentions, whether those of the characters or of the author. Within his formal space the latter are mere material, without special authority, unable to signify directly, or rather, signifying only within the general configuration that thus redefines them. This is hardly an isolated case: the primacy of form over opinions and intentions becomes programmatic in the history of the novel, starting with Flaubert. Outside of literature, the analogous effect is found in the Marxist idea of the precedence of process, whose objective mechanism, working behind the backs of the protagonists, also makes use of them and disqualifies their subjective purposes, transforming them into illusions of function (as when, for example, a nationalist self-understanding acts as a mere cover for the functioning of capital). It is not the interest of such a dehumanized and purely relational idea of artistic formation, replete with certain disabusedly materialist implications, to disclose a harmony, but rather to lay bare a revelatory dissonance, whose historical truth it is the task of interpretation to make evident. What we have in the end is a form of forms, an irreducibly heterogeneous complex of literally transposed experiences upon which the novelist works. It is worthwhile insisting on this internal diversity—merely disheveled from the intellectual point of view—since it gives a true idea of realist art, sometimes imagined, according to an illusory model, as the suppression of the subject in the automatisms of photography, as field notes, as sanitized prose, as scientific information, and as the absence of composition. Cândido’s essay shows us the literary power of O cortiço as something inseparably connected to the dysfunctional effects of its architecture and of its narrative focalization—effects that without being consciously aimed at, were spontaneously sought after by the writer, who considered them to be what made his book a good
one. Even here we are in the Marxist tradition of the so-called triumph of realism, which recognizes in the form-giving labor of the novel a power that gets the better of the backward or limited conceptions of an author and—why not?—of a country.

Without confirming or denying the existence of its contingent Tom, Dick, or Harry embodiments, the figure latent within both the three-p’s joke and the novel’s focalization is itself an abstract construction, with a pivotal place in the social organization of Brazil in one of its historical moments. Its generalizing and explanatory force derives from its abstraction, and in that sense we can say that the key that opened the novel was Cândido’s discovery of the appropriate diagram of class relations. The course of the plot will then expose the impasses and the contradictions of that abstract position. And these, then, are what animate the work itself without ceasing to exist outside of it, mutatis mutandis.

We have seen how, within the inglorious performance of the “progeny of the sons of the land,” the latter representation actually finds its truth, once the specific process of the accumulation of wealth has been factored in. Let us look at other, similar revelations, which also form part of the literary yield of the work, once so interpreted. The book’s naturalist theories, for example, demonstrate a modus operandi that is likewise sui generis and most enlightening for the intellectual history of Brazil. These theories are ideological when they cloak the necessities of capital within racial categories or when they justify “scientifically” the inferior status of blacks and mulattoes, but even so they have the merit, for Brazil, of bringing our repressed racial question to the fore of the discussion, as well as better integrating a complicated theoretical-moral situation, accentuating

the ambiguity of the Brazilian intellectual who both embraced and rejected his country, who was proud and ashamed of it, who trusted in it and despaired of it, vacillating between the moronic optimism of official views and the darkly pessimistic consciousness of backwardness. In this aspect, Naturalism was an exemplary moment, for it lived out the contradiction between the grandiloquence of liberal aspirations and the fatalism of the purportedly scientifically-based theories then current, which seemed to give a mark of inexorable inferiority to our differences with respect to established cultural paradigms.
We shall not sum up still other similar shifts and reworkings accomplished by Cândido’s essay, here with respect to the novel’s more or less national inflections of sex, nature, and allegory. For our purposes it is enough to indicate the remarkable interest of these literary observations, which are original for the unprecedented conjuncture of critical vectors they bring into play, a conjuncture in which artistic analysis and the discovery and raising of historical consciousness go hand in hand—along the path, naturally, of the novel’s aesthetic specificity, but also of its moral, ideological, and political peculiarities: along the path of a vast social experiment underway. From another point of view, the continued interest of the essay is its demonstration of how the pinpointing and the subsequent study of the practical foundation of a form allow one to speak of both the artistic work and reality in terms of each other. The gravitational pull of concretely pertinent reality seems almost to become the warrant for the self-consistency of artistic labor, in addition to giving to the exploration and paraphrasing of the internal logic of a work the status of a special literary law. It allows for critical prose to benefit from the resonance of the real itself—a resonance that only an unflinching and universal radicalization—itself an imperative of all aesthetic intensification—can give off. The various passages we have quoted from Cândido’s essay can all serve to illustrate this point.

For purely indicative purposes, the final part of the essay sets O cortiço alongside L’Assommoir and Memórias de um sargento de milícias, works that Cândido had studied during the same period. The comparison creates a space of powerfully suggestive differences, among them, for example, the essentially social significance of poverty in Zola (European Naturalism) and its more allegorical-national meaning in Azevedo (Brazilian Naturalism); or between the dialectic of order and disorder in a universe almost without labor, such as in Sargento de milícias, and the dialectic of the spontaneous and the regulated in a world dominated by profit, labor, and competition, such as in O cortiço. Before being compared, such terms have first been rigorously specified qua both literary structures and the history of which they were a part—thanks to which the approximation of these works becomes a matter of setting in place whole, complex universals rather than mere isolated traits. It would be out of place here to
speculate about the full-scale work Cândido’s essays seem to anticipate. But it seems clear that, at the same time that they individualize to the utmost their objects of analysis, the essays themselves hit upon the idea of an entirely heterogeneous but nevertheless (from the standpoint of literary form) correlative space. Let us say that the critic here seeks a literary way of practicing the intriguing though generally fortuitous art of comparing national experiences or traits. What we have, in other words, is a comparatism that allows us to problematize and take the pulse of Brazil itself in the context of its present reality.  

Nothing could be more contrary to the spirit of António Cândido than to transform his essay into a prescription. Still, one cannot help but note how well thought out the essay is: the steps it takes become the exemplification of a critical method that has clearly found its target. In conclusion, let us take the time to dwell on some of this method’s wider implications.

We begin with the essay’s opening reflections, paragraphs in which borrowed forms are considered in light of their society of origin as well as of our own. This kind of preliminary verification of forms and categories in strict relation to available experience is one of the elementary tasks of the critical spirit, wherever one finds oneself. In a country like Brazil, however, such a task is still more indispensable—and productive—since the differences that mark off Brazil from the societies that serve it as a model weigh upon it with an inescapable force. Yet for precisely that reason such verification is often as not refused or deferred, since the desire to match ourselves, without vexatious reservations, to the cultural life of the advanced countries is among our dearest aspirations.

Once the relation of form to its practical counterpart has been determined, a separate if brief examination of the latter becomes particularly valuable: this so as to substantiate as much as possible the specificity of the practical, experiential correlative, or, even more, so as to prevent the distance separating us from canonical societies from seeming to be the mere result of the idiosyncrasies of fictional characters or of a writer’s wandering imagination. Indeed, to whom would it ever occur that “native-born Brazilian” or “free, white Brazilian,” notions fit for a comic opera, were categories to be taken seriously?
The essential feature of a critical work must, naturally, consist in exploring and discussing the movement inherent in form itself, giving preference to the less obvious consequences of such movement and to its most unsuspected truths—so long as these are capable of demonstration. In the Brazilian context, a context poor in critical reflection on society, the extraliterary yield of this revelatory potential of forms is exceptional—there, so to speak, for the taking. On this point the comparison to the left-wing essayistic tradition in Europe becomes interesting. The latter’s situation was decisively shaped by the presence of an advanced social theory, rigorously analytical and critical. The better part of this tradition’s work consisted in interweaving, for reciprocal verification and illumination, the most salient points in the radicalization of art and developments within capital, class struggles, and the bourgeois order as such, with the work of Marx as the ultimate interlocutor. But the situation, clearly, is not the same for us; here there exists a considerable body of imaginative literature, in full creative swing for more than a century and well versed in what is both specific to and problematic about Brazilian social relations—but without a conceptual counterpart of comparable density on the left—whence the modest but resolutely pioneering character of Cândido’s essay, as well as of António Cândido, who was himself compelled to be historian, sociologist, and social psychologist so as to give the fullest conceptual dimension to his own observations on the formal plane.

Notes

This piece first appeared as “Adequação Nacional e Orginalidade de Crítica” in Sequencias Brasileros (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999).


3. Ibid., 124.
4. Ibid., 128.
5. Ibid., 129–30.


8. On this point, as in the other discussions on literary form and historicity, I am using Adorno’s aesthetic theory.
10. Ibid., 129.
11. Ibid., 139.
