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OTTO MARIA CARPEAUX: PROPHET OF OUR LITERARY TIME OTTO MARIA CARPEAUX: PROFETA DO NOSSO TEMPO LITERÁRIO

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ABSTRACT: Among the European intellectuals forced to immigrate during the interwar period, the Austrian Otto Maria Carpeaux (1900-1978) exerted one of the most significant influences on Brazilian literary life, with the publication, three years after arriving in the new country, of the first volume in a series of brilliant studies on literature: *The Ashes of Purgatory* (1942). The author's work, though extensive and luminous, was unjustifiably neglected after his death, but is currently being re-studied with interest, particularly his monumental *History of Western Literature* (1959-1966), a book that ranks alongside Ernst Robert Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948) and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946). This trend is attested to by the recent release of two collections of essays, both edited by José Carlos Zamboni (*Homens e destinos*, 2022; *Mais livros na mesa*, 2024), alongside the publication of Mauro de Souza Ventura's second volume on Carpeaux, *O Danúbio não é azul* (2025). Therefore, this article aims to contribute to the development of a scholarly debate around Carpeaux's writings by proposing a critical examination of certain of the author's essays that address the historical process of the exhaustion of traditional concepts of literature. This study argues that just as Carpeaux called Jacob Burckhardt a pessimistic prophet for having foreseen the two wars in his *Reflections on History*, the Austro-Brazilian master should likewise be considered prophetic in diagnosing the roots of our moment of disconnection from the Western literary tradition.

KEYWORDS: Otto Maria Carpeaux; literary criticism; concepts of literature; concepts of antiliterature; de-essentialization of literature.

RESUMO: Entre os intelectuais europeus forçados ao exílio durante o período entreguerras, o austríaco Otto Maria Carpeaux (1900-1978) exerceu uma das mais significativas influências na vida literária brasileira ao publicar, três anos depois de sua chegada ao novo país, o primeiro volume de uma série de brilhantes estudos sobre literatura: *A cinza do purgatório* (1942). A obra do autor, embora extensa e luminosa, foi injustificadamente negligenciada após a sua morte, mas vem sendo atualmente reestudada com interesse — em particular, a sua monumental *História da literatura ocidental* (1959-1966), obra em sintonia com *Literatura europeia e Idade Média latina* (1948), de Ernst Robert Curtius, e *Mimesis* (1946), de Erich Auerbach. Isso pode ser atestado pela publicação recente de duas coletâneas de ensaios, ambas organizadas por José Carlos Zamboni, quais sejam, *Homens e destinos* (2022) e *Mais livros na mesa* (2024), bem

como pela publicação do segundo livro de Mauro de Souza Ventura sobre Carpeaux, *O Danúbio não é azul* (2025). Assim sendo, este artigo visa a contribuir para o desenvolvimento do debate acadêmico em torno dos escritos de Carpeaux, propondo um exame crítico de ensaios específicos nos quais o autor aborda o processo histórico de exaustão dos conceitos tradicionais de literatura. Sustenta-se que, assim como Carpeaux identificou em Jacob Burckhardt um profeta pessimista por ter previsto as duas grandes guerras em *Reflexões sobre a História*, o mestre austro-brasileiro deve analogamente ser considerado profético ao diagnosticar as raízes do nosso atual momento de desconexão com a tradição literária ocidental.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Otto Maria Carpeaux; crítica literária; conceitos de literatura; conceitos de antiliteratura; desessencialização da literatura.

Despite having influenced the mindset of an entire generation of Brazilian intellectuals, the work of Otto Maria Carpeaux (1900–1978) remained in relative obscurity following his death, receiving neither new editions nor in-depth scholarly examination. This situation has, however, partially shifted in recent decades. In 2008, the Federal Senate published an exquisite four-volume edition of the *History of Western Literature* (originally published by O Cruzeiro between 1959 and 1966), which has since seen subsequent reprints. In 2014, Vide Editorial released the first work written by the young Otto Karpfen, previously unknown to the Brazilian public: *Caminhos para Roma* (Paths to Rome, published in 1934), translated from German by Bruno Mori. In 2020, the University of São Paulo journal *Teresa* organized a dossier in honor of the author, which reinvigorated discussions regarding his work. Efforts to recover forgotten essays published by Carpeaux in the Brazilian press have also been undertaken, resulting in three volumes of collected works: *O canto do violino e outros ensaios inéditos* (Livraria Danúbio, 2016), *Homens e destinos* (Sétimo Selo, 2022), and *Mais livros na mesa* (Sétimo Selo, 2024), the latter two edited by José Carlos Zamboni.

It is worth highlighting the excellent collaborative effort between the publishers UniverCidade and Topbooks to release the complete essays of Carpeaux: in 1999, the first volume of the *Ensaaios reunidos* was published, edited by Olavo de Carvalho, followed by the second in 2005, with a preface by Ivan Junqueira. A new volume is expected. It should be noted that Olavo de Carvalho's preface to the first edition of the collected essays represents the first in-depth investigation into the work of this Austro-Brazilian critic; although introductory, it establishes the author's primary lines of thought. Like Olavo de Carvalho (1999, p. 49), we are convinced that Carpeaux is "one of the greatest literary historians and critics the world has ever known," and that he "was better than Taine and Arnold Hauser, De Sanctis and Parrington, Thibaudet and Valbuena Prat." We also concur with Olavo de Carvalho (1999, p. 50) that Carpeaux's merit "did not lie in what he brought to us from abroad, but in what, from Brazil,

he contributed to world culture, helping to elevate our country from the condition of a passive importer and pious disciple to that of a creator and master.”

For many years, Carpeaux’s work was merely mentioned rather than studied with rigor. Many high-level Brazilian intellectuals recognized his undeniable merits but limited themselves to generalized references, particularly regarding the monumentality of his major historiographical work. In his 1965 essay “Crítica e sociologia,” Antonio Candido (1975, p. 14–15) asserts that the stylistic-sociological method employed by Carpeaux is a fruitful attempt to synthesize the structural aspects of works with their ideological content, thereby dismantling the traditional dichotomy between extrinsic and intrinsic factors—an approach that, for Candido, should be abandoned. In 1970, Alfredo Bosi (2006, p. 496–497) identified the core of Carpeaux’s methodology as culturalist, oscillating between the idealist historicism of Croce and the social historicism of Gramsci, Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno. In 1978, Alceu Amoroso Lima (1978, p. 172) characterized Carpeaux’s work as a unique contribution to *Weltkultur*, owing to its capacity to reveal the moral tradition and intellectual richness of expressions spanning from Greece to modern times. In 1979, José Guilherme Merquior (1981, p. 318), addressing the integrative approach of Auerbach, Goldmann, Candido, and Carpeaux, demonstrated how these critics transcended external sociological explanations in favor of an analysis that seeks to grasp social aspects as internal components of the text.

The discussion appears to have stalled at these brief methodological comments, with the exception of the aforementioned preface by Olavo de Carvalho. However, in 2002, Mauro Souza Ventura published a substantial study on the work and political activity of Carpeaux, *De Karpfen a Carpeaux: formação política e interpretação literária na obra do crítico austríaco-brasileiro* (Topbooks), an initial effort that was completed, after two decades of research, by his most recent book, *O Danúbio não é azul: vida e obra de Otto Maria Carpeaux na Áustria (1900-1938)*, published in 2025 by Unesp.¹ Broadly speaking, these two works reveal certain ethical principles in the young Carpeaux’s political activity that would later manifest in his criticism, such as: (i) the presence of the tragic in the form of a Catholic skepticism that never forgets that we are eternally stained by original sin and that earthly life is merely an ephemeral illusion—a dream, in the Counter-Reformation sense of Calderón; (ii) the concept of literature as a symbol (rather than allegory), resistant to intellectualist rationalization and therefore open

¹ Two recent scholarly contributions to the study of Carpeaux’s work warrant mention here: the master’s dissertation by André da Silva Rosa Júnior (2023), entitled “Carpeaux, um crítico entre dois mundos: um estudo sobre a recepção e a presença de seus ensaios de literatura brasileira,” and the doctoral thesis by Guilherme Mazzafera Alves (2024), titled “*Per realia ad realiora: Otto Maria Carpeaux e o romance brasileiro.*”

to numerous interpretations; and (iii) the normative and ecumenical universalism of the Baroque.

Souza Ventura's research is fundamental for understanding the ethical and aesthetic foundations of both Carpeaux's political orientation and his critical inclinations. This article, however, takes a different direction, as our purpose is much more specific and situated within the scope of literary theory: we intend to synthesize the concepts the author formulated regarding "anti-literature"—that is, what he considered contrary to the literary being, representing a decline in the face of Western tradition. We focus primarily on the diagnoses Carpeaux made of a phenomenon that currently stands at its zenith and may be termed the "de-essentialization" of literature, marked by the abandonment of mimesis and the separation between art and life in favor of political agency.

In the face of current manifestations of literary criticism in the main cultured media and universities of the West, Carpeaux would find the hegemonic capacity for indistinction between literature and the other surrounding expressions—which never quite reach it—to be, at the very least, eccentric. Even stranger to the critic would seem the diffuse tendency to superimpose the adjectival noun "literary" upon the substantive "literature". Such alienation would perhaps stem from the fact that Carpeaux belonged to another time, another generation; he had, in short, a different formation. He was educated in the spirit of German sociology of knowledge at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century; from the Romantic and Historicist tradition, he inherited the inclination toward valuing literary history, that is, toward the historical framing of cultural problems—an approach that often culminates in comparisons, relativizations, and judgments. He would not comprehend the trivialization of the concept of literature, despite having striven to understand the beginning of that process.

In fact, of the three fundamental axes around which literary studies orbit—the author, the work, and the reader—Carpeaux concentrated his analyses primarily on the first two, a procedure also followed by critics of his generation. Generally, for scholars of the latter half of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, literature was primarily the expression of a creative genius—a moral and psychological fact, therefore—or it was regarded as a social institution; this tradition of thought was largely consolidated by Madame de Staël. For twentieth-century scholars, broadly speaking, literature became textuality; it began to be approached through linguistic methods claiming universality, for which the world constituted a tangle of signs. Surprisingly, this first quarter of the twenty-first century signifies a break with these two approaches, as we see the predominance of an essentially empirical and external conception for which literature is agency—that is, the power to act, to unleash certain effects on the reader

(generally, those deemed most harmful receive greater emphasis). It should be noted that this tendency is teleological; what matters in literature is its ultimate goal, or rather, the consequences of reading. In summary: for literary studies during the Romantic era, what was primarily of interest was the a priori approach to the literary phenomenon, the anteriority of its psychological or sociological causes; for twentieth-century literary studies, the focus was procedural, so the meaning of the text could only be apprehended in its intrinsic materiality, simply in the dense interplay between the light and shadow of the page; for the literary studies of our time—called “post-human” by the most radical minds—the approach is singularly finalistic, namely, a posteriori.

The most significant impact of this last position is the de-essentialization of literature. The author’s position regarding literary tradition explains nothing else; nor does the textuality he produces establish a neutral, universal place, constructed according to procedures of association, combination, selection, etc. Carpeaux is not alive to be outraged by this iconoclastic positioning of most current literary critics, but he prophesied it. There is nothing abnormal or mystical in Carpeaux’s prophecies, since they are of the same nature as those of a Vico or a Burckhardt: they are judgments of minds aware of historical processes. Our historical moment was prepared by those who came before it, or, to put it in Vichian terms, our *ricorsi* become intelligible through the *corsi*.

In *History of Western Literature*, Carpeaux follows not only the evolution of Western literature but also the very evolution of the various concepts of literature. And, taken as a whole, the author’s critical history, in its dialectical expansion, continually reveals the spiral of conceptual nuances of literature that oppose, overlap, or merge—a true spectacle of the human imagination. However, the historiography of the Spirit’s latest creations, in the fourth volume, points to numerous attempts to deny traditional concepts of literature. In summary, the picture that emerges is as follows: from broader conceptions linked to the somewhat indistinct idea of corpora or mimesis and fiction, historical processes were marked by the progressive restriction of literature; the Renaissance began to distinguish between sacred letters, scientific letters, and *belles-lettres*; and European high modernism seems to have consecrated the notion that “literature” designates something academic, institutional, preferring to deal with the text, or rather, the poem, whether in verse or prose. French structuralism validated this restrictive position through its epistemology; and the semioticians of the *Tel Quel* group emphasized that the boundaries of their critical activity lie within the text. Carpeaux is clearly far from this understanding, which is already preparing the ground for the historical, civilizational, cultural, and individual aspects of literature to lose their legitimacy. With no longer any genres or

hierarchy between works and authors, the epistemological field becomes fragile enough to accept the concepts currently attributed to the “literary”: “place of historical reparation”, “*agentivité*”, “empowerment”, etc. This is the result of a historical moment marked by the supremacy of political values.

Literature, for Carpeaux, is, above all, an expression of a stage of civilization; it is more comprehensive than a work or a collection of works, than an author or a Pleiad of authors. It is the spiritual unification of socio-historical phenomena imbued with religious, moral, aesthetic, technical, or scientific character; and it is also—to use an expression from Renan (1923, p. 65) regarding the definition of “civilization” with which the critic would certainly agree—“every inclination toward reason”.² In this sense, as if prefiguring historical moments characterized by irrationalism, the *History of Western Literature*—like its similar works Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* and Auerbach’s *Mimesis*—is a contribution to the preservation of a vast estuary of literary concepts intrinsically linked to ideals of civilization. To this end, it is necessary to consider that literary genres accompany the evolution of civilization’s stages. In Carpeaux’s work, genres are not types of evolving biological organisms, as Brunetière thought, but aesthetic-stylistic configurations resulting from objective historical situations, as can be seen in the following passage:

Italy, the immediate heir of Latin civilization, was never “primitive”; therefore, it did not produce a “national epic” in the style of *The Song of Roland*, *The Song of the Cid*, or *The Song of the Nibelungs*; and the bourgeois Italy of the “Trecento” could no longer create a heroic epic. The first hero of *The Divine Comedy* is Virgil, who appears as the incarnation of Reason; the last hero of the *Comedy* is “*La Somma Sapienza*” (the Supreme Wisdom), inspired by “*primo amore*” (first love). Rather, they are both the poles—man and God—between which the action unfolds. (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 252).

In this remarkable critical insight, what first engages our attention is the concept of literature that emerges from a tension between the ineluctable forces of historical processes and individual creative impulses; sometimes historical objectivity prevails, sometimes subjective tendencies circumvent it. In the case of *The Divine Comedy*, it is less the *res gestae* that explains the poem’s composition than the very personality of its creator; there is no actual erasure of the poet in the name of the incarnation of civilization’s destiny in the figure of the hero; that is, its foundation is lyrical, not epic. In the words of Carpeaux (2008, p. 252): “The sole element that links the verses, unites the cantos, and joins the three parts is the poet’s own constantly present persona. From the beginning of the ‘Hell’ to the end of the ‘Paradise’, it is Dante who speaks.

² All translations in this article are by the author.

It is a work of personal expression, a lyrical work in the sense of Crocean aesthetics: lyricism is the vital center of the work of art. For this reason, the *Divine Comedy* endures.”

Carpeaux’s criticism will scarcely transcend relationship between man and civilization or between the image of the soul and the problem of destiny. This is a moral conception in the manner of Montaigne and La Bruyère, that is, of French humanist thinkers: literature molds man’s values within socio-historical contexts, aiming to offer a criticism of *mœurs*—which recalls Matthew Arnold’s famous expression: “criticism of life”. The particularities of such expression are the genres themselves: at certain moments, the objective and impersonal image of a people’s decline must emerge; at others, the subjective judgment of contingencies acquires relevance. In any case, it is undeniable that, for Carpeaux, literature is essential—in its metaphysical sense; initially, its essence was closer to the general due the very proximity between State, religion, and culture, and, following its evolution starting with Homer, it comes to be located on the individual plane. In both situations—which express transitions between genres—literature is linked to the nature of man, meaning it belongs to the plane of virtuality, but its actualization depends on a set of determinations related to the data of experience. Fundamentally, it is through the felicitous conjunction between particular experience and the abstraction of the general—achieved dialectically by that very experience—that the poet attains the intuitive comprehension of life; this phenomenon is nothing other the very inclination to find meaning. Therefore, the current movement of protest against the essentiality of literature would hold no logic for Carpeaux, given that, like Dilthey, our critic was fully aware that it is incumbent upon the poets to act as “our organs for understanding life.” (Carpeaux, 1999b, p. 534). Not everyone can be a poet.

In our current moment, we are gradually becoming accustomed to and almost magical, abundant view of literature: everyone is a potential literary creator, since, by the high degree of corporatist and undisciplined academic groups, the principle of distributivism must be extended from the political to the literary sphere. But, for Carpeaux, who did not confuse democracy with demagoguery, the elitist aspect of the literary phenomenon did not stem precisely from certain philosophical or aesthetic conceptions; it was a matter of something more conscientious, closer to common sense, that is, of conclusions drawn through the analysis of contextualized information. Certain data can be suggestive:

This elitist nature of serious literature is not a recent phenomenon. In 1897, the demographic census conducted in the European part of Russia revealed that sixty-one per cent of the adult male population and sixty-two per cent of the female population were unable to read and write. These figures mean that the literature of Gogol and Chekhov, of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky could only be read by a small minority of the Russian people, and certainly was only read by an even

smaller minority. The fact that the country in question was as underdeveloped as Tsarist Russia is not a compelling argument. The oldest existing literature in Europe—that of Dante and Leopardi, Manzoni and Verga—was written for centuries only for an even more insignificant minority. Indeed, the 1871 census, the first conducted in newly unified Italy, revealed sixty-one point three per cent of illiterate adult males and seventy-five per cent among the female population. Would this mean it was an extremely poor country, humiliated and backward for centuries? That rhetorical question also holds no value as an argument. The two most civilized and best-developed countries in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century were France and England. Reliable statistics for that period do not exist. However, French authorities estimated in 1819 that seventy-five per cent of the adult French population was unable to read, and Jeffrey stated in 1803 that in England only one hundred thousand people were capable of reading a book. (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2846).

It is clear that these data give us an idea of the exiguity of the reading public until the nineteenth century, that is, before the historical processes of mass education and literacy. A fact that nonetheless seems beyond controversy is that the writers and poets who produced serious literature aimed for a restricted audience, and it even appears that, within this group, only the highbrows were targeted—with the obvious exception of the pseudo-literary productions stimulated by partisan programs. In any event, the elitist concept of literature in Carpeaux's work does not derive substantially from statistical findings regarding readership; rather, due to their incontestable materiality, the findings serve only to reinforce his argument in favor of the notion of literature as a luminous moment of the spirit, resulting from the labor of seeking that Renanian nuance of truth lost in the estuary of temporal obscurities. In this sense, Carpeaux would be close to Harold Bloom, for whom the great works—those that deserve to be read, appreciated, and integrated into the canon—constitute an amalgam of: “mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction.” (Bloom, 1994, p. 27-28).

Having been formed in the innately humanistic and intellectual atmosphere of the Vienna of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert,³ Carpeaux could not but value, in his critical practice, components such as singularity, rarity, inventiveness, hierarchy, etc., in order to distinguish, on the one hand, serious literature, or high literature, and, on the other hand, all manner of vulgarization—the development of which was strangely linked to the expansion of readers. Regarding such an incongruity, Carpeaux writes:

This [few people being able to read] no longer happens today. At least the population of Europe is entirely literate. However, the print runs of books, even those with great success, are not commensurate with this mass of potential readers. At a recent congress of publishers and booksellers in Nice, it was stated that only one out of four French people manages to read a single book per year. Perhaps that number is not exact. But it is legitimate to ask what kind of book that single read book is. Certainly, the production of printed material is enormous. But the

³ See Carpeaux's poetical essay “*Reminiscências vienenses*” in *Ensaio reunidos I*, p. 628-633.

immense majority of these books do not belong to the literature whose history is the subject of the present book. UNESCO statistics reveal that a very large part of the surveyed literature consists of detective novels; among these, the case of Simenon is a rare exception, and it is better not to speak of literary value concerning Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers—and these are the best of the genre. Similarly, and despite vehement defenses, science fiction cannot be considered literature; to be convinced of this, one only needs to read essays as little hostile to it as *New Maps of Hell* (1960) by Kingsley Amis, or the *Histoire de la science-fiction moderne* (1973) by Jean Sadoul. Also counted are the astronomical print runs of best-sellers, espionage and adventure novels, the great successes of commercially pornographic literature, and everything that is called kitsch. Alongside a literature that is known to be elitist, there is another that is called “popular”. Hoggart defines this as literature made for exclusively commercial purposes. When one speaks of a “culture of poverty” in this regard, it must be added that is not limited, in this case, to economic poverty and that it is consumed by all classes of the population, by the least educated and by the educators (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2846-2847).

It is patent that, for Carpeaux, there is, so to speak, Literature (with a capital initial), on the one hand, and written fictional productions (prose) or expressions of subjectivity (verse), on the other. The further we move toward a massive and exorbitant level of written production, the further we distance ourselves from true literature. The essential concept of literature—which is that of Carpeaux, Harold Bloom, and even of a Marxist critic like Lukács—is tied to the authentic quality of the aesthetic object, and not to the indistinct quantity of production. Fundamentally, the impregnation of writing techniques by the industrial and commercial modus operandi corresponds to the masses’ desire to consume art and culture, which runs directly counter to Carpeaux’s conception of autonomous literature. Perhaps we could find in Milan Kundera’s definition of kitsch the anti-aesthetic objective of this type of production that does not deserve to be called literature: “The need for kitsch is the need to look into the mirror of the embellishing lie and to recognize oneself there with a touching satisfaction.” (Kundera, 1986, p. 144).

Beyond this false feeling of belonging and recognition, other elements are accentuated by kitsch—and they do not strictly stem from the process of industrial modernization of culture, since they are timeless: diversion and pastime. These two elements, which, to some extent, reject pleasure gained through effort—the difficult intellectual-spiritual pleasure—characterize the abundant production of text intended for filling idle time, for the immediate satisfaction of the organ of intelligence or the instincts, and are not necessarily consumed exclusively by the popular classes; it is the elites—especially the intellectuals—who most revel in this type of subliterate, even yearning to erect it into a canonical norm under the false pretext of inclusion. In the words of Alceu Amoroso Lima (1954, p. 23), “the common people still have a certain superstitious respect for works of art, whereas the majority of the so-called social elite only see their own sensible pleasure in art.”

Indeed, in his procedures for judging the aesthetic value of works, Carpeaux distinguished between texts that better corresponded to his somewhat classical notion of literature (let us consider those aspects highlighted by Harold Bloom) and those that Benedetto Croce designated as “aesthetic hedonism”: “thus we oppose particular aesthetic hedonism, which considers, if not all other activities, at least the aesthetic one as a simple event of feeling, and confuses the pleasure of expression, which is the beautiful, with the agreeable plain and simple, with the agreeable of every sort.” (Croce, 1950, p. 91). It is apparent, here, that the agreeable, in and of itself, is the apanage of aesthetic hedonism, thus being incapable of fulfilling the concept—especially the sublime—of the beautiful.

Aesthetic hedonism was perceived by Carpeaux as an effect of the crisis of culture, that is, as a consequence of a phase of lowering of civilizational values in the West. As a thinker imbued with a philosophical pessimism nourished by Catholic and historicist sources (among them, also the eschatological ones), our critic could only diagnose his present time as an involution, for he witnessed with contempt the advance of mass culture—the same contempt found in the pessimistic book by the scholar Richard Hoggart published in 1957, *The Uses of Literacy*, which addresses the “literature” of newsstands and station bookstores (what the French call “*littérature de gare*”). It would be interesting for us to imagine how Carpeaux would reformulate this passage today: “One can already anticipate that Hoggart’s book does not present very pleasant or comforting aspects of contemporary life. It could have emerged from one of those terrible indictments of ‘cultural criticism’ by a Huizinga or Ortega y Gasset or Jaspers; for in the accusation against mass culture, there exists a strange consensus among conservatives and liberals, reactionaries and Marxists.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 314).

It is true that, in the twentieth century, the desire to preserve a superior or essential concept of literature in opposition to the growth of mass culture would bring René Girard and Theodor Adorno, Sartre and Bloom into agreement. This has changed currently; for it is no longer a phenomenon of the proletarianization of literature, but of its de-essentialization. However, the latter could not have existed without the fermentation and subsequent flourishing of the former. Let us be clear: de-essentialization, that is, the loss—beginning at the end of the twentieth century—of the notion that literature is the product of geniuses, persons of superior intelligence, endowed with great writing ability, and capable of intuitively and subjectively understanding the meaning of the fluctuations of the human soul or historical tendencies. The decline of such qualities is accompanied by the idea that literature is a human virtuality, an intrinsic disposition to create empirical objects, that is, with real power to intervene in human behavior, with “agency”. Thus, the author’s role is no longer that of a creative genius (a

nineteenth-century notion) nor that of a neutral subject (a twentieth-century notion), but that of a political agent ethically responsible for the effects caused by their creations (less of imagination than reporting). Literature has become the social situation of the text's reception by the reader—an ordinary fact with pragmatic implications and not a *sui generis* condition.

The meaning of this transformation can only be grasped historically, and Carpeaux indicates the path for us: “He [Hoggart] also protests against the so-called proletarian literature and against a sociology that primarily views workers as political individuals. In reality, politics plays a secondary role in their lives, and many still harbor a distinctively peasant distrust of professional politicians.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 314-315).

Knowing that Carpeaux considered Burckhardt “the supreme model of the intellectual” (Carpeaux, 1999a, p. 85), it is not difficult to ascertain the brilliant influence of his Swiss humanist master in his lines imbued with gloomy pessimism, as Burckhardt lamented his secular century of substituting religious and aesthetic values with political ones. The progressive accentuation of the political framework of cultural manifestations is, for Carpeaux, the very sign of the crisis, the hallmark of fragility resulting from absolute belief in the power of matter. What Carpeaux said of Burckhardt can also be said about Carpeaux himself: “Burckhardt is the last of the humanists. Which means: he was formed, apolitically, in the world of secularized Christianity, a world above politics, shaped by Renaissance Italy, the France of Louis XIV, the England of aristocratic universities, and the Germany of Weimar.” (Carpeaux, 1999a, p. 84).

For Burckhardt and Carpeaux, literature is above politics, spirit is above matter, and the eternal soul is above the century. The poles of these equations are now inverted by the modernization of customs, by “the slack and sometimes excessive tolerance in the sense of ‘but that is just human’ or ‘everyone is doing it nowadays’; Tocqueville, prophetic as ever, already spoke of ‘a virtuous materialism that does not corrupt but slackens the soul’.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 315-316).

If we were to draw a broader picture, we could say that the eighteenth century was the one that truly marked a pronounced historical transition, perhaps more prominent than that of the sixteenth century. It was the advent of technical civilizations that a relative structural continuity⁴—established more or less between the Ionian-Dorian age of Greek literature and the pre-Romantic period of Goethe and Rousseau—encountered a series of obstacles to its

⁴ We owe this idea of the continuity of European literature to Ernst Curtius (1993) in *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*.

progression. This does not indicate, absolutely, a loss of aesthetic quality, but the opening to certain cultural phenomena that are either parasitic on true art or refractory to it. Certainly, at a later moment, such phenomena end up being considered the equivalents of genuine and disinterested creations (in the Kantian sense). The crisis of literary culture that Carpeaux witnessed—and which is even more dizzying today—was prepared by a long process of confluence of two currents that are only seemingly opposite: on one hand, the emergence of the working class as a social consuming artistic objects and a market attentive to its demands; on the other hand, the progressive formation of an iconoclastic intellectual class that came to identify the identify the latency of praxis in the proletariat (or the lumpenproletariat). Between the “literature” that was desired to be read and the “literature” that ought to be read there is an impassable gulf, but they are equated by the deviation from that structural continuity whose fractures began to be felt after the Revolution. We all know that engaged literature is directed at an audience that does not even take notice of it: it is the intellectuals themselves who delight in reading it. The so-called popular literature, in practice, is something else:

The so-called popular literature, which is in fact commercial literature, was the one that guessed this new spiritual situation:—novellas, illustrated magazines, popular newspapers—personalizing all facts, simplifying them (to the extreme of comics that dispense with or nearly dispense with words), fragmenting them to offer the greatest number of information in the smallest possible space (consider news in a telegraphic style; consider the replacement of the short story with the “short short story”). Hoggart rightly says that is neither literature nor journalism, but entertainment, diversions, exploited by the entertainment business; which is a large, ramified, and lucrative industry. (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 316).

We could update Carpeaux’s observation simply by considering the current popularization of streaming platforms; however, there is no substantial difference between that moment and today: in both, generally, “‘diversion’ is the keyword: fragmentation amuses and distracts attention”; other elements can be highlighted: a) “it is not necessary to understand well, it is enough to guess”; b) “there is evidently a lack of [...] a certain dimension of depth”; c) “everything remains in two dimensions only, simplified, reduced to the most elementary emotions and the most unreal concepts”; d) “the ‘primitivism’ of emotions corresponds to the preference for the detective novel, and, especially, for more or less pornographic plots, always spiced up with a lot of sadistic violence, kidnapping, rape, ‘gang rape’.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 316).

In Carpeaux’s dictionary, the entries “literature” and “democracy” appear not to harmonize very well. From the perspective of his critical *charpente*, more than a single factor accounts for this incompatibility. In the first place, these terms do not align because

“democracy” designates a form of government; how could literature be, indiscriminately, the apanage of all citizens? Even due to its unnatural disposition, as already observed by the current Professor of Comparative Literature at the Collège de France, William Marx (2009), literature could not become attractive to a large number of people: to be a serious reader of literary texts, a *lettré*, involves forsaking the natural order of things to prioritize understanding the discourse of others, and this behavior can even turn into a pathology. Let’s not forget that they, the *lettrés*, “at night, if it is misty, open bronze umbrellas / or retreat into the volumes of sinister libraries.” At some later point, consciousness will be submitted to self-examination, and the conclusion will be inevitable: “literature spoiled your best hours of love.”⁵ Literature thus seems to have a more aristocratic than democratic character, not in the sense of an activity restricted to the economic elite, but in the sense of a private taste, certainly circumscribed to a group less numerous than the nation as a whole, whose unnatural tendency, so to speak, leads it, almost inevitably, to distinguish itself by its intellectual development. Until the end of the nineteenth century, “literary aristocratism” was, however, associated with the number of readers: “In other ages, in the past, the aristocratic character of literary art was supported by the lack of literacy among the masses (and by the aversion of other groups, the bourgeoisie, against profane readings).” It must be taken into account that the massification of literacy is a historically recent phenomenon, so the constitution of a broad reading public corresponds to a very brief period in the course of Western literature. “Voltaire”, Carpeaux exemplifies, “in the *Philosophical Dictionary* (entry ‘goût’), estimates at three thousand the number of people who, in seventeenth-century France, read the works of Racine and La Bruyère.” The expansion of the reading public alone, however, would not guarantee that the reading of literary texts would increase: “The new fact, today, is the following: everyone (at least in Europe) knows how to read; but please do not ask what it is that they read.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 318).

Drawing further inspiration from Hoggart, Carpeaux unveils the historicity of the semantic changes in the concept of literature: the twentieth century will be remembered, strangely and simultaneously, as the century of criticism and the century of anti-literature, or of the exhaustion of traditional concepts of literature—an exhaustion prepared by interconnected movements: “Reading *The Uses of Literacy*, we lose, so to speak, our literary innocence. And

⁵ The subsequent verses from the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade’s poem “*Elegia*” (1938) are rendered here in a direct translation: “à noite, se neblina, abrem guarda-chuvas de bronze / ou se recolhem nos volumes de sinistras bibliotecas [...] a literatura estragou tuas melhores horas de amor.” See Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1967, p. 115).

a good part of the discussions on the *nouveau roman*, ‘theatre of the absurd,’ concrete poetry, New Criticism, and structuralism lose their meaning.” (Carpeaux, n.d., p. 318).

In *History of Western Literature*, Carpeaux narrates literary events and their interconnections like a judge, meaning he judges, he hierarchizes, he proceeds by taste, giving greater or lesser attention to one poet or another according to their lyrical content—his critical consciousness is never detached from his master Croce’s concept of lyricism, which is, of course, modified by a typically Saxon historicism that only externally contradicts that concept. He dedicates a meager paragraph to Scarron, noting that “his comedies, drawn from Spanish plays, are nothing more than Diversions”, whereas he outlines the profile of Pascal over seven pages, calling him “the most complete literary genius of the French nation.” The critic could not have given less space and importance to someone who “intended to demonstrate the Christian truth, just as one demonstrates a geometric truth.” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 690, 851, 854). This established, the meaning of “literary aristocratism” for Carpeaux becomes clearer: it is, in Crocean terms, the inclination of letters toward intuitive knowledge. Pascal could not demonstrate, through his *esprit géométrique*, the highly elusive object of his investigation; no matter: his occupation was far greater than merely to divert. It is clear that books and readers mean nothing to the literary phenomenon, which is, above all, an inclination, attraction, restlessness, *animi affectus*; or, more properly, the search for truth in its scholastic sense: *veritas intellectus* (and not *veritas rei*). Borrowing once again an idea from William Marx (2025), in his recent book *Libraries of the Mind*, libraries, books, papers, or scrolls only have meaning as mental realities and not as exterior realities; this is proven by the fact that Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* based on his prodigious memory, as he did not have his library when he moved to Istanbul to escape Nazi persecution.

Carpeaux’s constructed hierarchy is an essentially critical attitude that discriminates between the true, the good, and the beautiful. Nothing would be more legitimate than the objection “but this is all very relative”. A priori, yes, but literary historiography does not habitually innovate taste or alter canons; rather, it prefers to ground itself in the established opinion of great critics. And, for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, wouldn’t the judgments that have survived the agitations of differing opinions throughout history be precisely those capable of serving as a reliable investigative method? After all, since the crisis of the historical method at the end of the nineteenth century, we have lacked “exact” instruments for literary interpretation. Carpeaux’s stance of distinguishing what is literature from what is not—an attitude natural to minds that feel free to exercise criticism, as the liberals Faguet and Thibaudet once

were—would only be met with a certain estrangement in our century, at this moment when criticism is constrained to abdicate its prerogative to judge value.

Carpeaux appears to lament the crisis of culture as an ineluctable fact, one he diagnoses through contemporary forms of “literary” expression. In reality, he had long attested to the exhaustion of the mimetic concept of literature, without which, in his view, one could not even speak of serious literature—Matthew Arnold’s famous “high seriousness”—in the same way that Auerbach sought to trace the “representation of reality” and Lukács pursued the chaste forms of realism: “Is literature capable, or still capable, of corresponding to life? The *nouveau roman*, the Theater of the Absurd, and Adorno’s assertion that ‘after Auschwitz one can no longer write poetry’ all answer this question in the negative. Realism is rejected. All fiction is deemed impossible, due to the lack of credibility of invented ‘facts’.” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2847).

The concept of the de-essentialization of the “literary”, which today tends to be displaced toward positive categories, had already been identified by Carpeaux based on his description of a series of anti-literary movements. Now, every age has its countercultures and countercurrents, its quarrels that divide those who wish to conserve and those who wish to transgress; and the production of writing averse or even hostile to Literature (in its institutional sense) is not a fact unique to our century. The historical phenomenon with which Carpeaux deals, however, is something more singular to our contemporaneity: the progressive loss of literature’s mimetic-realist function that pervades the entire period covered by his *History of Western Literature*. As this function declines, so too does its property as a critical reflection of life. In Carpeaux’s terms: “Since it is impossible to invent trustworthy fictions, all that remains is to abolish the frontier between art and life.” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2848).

Several factors contributed to the dissolution of this frontier, whose critical reflective duty had been secured by verisimilitude, representation, and *imitatio*. In place of the critical distance between the object and the language that mimetically represents it, “agency” has come to figure prominently—that is, the power to act that the literary work now possesses, being regarded as an existing entity. Under this figurative regime, artistic artifacts function as non-human agents in direct interaction with humans, following, for example, the praxeological doctrine of Philippe Descola (2021). The fermentation process of this contemporary *épistémè*, so to speak, dates back to the flourishing of the European High Modernist avant-gardes, unfolding throughout the twentieth century in various forms. Among these, Carpeaux highlights: a) “The ‘theater of documentation’”, meaning “the participation of the audience in the events staged, which are actual occurrences, with the dramatist’s work being limited to

transcribing the respective documents.” Such a dramaturgy “dispenses with a literary basis: the work of the dramatist is reduced to almost zero”; “it is an ‘anti-theater’ and could only be part of an ‘antiliterature’”; b) the *nouveau roman*, which the French critic Claude Mauriac called “*alittérature*”, “whose authors do not intend to recount coherent or comprehensible plots or psychologically explain the characters”; c) “narrative works that communicate only facts researched by the author”, such as “the results of Danilo Dolci’s research on poverty in the suburbs of Palermo” and “the Brazilian Carolina Maria de Jesus transcribing or having transcribed the diaries of her life in a miserable São Paulo suburb, a work that was translated into several languages and highly praised by a novelist like Alberto Moravia”; d) “autobiographical narrations” or “autobiographical recollections”, such as “those of a family of workers and prostitutes in a Mexico City suburb” recorded on magnetic tape by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis; e) “mere reportage”, such as “Truman Capote’s report on a murder perpetrated in *In Cold Blood*”, or the “reports that read as if they were novels, but without being so”, such as those resulting from “scandalous documentation about abuses and violence” that occurred in “factories, offices, hospitals, and asylums”, collected by Günther Wallraff in *Thirteen Unwanted Reports* (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2848-2849).

Tending toward pointlessness, the voluntary movement of revolt against literature—under the motto “the end of literature”—“does not properly proclaim the death of literature, but that of language. This reflects the lack of a direct relationship between language and reality, a deficiency that Joyce had already sensed to the point of dispensing with communicability through language in *Finnegans Wake*. A precursor movement in this sense was hermetic poetry, less that of Ungaretti and Montale, but more that of the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and Michaux.” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2850).

Regarding what more properly concerns the paroxysm of the lyric concept, Carpeaux mentions “the ‘anti-poetry’ of the Chilean Nicanor Parra, who, starting from Surrealism and meeting up with the Beatniks, seeks to liquidate traditional poetry and lyricism.” The critic also refers to “the attempt by ‘concrete poetry’ to break the dominance of syntax and replace it with the conquest of ‘space’, through the meaningful placement of words on the page.” Significantly, for Samuel Beckett, “the last word is silence” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2850-2851).

In all these cases, Carpeaux distinguished a single effect: the “symptom of the exhaustion of the traditional concept of literature” (Carpeaux, 2008, p. 2851). But there is neither despair nor anguish in the critic’s observations, nor is there the premonition of an eschatological dogma. There is, rather, a certain philosophy of history—that is, the perception that individual literary manifestations, even the ones most averse to any sort of trend, are

articulated within the determined trajectory of history, a trajectory which, for reasons that escape reason, seems to possess its own logic. In short, one notices resignation in Carpeaux's critical stance. Conscious of the Vichian "courses" and "re-courses", he naturally accepted this moment of decline in inventive capacities—a period now quite extensive. After all, following the various creative irruptions in the *fin-de-siècle* period and even during Modernism, the emergence of a phase of involution is unsurprising.

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