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FROM HERE WE READ: POWER, RESISTANCE AND THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AMERICAN LITERATURE¹

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"Army general fears invasion of the Amazon". This was the daunting headline that reached the readers of the most influential and widely-circulating newspaper in southern Brazil, **Zero Hora**, on the morning of October 15, 1995. The piece of news, based on a lecture by the Amazon region army commander-in-chief to top federal government officials visiting the area, disclosed details of the movement of American troops stationed on the northern Brazilian border. According to the general, the Americans not only crossed the Brazilian air space but interfered in army communications as well. Their presence was to be under day-to-night surveillance because they were not "innocent" engineering troops, as it was first believed, but marines training field strategies for territorial occupation.

For our relief, it turned out that the general's fear blew over as quick as it was announced. Curiously enough, it sparked the signs of something fishy in relation to the area for, in the weeks that followed it, there were news of a major scandal sweeping the federal government bureau in charge of the Sivan Project, an integrated system of vigilance of the Amazon. In the massive and often discordant information on the case that has been loading the papers daily ever since then, and among hearings, accusations and discharges, an American business corporation named Raytheon has been placed under suspicion for having had untimely access to top-secret information on the project, a fact that allowed it to win over the competition with a French firm for the installment of a sophisticated radar system at the cost of 1.4 billion dollars to be financed by foreign investors. In the last week, the American

¹ Texto apresentado no painel "Seeing ourselves as others see us: scholars from abroad discuss their studies of American Literature", Durante o 111º Congresso da Modern Language Association of America, Chicago, dezembro, 1995.

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government, through its embassy, is making pressure on the Brazilian government to get the contract with Raytheon into effect.

By starting with these pieces of news that blasted over Brazilian public opinion lately, I don't want to focus on what can be regarded as a neo-imperialist thrust that articulates its military and economic power in practices that, for decades, have kept and served American interests in Latin America. What I specifically aim at is to give historical visibility to elements that partake of the pre-existing legible socio-political text that govern Brazilian students' contact with the texts of American literature in order to map some salient points and some of the tensions that attend this interaction as they receive an image of the US that interpellates their identity as Brazilians and inscribe their unfavorable position in the binary system of dominant / dependent, center / periphery, power / powerlessness.

As I am aware of poststructuralists distrust of any appeal to experience, I sustain nonetheless that experience as geographical location in the context of the hegemonic dependent split north/south resists essentialism in the sense that it stands for a structure of references by which people south of the Equator perceive and read their historical experience. From this perspective, experience is an indispensable departure point to a critical understanding of the problematics involved in cultural exchange between distinct national cultures, particularly when collective articulations of nationness are predicated on a space and temporality ideologically marked by oppositional differences. What shape does this problematic take in the teaching context of American Literature in Brazil? What are the pedagogical and political imperatives that surface in such a context? By what means can marginality be transformed into empowerment? How does the introduction of traditionally non-canonical texts affect students? These are some of the questions I will address briefly.

From my experience as a teacher of American literature at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul in the last ten years, I would say that students are, from the outset, "resisting readers" of American literature, to borrow from Judith Fetterley's book (1978). But it would be quaint to say that that happens just because they are Brazilians though that would not be a falsehood.. As an interpretive community, they are held together by a heightened awareness of an identity produced by the

conditions and contingencies of their location within the limits of a nation ravaged by the plagues of underdevelopment, with an ever-present history of colonization and tremendous social upheavals- a large backland country where people live in sub-human conditions with a primitive economy of hand labor farming that reminds us of pre-colonial times and industrial urban centers with growing slums where multinational corporations compete for tax advantages and huge profits that place the nation at the threshold of global economics. It is from this dramatic experience of location that they respond to the socio-political text of what has been termed "the American ideology", a field of force and reference that grounds an American identity projected and made familiar outside the US by its power, invincibility and interventionist foreign policies.

One of the most popular representations by which the American ideology as a system of ideas bound to a certain social order elicits its acts of interpellation is the image of the US as a powerful guardian of western values invested with the right of authority to make the world safe for democracy. This representation, with a regime of truth that naturalizes culturally and historically determined meanings -its truth reveals its fallacy when we ask safe for whom from whose point of view - brings to the students' critical perception the play of "nationalities" and the implicated questions of boundaries, autonomy and sovereignty. Such questions touch a very sour and sore spot of their collective memory of the national experience for they are reminded by historical records of the authorized involvement of the CIA in the coup d'etat of 64 which plunged the nation into 22 years of military dictatorship. If they resist being subjected to the structure of power within which the American socio-political text is elaborated and articulated it is because they understand that what is at issue, for them, it is the relationship between their place and history as stakes of identity and that being subjected to it is to erase the differences upon which this identity is constructed, what amounts to abandoning the idea of nationality altogether. Resistance to this already-read text becomes a politically effective and psychically affective affirmation of location as the condition for their insertion as subjects in the act of reading the text of the other.

I understand that the concept of national literature has fallen somewhat in disrepute in the context of prevailing tendencies in literary studies or, at least, is in a profound process of redefinition vis-a-vis the

dissemination, in the words of Bhabha (1994). "of the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood". Yet, concepts such as nation and identity, even when not taken as absolutes but as multilayered, heterogeneous constructs of imagined communities cannot be entirely ignored as *parte pris* of the teaching activity in the contextual international relation of the dichotomy center/periphery countries. Literature is part of institutional structures intimately associated with the production of national identity. American Literature, for instance, has been, from its origins, obsessed with the idea of American-ness, even when the notion of an all-encompassing identity was produced and supported by an ideology flexible enough to absorb and transmute dissensus into "varieties of ideological consensus" as Samcsan Bercovitch (1986) has pointed out. Seen in this framework of its authoritative address, American Literature articulates itself as an apparatus of symbolic power by virtue of the social values and contexts in which it is embedded and which it spells out, providing the ideological affiliations that sustain and give coherence to the identity of the national state.

It is in the light of these statements that I want to take up the question of the students as "resisting readers". What happens in the classroom is that they tend to transfer the assumptions that inhere to their positionality in relation to the socio-political text to their responses to the literary texts, establishing thus, a relational equivalence that comes dangerously close to seeing the later as mimetic representations of the former. So they respond to Emerson's "Self-Reliance", Whitman's "The Song of Myself", Melville's *Moby Dick*, Twain's *The adventures of Huck Finn* as distillations of the American ideology encoded in the figures of national potency, individualistic drive, advancement, progress, freedom, enterprise, transcendence. Their non-identification with such figures presents a double-bind: on the one hand, it activates a negativity that enhances the autonomy of subjectivities not co-opted by the power structure that undergirds those figures, and that can be a gesture towards empowerment; on the other, it narrows down the grounds of interpretation, contributing for the perpetuation of a vicious circle: as they are held by their readings of the socio-political text, they resist readings incompatible with their perception of a monolithic and unified cultural text and vice-versa. And this can mean a surrender to the power of the other, paralyzing in its effects. I would add, at this point, that the texts available and

systematically used in the classroom for survey courses since the early 70's, have, to some degrees, reinforced such a perception. Under the designation of **The American Tradition in Literature**, the anthology by Bradley, Beatty and Long (1961) pictures a rather uniform American tradition insofar as it poses limits to the range of literary production in terms of major writers and texts that best express the native values bequeathed by "a national inheritance". Perhaps, a remark is necessary here: 50 samples of the anthology referred to above were donated to the University by the USIS in the early 70's. In spite of being considered outdated, this anthology is still used, largely because the university library faces huge budget problems in keeping bibliographies in foreign literatures up to date. The Heath anthology, today used in American universities survey courses, is out of reach both to our library and to our students because of its cost.

When I've began introducing non-canonical texts in courses syllabi from the mid 80's onwards, I've observed that the students' response to American Literature started changing significantly and this has been so till now.. On reading Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the life of a slave girl*, Kate Chopin's *The awakening*, Richard Wright's *Black boy* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, texts where cultural representations challenge the notion of American-ness, the students are lead to review the ideological grounds of their readings. In effect, the images of this other of the American culture, rendered in the stories of the plight of women and Afro-Americans, break down what they had taken for granted, that is, the horizontal and homogeneous view of cultural supremacy embodied in the metaphor of the many-as-one upon which the idea of American-ness has been mobilized.

As students of a peripheral country like Brazil which still today, has not reckoned with its own otherness, where literary culture, for instance, is still imprisoned in the hierarchies and standards set by canonized texts modeled on white, male ethnocentric values, they respond to these texts very positively as if they recognized a part of themselves in the American culture's projection of its otherness, its dissident voice. This means, ultimately, a realignment of the antagonistic terms on which their reception of the Americanist canon (to use Donald Pease's terms) had been based. Otherness, thus displaced from the conflictual polarities and fixed differences we/them, here/there becomes, cognitively, a specular

image, the site of a dialectical play of resistance and identification, misrecognition and affiliation. Politically, otherness becomes the image of a hybrid space that opens up the possibility of cultural interaction by liberating the transformative power of interrelatedness.

In closing, I'd like to say that as a teacher also inscribed in the contingencies of location where teaching a foreign literature and American literature, for that matter, has been seen in the academic establishment, as a symbol of social status related to internal colonialism and class domination, I meant to foreground the ideological tensions that attend the reception of American literature in the classroom context. The question is political and therefore polemic, but to abstract the teaching activity from the conditions of conflict and antagonisms that the students live out in the concrete everyday world and bring to their readings would be to act on the bad-faith of blindness and abdicate of my social role as educator. If teaching American literature involves inflections of danger and power, it also offers the possibility of a cultural dialogics where differences as oppositions can change to differences as negotiations at the level of representations and symbolic cultural exchanges in an unequal and asymmetrical world.

The opening of the American literary canon resulting from the steadily-growing field of studies of gender and race has made this political and pedagogical move possible. In other words, multiculturalism has made American literature not a totally safe territory for Brazilian students but, at least, it has made it into a territory where they do not fear to thread.

O AMANTE DA MORTE: CONSIDERAÇÕES ACERCA DE UM CERTO IDEAL ROMÂNTICO EM ÁLVARES DE AZEVEDO

Roger Monteiro*

"Amore e morte a un tempo stesso..."
Leopardi

"Quand la mort est si belle,
Il est doux de mourir"
Vitor Hugo

COM A MORTE ENTRE OS BRAÇOS

"Yet one kiss on your pale clay
And those lips once so warm
My heart! My heart!"¹

Com essa epígrafe, Álvares de Azevedo introduz a narrativa de Solfieri, no tão polêmico segundo capítulo de seu *Noite na Taverna*.

A bem da verdade todo o livro é polêmico, por abordar assuntos muitíssimo delicados para o século XIX, como o incesto, a antropofagia e, no caso de Solfieri, a necrofilia.

Mas creio que esse capítulo do livro possa ser encarado como uma grande alegoria. Uma alegoria do amor azevediano pela morte.

Afinal, quando seu personagem avista a amada ela é *uma forma branca, uma estátua pálida*. Uma imagem irreal, etérea, que se move muito à vontade em meio à escuridão, com *as aves noturnas* passando ao seu redor, enquanto ela se ajoelha em frente a um túmulo, chorando e depois desaparece como que por encanto. Ora, essa donzela é a Morte.

Depois de avistá-la, Solfieri não a esquece:

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¹ "Um beijo, ainda, em tua pele pálida, e esses lábios, um dia tão quentes. Meu coração! Meu coração! Os versos são de Byron, no poema *Cain*, e a tradução é minha.