



The Production and Consumption of Precarious Literature – An Exemplary Case

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ABSTRACT

The criticism dedicated to the poet from the Brazilian State of Mato Grosso/ Mato Grosso do Sul Manoel de Barros is wide-ranging, but in spite of the many approaches to his work, undertaken by the specialists of the literary field, according to us, it is still necessary to investigate, although briefly, the relevance of his discursive strategy, on the basis of the relationships between his poetical universe and the phenomenon of consumption. Thus we approach some characteristics of his stylistics, above all the reiterated exploitation of certain elements of the natural world (specially its emphasis on the “precarious” things and beings) and the linguistic inversions (which defy normative grammar), responsible for the “differentiating mark” of his work, which, in order to impose itself, deliberately moves away from the hegemonic path. In this discussion, we mobilise concepts of literary theory, of the interface between communication and consumption and of the precepts of the French Discourse Analysis.

KEYWORDS: Consumption; Discourse; Style; Precarious; Manoel de Barros

EVERY AUTHOR HAS HIS OWN BRAND

Prominent figures within the field of culture, like poets, cannot be considered media celebrities because they do not meet the totalising credentials of visibility according to Inglis (2010). However, they still occupy noble spaces within the sphere of cultural production and, consequently, also in the context of their consumption.¹ An expressive, even if preambular question, is whether it is not through the excellence of their work (so it should be; extra-artistic factors should never influence critical assessment), that this central presence is what makes these authors relevant for the history of poetry, resulting, in effect, in their inclusion in the literary canon.

This inaugural question unfolds into the notion of internal hierarchisation, according to Bourdieu (1996) in his study about the literary universe, since the degree of recognition of a writer corresponds to the great or little of his or her symbolic capital in the field, devaluing or overvaluing the kind of literature produced by him. In this way, he beckons to his “presence” with more or less acceptance in two domains that, although complementary, not always converge to his conclusions: (specialised) criticism and (general) public.

1 Cf. in *Brief History of Celebrity* (Inglis, 2010. p. 57) some of the “effects and conditions of celebrity: public recognisability, the interplay of envy, admiration, generous acclaim, malicious denigration, prurient attentiveness, swift indifference.”

In a key of interpretation based on the analysis of French discourse, we could affirm every poet, as the enunciator of a particular work, enters into direct dispute with the work of other poets. This dispute is here understood as the establishment of an authorial brand, like a logo symbolising his singularity, differentiating him from his competitors. In other words: in order to assert its existence, the production of a poetic work is associated – and sometimes even conditioned – to its respective consumption.

Compagnon (2004), in his book *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, reminds us that it is not only the author but also the reader who gives meaning to a text. If so, the author could presuppose the profile of his readers and develop his work in communion with them. We realise here an approximation with the mechanism of discursive anticipation pointed out by Orlandi (2005). Through this mechanism, which constitutes the very act of enunciation, the author (enunciator) puts himself in the position of reader (enunciatee), in order to ascertain whether his statements motivate, affect or provoke the other:

(...) every subject has the ability to experience, or rather to put himself in the place in which his interlocutor “hears” his words. He thus anticipates his interlocutor as to the meaning produced by his words. (...) This spectrum varies widely, from the prediction of an interlocutor that is his accomplice to that whom, at the opposite side, he foresees as an absolute adversary (Orlandi, 2005, p. 34).



It is not a question of affirming that these “ideal” readers guide the writer’s demands, but no writer is unaware of their existence, and even though he can ignore them, he does not do it completely, because by writing he reads himself or somehow anticipates for himself the reading of others. The first reader of a writer, the target reader, the reader who validates the author’s writing and forces him to remake it, whether he wants it or not, is, through a mechanism of anticipation, the writer himself. The writer himself – and also, or above all, the one who, at another time, will be his (other) reader and will continue to validate his works written in the past, now – and all of his works to come.

Similarly, in marketing, one of the guidelines of the advertising of any commercial brand is knowing their target audience. It is necessary to have some knowledge of this contingent, to carefully gauge the language in order to elicit empathy – which would be unattainable without taking into account the mechanism of anticipation, that is, if the enunciating brand does not “hear,” in the position of enunciator, what its utterances say and if, in such gradation, they are sufficient to instigate their “target.”

It is no coincidence that Fernando Pessoa, whose poetic work is fragmented into distinct authorial ramifications corresponding to the production of his different pen names – and aren’t these pen names a strategy to reach a wider audience? –, wrote advertising texts as a freelancer and, in one of the essays in which he theorised about the trade of advertising, he affirmed that it is essential to know the public to whom a product is directed – and here we can add, the same happens in relation to a text (be it in advertising or literature) and its consumer/reader:

The study of the public, that is, of the markets, is of three orders — economic, psychological and properly social. That is, to enter a market, whether domestic or foreign, it is necessary: 1) to know the conditions of economic acceptance of the item, and those in which the competition works and what it offers; 2) to know the nature of buyers to, regardless of matters of price, know what the best way is to distribute and claim the item; 3) to ascertain the circumstances, if there are any, that, of profound social or political order, or superficial and fashionable or momentary, require certain corrections in the result of the two previous studies (Pessoa, 1990, p. 224–25).

As the Portuguese poet pointed out, it is equally essential, besides knowing one’s audience, to know the strategies of the competition, which, we point out, can unfold in the marketing plan and also in the discursive plan of the product.

Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2003, p. 94), analysing discourses about brands, define brand identity as “the capacity of a brand to be recognized as unique, over time, without confusion, thanks to the elements that individualize it.” It is this identity that differentiates one brand from another. Thus, based on these authors’s studies about the communication strategies of commercial brands, we could say that every author (poet)

would be, consciously or not, placing their work, through their own peculiarities, on a discursive “shelf” that pleads for a certain originality capable of guaranteeing the interest of readers.

It is no coincidence that Mario Benedetti (1994, p. 116–17), in the poem “Tactics and Strategy,” says: “my tactic is/ to remain in your memories/ I don’t know how nor/ with what pretext/ but to stay within you.”² Though not expressed in the poem, the pretext is implicit and is not unknown by the poet: the enunciator knows that for the utterances to produce meanings, the enunciatee has to consume them, thus removing them from the latency in which they could always remain.

Our aim is to take Manoel de Barros’s case as the example of an author who, aware of the need to position his work – despite the legitimate elements of his poetics –, focused intensely and uninterruptedly on certain stylistic traits that guaranteed authorial differentiation, as well as critical reputation.

STYLE: THE ESSENCE OF LITERARY CONSUMPTION

Compagnon (2004) makes a lengthy examination of the notion of style in his work, evaluating conceptions that preceded in a few decades the relationship between literary text and language. After discussing the various ways of conceiving style (as norm, ornament, deviation, genre, symptom, culture and thought), he concludes that three aspects define him and that are no arguments capable of neutralising them:

- Style is a formal variation on a (more or less) stable content.
- Style is a set of characteristic features of a work allowing its author to be identified and recognized (more intuitively than analytically).
- Style is a choice among several “writings.” (Compagnon, 2004, p. 145).

We can think, in consonance with the three constituent vectors of this literary notion, that a certain style, or, in our case, the style of a certain writer, is not only the brand (of his uniqueness) but also his “differential” in relation to the writing of other authors.

Any writer, in order to establish himself before the public (it will be the readers who will give his text the status of “work”), needs, whether he wants it or not – and obviously according to his personal obsessions and his mastery of the principles, techniques and possibilities of his craft –, to have a well-defined style, his brand.

It is by means of his own style that a writer legitimises himself, stands out and distinguishes himself from others. His many or few formal variations and their constant contents (themes, so to speak) are what give him the perseverance

2 “Táctica y Estrategia”: “mi táctica/ es quedarme en tu recuerdo/ no sé cómo ni sé/ con qué pretexto/ pero quedarme en vos.”

to at one and the same time impose and consolidate his particular, authorial “voice.” The set of traits peculiar to his work is what leads him to be recognised intuitively (by the public) and analytically (by critics). His writing is a choice among others – we need not look more closely at whether his writing is led by his literary limitations or by his discursive strategy in competition with that of other works, or still for a balance between these two lines of force (a “romantic” and a “pragmatic” one).

Considering these three aspects, interconnected and shaping the notion of style, we can see, for example, that Alvaro de Campos, Alberto Caeiro and Ricardo Reis – Pessoa’s pen names – are different poets; the writing of each one (with their dominant and recessive stylistic elements, their *embrayages* [engagements] and *débrayages* [disengagements]) identifies and distances them.

Similarly, the semantic reader, the one that Eco (2005, p. 224) points out as the first-level reader, who only reads the text, can (by discerning, even if not analytically, an author’s brand) recognise whether the following poem is by Carlos Drummond de Andrade or Manoel de Barros:

To be great, a creature depends on its own desertion.

We are created by sentences!

Writing is full of peel and pearl.

Ah! I have always been waste.

What a joy it is catching snails on decaying walls!

A thing with no name to explain it.

Like a light that vegetates in a bird’s clothing.

This semantic reader can discover, by intuition or even by contagion, as Tolstói defines it (2011, p. 97) – the feeling embedded in a work of art turned real by that reader when he experiences it –, who the author of the poem is. The semiotic, or second-level reader, equally theorised by Eco (2005, p. 224), examines the text in depth, interested in how it was constructed. He is therefore a “critical reader,” and, in this condition, he easily recognises in the cited poem a form and content inherent in Manoel de Barros’s (2016a, p. 39) work, that is, the recurrence of elements in his style and, consequently, his unique “writing,” distinct from all others.

By the way, in the poem “Igual-Desigual,” [Equal-Unequal] Drummond (1980, p. 59) affirms:

All sonnets, gazels, virelays, sestinas and rondos are alike and all, all poems in free verse are boringly alike.

(...)

All creations of nature are alike.

All actions, cruel, pious or indifferent, are alike.

However, man is not like another man, animal or thing.

He is not like anything.

Every human being is a unique stranger.

If all poems in free verse are boringly alike, including among them the poems of Drummond and Manoel de Barros, the only way to differentiate them, and consequently, to recognise their authors, is precisely because of their distinctive form, the “unique stranger” that each poet is, who, guided by the mechanism of anticipation – conscious or not –, in line with his “poetics” and style, is able to materialise them.

It is no coincidence that the same thing takes place also with consumer goods in the context of the market. A product is recognised and then consumed, due to the striking and distinctive features that characterise it. As Chevalier and Mazzalovo (2003, p. 25) argue, “the common objective of brands is to introduce differentiation” and, for this reason, brands “are an unavoidable reality”; defining and managing them are rules of the game (in our case, rules of art).

THE PRECARIOUS: A VITAL STYLISTIC TRAIT IN MANOEL DE BARROS

However, how to present a product with its brand, gain consumer preference and keep their loyalty? Or, how to present a literary style and, after anchoring it to the sensibility of its readers, keep on captivating them?

For an author’s style to establish itself, it must ratify its most relevant peculiar traits (and the traits that make its brand well-known), which requires a complex balance between repetition and variation. The first, in high dosage, will turn the author, over time, into a “copy” of himself, at times a pastiche, a decal, a risk that every artist invariably runs. The second, if exaggerated or equally scarce, often distances the writer from the style that earned him recognition – or worse, distances him from his “self,” from his literary personality, so hard to establish and maintain. Manoel de Barros (2016b, p. 16), in one of his poems in *Livro das Ignoranças* [Book of Ignorances], emphasises: “Repeat, repeat — until it’s different./ To repeat is a talent of style.”

It is no coincidence that the poet from Mato Grosso turned repetition (of themes, linguistic procedures, lyrical devices, etc.) not only into a “talent” of his style, but into his strategy of “survival” to remain “alive” in the literary world. By repeating, with small variations in the form of poetry his homage to the particularities of the fauna and flora of his original locus, his roots in the Pantanal, Manoel de Barros reinforces the layers of singularity that make his work distinct from others.

One of the essential elements of this strategy is his obsessive way – which can be verified through his uninterrupted repetition – of mobilising elements of the universe of the precarious. In all of his poetry books – except for the first two, when he was still “building” his literary personality, both still in decantation according to Moriconi (2016 pp. 7–10) – there is an abundant number of poems that address the “precarious” particularities of nature in the Pantanal: snails, ants, birds, tree stumps and muddy critters, always in harmony with many expressions that subvert the linguistic logic, like the following one, extracted from *Livro das*

Ignorãças [Book of Ignorances] (Barros, 2016b): “Today I draw the smell of trees,” “It is like being dawned to birds,” “The silence of stones has no volume,” “It was then that I started to teach the swallows.” Many other examples can be found throughout his poetic work.

Among dozens of other poems by Manoel de Barros, “Autorretrato Falado” [Composite Self-portrait] accurately reveals his authorial “choices”:

I come from a Cuiabá of mines and crooked alleyways.
My father had a shop on Beco da Marinha, where I was born.
I grew up in the Pantanal of Corumbá among ground
critters, birds, humble people, trees and rivers.

I enjoy living in decadent places for the sake of being
among stones and lizards.

I have already published 10 poetry books: when I publish
them, I feel a little disgraced and I escape to the Pantanal
where I am blessed by herons.

My entire life I’ve been looking for but couldn’t find
myself — and this is what saved me.

I’m not in the gutter only because I inherited a cattle ranch.
The oxen recreate me.

Now I’m such a twilight!

I am in a category of moral suffering because I only do
useless things.

In my dying there is a tree pain (Barros, 2016b, p. 79).

In this self-portrait, as in the whole production of this poet (from his third book onwards, as we have already said), it is possible to note the appearance and ratification of traits prevalent in his style: 1) the greatness of what is insignificant in the natural world (ground critters, birds, lizards, etc.); 2) syntactic constructions that are unexpected – but that, because of their style, are expected by those who consume his poetry –, such as “I am blessed by herons,” “the oxen recreate me,” “I’m such a twilight,” “my dying has a tree pain”; 3) the vocabulary of support, equally adjusted to the precarious (“crooked alleyways,” “decadent places,” “useless things”).

Let us look at another expressive example of his style, which, thus representing it, is recognisable by its “consumer,” since the poet, guided by the mechanism of anticipation, knew he had to consider the consumer’s sensibility – because, as we saw in Compagnon (2004), the reader predicts his author:

My world is small, Lord.

There is a river and a few trees.

The back of our house faces the water.

Ants trim the edge of Grandmother’s rose beds.

In the backyard, there is a boy
and his wondrous tin cans.

His eye exaggerates the blue.

Everything from this place has a pact with birds.

Here if the horizon reddens a little,

the beetles think it’s a fire.

Where the river starts a fish,

river me a thing

River me a frog

River me a tree.

In the evenings, an old man plays his flute

to invert the sunsets. (Barros, 2016b, p. 51)³

Here are the details of daily life and of the geographical territory where the poet lived and that charmed him (“my world is small,” “a river and a few trees,” “ants trim the edge of Grandmother’s rose beds,” “beetles think,” etc.), the “original” way Manoel de Barros expresses himself (“everything ... has a pact with birds,” “the river starts a fish,” “river me a thing,” “river me a frog,” “river me a tree,” etc.), the great expanse of “his” Pantanal dammed into a domestic glossary (“the house,” “the river,” “Grandmother,” “the backyard,” “a boy,” “tin cans,” “the horizon,” “an old man”).

While still seeking to consolidate his style, Manoel de Barros, in his second book, *Face Imóvel* [Still Face] (1942), wrote the poem “Os Girassóis de Van Gogh” [Van Gogh’s Sunflowers]:

Today I saw

Soldiers singing on roads of blood

Freshness of mornings in the eyes of children

Women chewing dead hopes

Today I saw men at dusk

Receiving love in their chests.

Today I saw men receiving war

Receiving tears like bullets in their chests.

And as the pain lowered my head,

I saw Van Gogh’s blazing sunflowers (Barros, 2016c, p. 55).

Decades later, the poet would face the same theme, but this time, with an already well-developed style, he dispenses the grandiose “tone” and verbosity, concentrating his poetic power, backed by details, in one single verse that defies conventional grammar (Barros, 2016b, p. 17).

A sunflower appropriated God: it was in Van Gogh.

This comparison allows us to prove that a literary work is not established – and who grants it permanence is the reader –, if its author does not invest, through repetition and variation, on the structuring beams of his style.

3 Poem translated by Idra Novey (Barros, 2010).

Even in the last works he published, *Menino do Mato* [Boy from the Jungle] and *Escritos em Verbal de Ave*, [Writings in Bird Language] Manoel de Barros would use this complex balance between repetition and variation of the constituent elements of his style, thus maintaining the differential brand of his “literary product.”

IN SHORT: CONSUMPTION IS MAINTAINED THANKS TO THE PRECARIOUS

To conclude, let us go back to Benedetti’s poem (1994, p. 117), which, in its last few verses, enunciates, in our view, the position of a poet from the Pantanal before the literary universe, that is, how he maintained his differentiating brand: “my strategy is/ deeper and simpler/ my strategy is/ that any day/ I do not know how nor/ with what pretext/ you may finally need me.”⁴

By moving away from great themes, or rather, by approaching them through small details, Manoel de Barros gives us a poetic work that ignores current hegemony. If we recall that consumption, according to Douglas and Isherwood (2006) is a code of values which generates a sense of belonging among people (Canclini, 1995), his poetry, produced with the semantics of the precarious, becomes a valuable consumer item for readers who are resistant to the poetry of great themes and noble verses. We might add that, as he was aware of the existence of an economy of discourses, he chose to put into circulation a scarce “commodity,” since he was opposed to dominant poetry, achieving “distinction” by taking the position of a “guardian of the waters” of the Pantanal, just like Pessoa turned Caeiro into his guardian of herds.

Herberto Helder (2010, pp. 12–13), another important Portuguese poet, advises: “seek your own style if you don’t want to fail.” For him, style “is a subtle way of transferring the confusion and violence of life to the mental plane of a unit of signification.” By forming his own style for decades, Manoel de Barros turned the “greatness of the insignificant” into his unit of signification – and assumed that being a poet, as in the conception of Mario Quintana (2013, p. 155), “is not saying great things, but having a voice recognisable in the midst of all others.”

Dragging, like a snail, the world of precarious things into the production of his discourse, the poet from the Pantanal leads the reader to relish in consuming a great quantity of statements of his “thingal, larval, stony dialect” (Barros, 2013, p. 42). His penchant for the lesser, for the small, for the tiny, indisputably became a broad-ranging strategy for his poetry.

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