CRITICISM WITH A SOUL – ALFREDO BOSI, HIS LEGACY AND ONE LAST WAVE[1]

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Abstract: Drawing on personal recollections, in this article I examine Alfredo Bosi's intellectual career, from his academic training between Brazil and Italy in the early 1960s, to his work as a faculty member at the University of São Paulo until his death in 2021. I also analyze the multiple nature of his work, which simultaneously follows both materialistic and idealistic principles.
Keywords: Alfredo Bosi (1936-2021), Dialectical Materialism, Poetry and Resistance

It's never easy to delete the address of someone who's died. It makes us apprehensive, fearful we might be wiping that person from our memory forever. Recently, I came across the name Alfredo Bosi (1936-2021), and, when I saw the note next to his email address, I didn't have the courage to erase it. They were the instructions he had sent more than twenty years ago, when he invited us to visit him and his wife, Ecléa Bosi (1936-2017), at their house in the countryside, in Cotia, in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo: exit the Raposo Tavares highway, turn onto Basileia Street, keep right, turn onto Zurique Street, and, when you get there, he wrote, "ring the bell."

It was our first time visiting them, and the old bell seemed like a statement of principles. We were to be welcomed as wayfarers to a monastery. The Franciscan simplicity of the place was moving, *comovente* (a word Bosi used often). Their little brick house sat at the back of the lot. In the front was a small soccer field made for the grandchildren, along with the plants that Ecléa

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tended to, scattered all about. I'll never forget the kitchen—the country air, the agate dishes, the flagstone floors, the wooden furniture and that light that, bunched up in the curtains, seemed to transport us to another time.

It's said that, at the age of three, Simone Weil refused a ring given to her as a gift, claiming that she didn't like luxury. Ecléa recounts the story in her introduction to an anthology of essays by the French philosopher. The tale says a lot about the Bosis as a couple: luxury proscribed, what remains? Who are we without our possessions?

In one of his essays, Alfredo Bosi discusses the concept of *attention*, as elaborated by Weil, for whom victory over the "thingification" of the world is possible only in a mind free of passions, capable of giving primacy to "figures and their geometrical properties." With our imaginations rid of subjective dispersions, we escape the captivity of personal vanities, finding ourselves prepared for transformative action and, thus, ready to resist the gears of the social machine

This intricate philosophical notion, distrusting of our love for material possessions, purports to construct a world resistant to the empire of things. But even in such a world, we should never stop paying attention to things; we can observe them as one admires the gracefulness of a world that belongs to no one. In another essay, Bosi suggests that Simone Weil followed the thinking of her teacher and mentor Alain, who ascribed to the artist the capacity to recognize "forms, dimensions and the weight of the real, everything that nature presents as immanent law."

I remember another time, in 2008, when we were viewing a Giorgio Morandi exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Bosi went up to each of the Italian's still life paintings. Magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses, his myopic eyes stared at the bottles shrouded in that milky light that Morandi admirers know so well. As we walked through the museum, he told us about a form of attention that could make each object unique, capturing within it the subtle organization of matter.

As was true for Simone Weil, for whom mathematical abstraction was part of an exercise in contemplating the universe, the human gaze, when confronting the material world, can experience an endless order of numerical relations, which some would call divine. Whether or not we believe in the same God as the Bosis or Simone Weil, the fact is that the world can move

us whenever we allow ourselves to admire its natural order—striving never to dominate it, but also refusing to let it dominate us.

Walking through the museum with Bosi reminded me of his kitchen in Cotia and what it held: a lesson on contemplation and an invitation to be in the world without wanting—or perhaps even needing—to possess it.

Alfredo Bosi was born in São Paulo on August 26, 1936. The son of an Italian mother and grandson of Italians on his father's side, Bosi would often recall a scene from his childhood in which, while helping his mother sew, he would chase after the buttons that fell under the table or carry out some small task suitable only to his child-sized hands. The scene evokes the opposite of the factory work that, at the onset of capitalism, was reserved for children—dangerous tasks that adults were unable to perform. Imagining Bosi as a little boy beside his mother at work paints an endearing picture of a cozy little domestic workshop.

Manual labor never escaped Bosi's critical horizons. In one of his essays, from the mid-1970s, there is a section titled "The Works of the Hand." Dedicated to Ecléa, it lauds handiwork, a kind of rosary, with each bead representing some small or large task:

> The hand feels with the fingertips, palpates and presses with the flesh, scrapes, scratches, scarfs and picks at with the fingernails. With the knuckles, it knocks.
>
> The hand opens the wound and dresses it. Ruffles the hair and smooths it out. Braids and unbraids. Wrinkles and unwrinkles the paper and the cloth. Anoints and conjures, sprinkles and exorcises.
>
> Accuses with the index, applauds with the palms, protects, when cupped like a shell. Gives life by raising the thumb; takes life, by letting it fall.
>
> Measures length with the span of the hand, weight with the palm.

And, later:

> A woman's hand has eyes on its fingertips: it marks the fabric, threads the needle, sews, stitches, backstitches, finishes, darns, makes

> buttonholes. Fastens the fabric to the hoop: and weaves and warps and embroiders.

But what do these same hands do in the time of factories? The section wraps up with a harrowing question:

> In the Machine Age, has the hand perhaps lost its finest articulations, those with which it paired the protrusions and recesses of matter? Craftmanship, by necessity, diminishes or declines, and the hands operate the assembly lines far from the products they produce. The hands push buttons, turn cranks, flip switches, push and pull levers, operate panels, ceding to the machine the tasks that were once theirs. The machine, docile and therefore violent, does exactly what the hands tell it to do; but, if it goes easy on the operator's muscle, it also demands constant vigilance: otherwise, it cuts off inattentive fingers. There were 8 million work accidents in Brazil alone in 1975.

In our current information age, perhaps the factory setting described by Bosi seems outdated. I wish he and Ecléa had lived, however, to see the magnificent *Nomadland*. Scenes of the main character walking down the aisles of Amazon's gigantic warehouses leave no room for doubt: hands are still at work "far from the products they produce." Shots from Chloé Zhao's film confirm what Bosi himself wrote, in a book published in 2010:

> It is not hard to imagine what Simone Weil would say about working conditions in these times marked by the startling achievements of automation, paralleled by the no less startling relapses into the meshes of major financial networks. Some of her prophecies are coming true before our very own alarmed eyes. If the proportion of industrial workers has fallen relative to those employed in public and civil service, thereby altering social class composition, the political divide between those in charge and those who follow orders has sustained sharp

> inequality within the participatory sphere of decision-making bodies, both in and outside of the state apparatus.

In another of Bosi's essays from the 1970s, "Poesia Resistência" (Poetry Resistance), poetic labor is viewed as a subtle way of fighting—but one that, in modernity, runs the risk of folding back, closing itself off to the world. A perceptive reader might pick up on a particularity not entirely apparent at first glance: Bosi wrote the piece at a time when concrete poetry was gaining prominence in Brazil. I remember him telling me about the time he met one of the great concrete poets. Only later would he come to appreciate a book like *Não: poemas* (No: Poems), by Augusto de Campos. In those initial years, he was still skeptical of the idea that poetry's primary source could be found in the language games of the poem itself. At least that's how I interpret one of the statements in his essay, which would later take on various hues: "Modern poetry was compelled into strangeness and silence. Worse, it was condemned to extract vitality from itself alone. Oh, extreme indigence, emptied-out song, metalanguage!"

That is, something of greater significance stirred *outside* this thing that is the poem, with its mirror tricks and echoes so dear to some modern poets. Something vital, soulful, human: a breath found nowhere, if not within each of us.

Under a tree in Cidade Universitária, in the West Zone of São Paulo, we were having a heated conversation about Roland Barthes when I realized how inadequate he found the French critic's metaphor of the "death of the author" (the notion that we should turn to the infinite potentialities of the text, without wasting time asking about the intentions of who wrote it).

To understand Bosi's orientation to the written word is to understand his belief in the soul as the motor powering the hands that write. Literature demands that we probe the writer's torments, desires and fantasies. Wading against the current of the theoretical debates of the 1970s, Bosi was interested in awakening the author from his artificial "death," seeking within him (or her) the source of feeling and meaning within each text.

Bosi scrunched his nose whenever someone identified him as a "catholic critic." In a universe dominated by materialistic thinking, as the academic world was and still is, reasoning in terms of the "soul" can sound anachronistic, if not misguided. Indeed, to reduce Bosi's criticism solely to religion would be a barbarity. And still, his position as one of Brazil's greatest literary critics can be best understood when taking religious activism into account.

Close to Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns and a friend of Frei Betto, Bosi once told me—with smiling eyes and a fast tongue, which made the whole account even funnier—the story of the "true" genesis of Liberation Theology: like a wily little Macunaíma, Cardinal Hélder Câmara went to work between the meetings of the Second Vatican Council, in the 1960s, slyly swapping the council members' papers for texts written by Father Lebret. Lebret preached the option for the poor, in the ecumenical spirit that would later set the tone for the progressive Church in Latin America—this in the times of the Cold War, and of violent regimes supported by the great powers.

I left his house still chuckling inside, imagining a tiny little Cardinal Hélder rummaging through the folders of his colleagues at the Vatican, glancing sideways to avoid being caught in that holy crime.

Bosi's criticism ponders both material conditions and the soul. His horizon extends from labor exploitation to the internal dimensions of the subject. A quick review of his academic trajectory is enough to understand what makes such a connection possible.

Bosi's Italian-Brazilian roots helped him to graduate in Romance Languages in the mid-1950s, on Maria Antônia Street—site of the former School of Philosophy of the University of São Paulo (USP) before it moved to Butantã. The professors, most of whom were foreigners, often began their courses by analyzing original texts in French, Spanish and Italian. At that point, what would later become known as the "structuralist fever," that is, the prevalence of structuralism in textual and cultural analysis, had not yet set in. Back then, more attention was paid to the images and feelings aroused by literature. There were specific ways of reading, focused on the subject, which would later become, as Bosi would say, "buried" by the "anti-psychological" force of structuralism.

Theoretical sparring aside, Italian literature seduced Bosi from an early age. He felt at home with Italo Bettarello, an Italian professor who, in his very first class, taught his young pupils an excerpt from Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetics*. Then twenty-year-old Bosi was enchanted by the idea of searching for that intimate flow which, according to the Italian philosopher, would find its sensible form in the poem. The idea of the text as an expression of an inner truth, as if each word carried a subjective intuition, would later shield Bosi from the reductionist readings of Marxism that were abundant in the 1960s and 1970s.

But Bosi was also a voracious reader of Marxist critics, who, as it happens, left a profound mark on his essays, including the one often considered his masterpiece: the award-winning *Dialética da colonização,* published in 1992. It was, however, in Italy—where Bosi spent a year as a graduate student at the University of Florence, between 1961 and 1962—that the difficult equation between spirit and flesh, soul and matter, would be solved.

Although he ended up specializing in aesthetics and Renaissance philosophy, Bosi had departed for Europe with the idea of writing a thesis on the poetry of Jorge de Lima. Upon arriving in Europe, he found the Italian academy in flames, and his beloved Croce being crucified by professors who, adherent to the orthodoxy of the Communist Party, were seeking in literary texts moments of ideological imposition—the kind that squander the subject who writes, emptying him of his own free will. To his dismay, the mechanical explanation of texts reduced them to mere ideological beams confining the author.

In other words, there was no room for the "auroral" dimension of poetry, which Giambattista Vico—one of Croce's greatest inspirations—conjectured to be in the very origins of language, when everything is still fantasy, before being bound by rational formulas. But the order of the day demanded that texts be churned through the mill of ideological criticism, grinding up whatever there was of poetry in them.

One time I asked Bosi for an example of this kind of deterministic reading that bothered him so much. Bosi responded with Dante, whose *Divine Comedy* maps perfectly onto medieval Thomistic morality, with its depictions of virtues and vices. Characters are punished according to their deviations, assigned to the circle of Hell corresponding to the sinful passion to which they succumbed during their lives. So far, pure ideology. Where, then, to look for poetry?

I'll reproduce here a fragment from an interview with Bosi, which I conducted a little over fifteen years ago and had the foresight to record:

> It so happens that these sinners who are there, being punished, tormented, move Dante, who arrives with Virgil and asks: who are those who go there, like doves carried by desire? Then Virgil calls two of them into conversation, their punishment is temporarily suspended, and the others remain, naturally. There's a sentencing, and they tell their story. Virgil is so moved that *caddi comme corpo morto cade* [he "fell, even as a

> dead body falls''—Bosi quoted Dante, with an expressive gesture of the hands]. He fainted out of pity. This story that Dante tells—the desires, the doves and all the metaphors of love—and the profound relationship with the subject who narrates, that is poetry. The rest was a necessary structure; we can polemicize whether each passage could be reduced to this or that philosopher, whether or not it represented something of the society of the time, or whether it could be a *sociological* datum (a word which, to Croce, gets no *bonne presse*).

Conflicting readings preoccupied the young graduate student, who, at the time, lived with Ecléa in an extremely cold apartment, thanks to the stinginess of the landlady who tried to save on heating. But it was at that moment, in Florence, that an unlikely juncture would form in Bosi's mind: on one hand, the historical situation of each author, with its concrete conditionings and limits; on the other, the possibility that poetry could be studied as a form of resistance to the weight of historical determinations. Only poetic impulse would be capable of carving out, in the homogenized and uncritical realm of ideology, a space of complete signification, shared, with equal emotion, by poet and reader. Almost still intact, these feelings could cut across the centuries that separate us from Dante.

Upon returning to Brazil, the Bosis became involved in the left-wing projects forming around President João Goulart. It was not long before they began collaborating with *Brasil Urgente*, the newspaper of the Dominicans in São Paulo. Inspired by the ideas of Friar Carlos Josaphat, *Brasil Urgente* brought together a wide range of voices in defense of social justice, until its publication was interrupted, soon after the military coup. The story of the Bosis' return to Brazil intertwines with the history of the Dominicans who, in France, had already made themselves visible in the fight against the Nazi occupation during World War II. Later, in Brazil, they would participate in the opposition to the dictatorship, to the point of having several of their members tortured by the executioners of 1964.

In the academic sphere, Bosi began writing his doctoral dissertation in Italian, which he would present at the University of São Paulo (USP) in 1964. The topic was the theatre of Luigi Pirandello, whose tormented characters attempt to free themselves from the social roles imposed upon them. As Bosi told me, "I began to betray dear Croce…" That is, he was developing a

method that would allow him to combine historical conditioning with the will to free oneself from the social mask that imprisons. The tension between freedom and ideology would resurface in his subsequent work, in the analysis of authors as diverse as Father Antônio Vieira and Machado de Assis.

The task of the literary critic would be to discern what was hidden behind the mask—to catch the subject divided between the ideological brake and the desire that, often disguised, resists from within, through one's own style of thinking and writing. It is what Bosi later identifies as a desired combination of "feeling and coherent praxis," which he derived from reading Marxist critics such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who allowed him to rediscover Croce's "Hegelian sources."

It's worth unpacking this idea even further, to better understand what a return to the "Hegelian sources" of these authors really means. In a chapter of his book *Ideologia e contraideologia* (Ideology and Counter-ideology), which he titled "Parêntese temerário: a religião como alienação ou como desalienação" (Reckless Parenthesis: Religion as Alienation or Disalienation), Bosi interrupts his long reflection on the concept of ideology to return to the Christian sources that Marx disowned, despite having built his historical dialectic upon them. These include Feuerbach, Kant, and Hegel, suggesting, in various ways, that a moral life leads one to question God, not as an individual entity, but as a kind of original force of the universe—that same cosmos that perhaps the critic would glean in the placid yet intrinsically complex forms of Giorgio Morandi.

Or in the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, to use a reference that was even dearer to Bosi, and which led to his last book, published in 2018. In Da Vinci's paintings, one can perceive reverence for the perfect mathematical order of the universe, combined with observation of the concrete order of the world we inhabit. The balance between belief in the afterlife and in the here and now relativized the Neoplatonic idealism prevalent in the Florentine Medici court, in which Da Vinci had been trained: "Living bodies with their specific forms and acts are situated by traditional Neoplatonism on an inferior plane, subject to division, pain and death. In Da Vinci, by contrast, one is presented with the artistic and scientific appreciation of that same nature." In short, love of worldly matter, moved, nonetheless, by love of a higher order.

Whatever the topic, Bosi's critical imagination led him to reflect on the "end" of human activity, that is, the very reason for our existence. The indifferent yawning of non-religious

authors in the face of this question never convinced him. He was a mindful student of a certain German idealism, foundational to his beloved Croce:

> In Kant, God is a transcendental horizon. In Hegel, He is the ever living and operative presence of divine self-consciousness in the human heart, which gives meaning to Christian incarnation. Revelation, as *appearance*, would have propitiated, historically and rationally, the encounter of the divine with the human.

But then, what are we to make of Brazilian literature, and its most beloved author? How does Machado de Assis fit into this schema in which existence seeks some end, some ultimate reason? Bosi and I spoke endlessly about the influence of Pascal—a mystical philosopher whom we both adored—on Machado de Assis, a confirmed atheist. It was a paradox that fascinated us.

Bosi questioned the common perception of the author of *Dom Casmurro* as a skeptical man. Of course, no one would seriously postulate that Machado de Assis was an outright activist, much less a believer. And yet, there is something in certain Machadian characters that not even the cynical gaze of the narrator can erase. Anyone attempting to flee from the favor system of seignorial Brazil and escape from the shadows of the ruling classes has a tragic fate in store. Such is the case of Eugênia, in *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*: unlike the book's miserly *bon vivant* narrator, she will end her days "sad as a pauper's burial, solitary, quiet, unflagging" (translation by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux).

During one of our conversations about Machado, Bosi spoke of Eugênia, remembering that her journey on earth was like a "pauper's burial." At that moment, his eyes filled with tears and he couldn't finish his sentence. Something was stuck in his throat, and we both stared at each other, amazed by the weight of that image.

In August 2014, Bosi invited me to accompany him and his family to a school in São Paulo for a fortieth anniversary tribute to the martyrdom of Friar Tito de Alencar, a Dominican who committed suicide while in exile in France, after being barbarously tortured in Brazil for his opposition to the dictatorship.

There, among others, were João Pedro Stédile and Frei Betto. The hall resembled a school fair, with booths selling keepsakes honoring the life and death of Friar Tito. I noticed

that Bosi was watching over me, curious. Walking over, he whispered, "You're not used to this kind of atmosphere, are you?"

To be honest, the atmosphere wasn't all that strange to me. Though I've never been a practicing Catholic, I did attend more than one Catholic school and, as a teenager, I participated in several Workers' Party (PT) events, which bared some resemblance to a charitable bazaar in the back of a church.

Bosi spoke of Friar Tito, his writings and his suffering at the hands of his torturers. It's strange to reread his words today, when the apology for violence is so deeply ingrained in institutions and in the soul of so many Brazilians. Eradicating torture and promoting "citizen coexistence," he used to say, "is our political ideal." He also recalled the change that, in the early 1960s, had pulled "a large number of Christians out of conformism, leading them toward a kind of social and political engagement that advocated for structural reforms and, at the very extreme, adhered to a revolutionary ideal."

All of this draws back the curtain on a time when, introduced by the Dominicans, the Bosis had become involved with the basic ecclesial communities in the peripheries of São Paulo. But this would not be their only experience with activism. In Cotia, many years later, they would become rather involved in local and environmental politics. I remember the tenderness with which Bosi showed me the pamphlets that Ecléa had made to distribute at the demonstrations against nuclear policy, denouncing the horrors of Fukushima. They had such a simplicity to them, as if they had been printed on one of those antique mimeographs.

In a text written for the Second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, in 2002, there are stunning passages about Bosi's experience, forty years prior, with a collective reading at a Pastoral Operária (Pastoral of the Workers) meeting in Osasco. The book selected was *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives)*, by Graciliano Ramos:

> Those young people who, at the first meeting, sat in embarrassed silence soon let out their voices, timid indeed, but vibrant with promise. Having lived so many years on the threshold of writing, they learned in a few hours that not all writing has to be like those accounts manipulated by Fabiano's boss. Ramos shows how distressing it was for the people from the backlands (sertanejos) to have to face the boss's ledgers at the end of each contract […] the young people of Osasco discovered, by

> reading Ramos, the force of the living letter, through which the winds of criticism breathe and a feeling of perplexity is conveyed in the face of an iniquitous, opaque world, hard to understand.

It didn't take much to get from Graciliano to Gramsci. Following the ideas of Paulo Freire and guided by the loving baton of Alfredo Bosi, the group ended up calling into question the very reasons for existence, *their* existence, and the "meaning of the cosmos, of life and man." Taking to the limit Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci's conception of every person as an intellectual, Bosi would later find that the "economic situation of those young people excluded them, early on, from formal education, removing them from school; but coexistence in developing a shared project opened to them the world without borders of reading and writing."

The limit, the threshold, the border: these are images that run through Bosi's work. The culture that we call "popular" surpasses its own limits and reaches the world of letters. It has its place in the hybrid nature of José de Anchieta's *redondilhas,* trying to convert the Tapuias; in Gregório de Matos' satire, describing Bahian colonial life; or in José de Alencar's "wild" and "pre-social" romanticism, idealizing the indigenous world. It is all around, as if a spiritual universe existing "beyond the pale of writing" were striving to appear in texts bound by ideology, in authors caught between genuflection before power and listening to the dominated.

I remember talking about this idea with Robert Patrick Newcomb, now a university professor in California. In his English rendition, *Sob o limiar da escrita* became *Beyond the Pale of Writing*. That beautiful image appears in our edition of *Colony, Cult and Culture*—a long chapter that became a book, in a collection organized by Victor K. Mendes here in the United States—as well as in the complete edition of *Brazil and the Dialectic of Colonization*, which Newcomb translated for the University of Illinois Press.

Bosi was reluctant to come to the United States, but in 2008, after confirming that Bush would be leaving the White House, he ceded to the invitation. His delight was as great as his dislike for this country, which he visited for the first and only time.

At Princeton, he met Argentinian writer Ricardo Piglia and Puerto Rican essayist Arcadio Díaz-Quiñones; in New York City, we strolled through Central Park on a bright autumn day. He had time to pick out a gift for Ecléa: some very cheap socks, lovingly bought at the local pharmacy. He also went home with an Obama campaign button, given to him by the historian

Jeremy Adelman. He told me about the poet and critic John Ashbery, whom he knew of through his daughter, also a professor at the University of São Paulo (USP), and we talked about Bob Dylan, whose concert he would end up attending with his grandchildren in Brazil, later confessing that the "noise" prevented him from hearing a single verse.

I'll never forget when I went to pick him up at the airport and saw his small, battered suitcase. So that he could tell it apart at the baggage claim, Ecléa had tied a small plastic grocery bag onto its handle. The simplicity offered a contrast to the ostentatious world of North American consumption. He was amused by the flowers, the landscapes, the people. At dusk, as we drove into Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge, he was moved by the famous New York City skyline: "This world that we know from the movies!" he exclaimed. I was driving, and in the back seat were Eliane Robert Moraes and Fernando Paixão. It was a double enchantment: the landscape, but also Bosi's marveled gaze.

As for so many of his generation, vexation with mass culture was unavoidable. Tropicalism never seduced him, though I always provoked him, defending unrepression in regard to the great symbols of capitalism. It's worth noting that Bosi saw in Caetano Veloso a great artist, especially after he received the album *Muito*, in 1978, as a gift from Zé Miguel Wisnik. But his notion of the popular pointed to something prior to commodities themselves, in a still somewhat-sacred place, sheltered from the forces of the system.

I remember a conversation in São Paulo with Bosi and the musician Antonio Nóbrega, whom he affectionately called "nosso brincante" ("our jester"). I felt that both were agonizingly concerned with the effacement of the "popular." The three of us agreed on at least one thing: with varying degrees of emphasis, we would bring up the arguments of Mário de Andrade, the modernist who most experienced anguish over the disappearance of the original traditions of popular cultures in Brazil.

In *Dialética da colonização,* there is a passage in which Bosi narrates a visit that he and Ecléa paid, in 1975, to Nhá Leonor, a woman who organized a celebration dedicated to Saint Anthony, in a neighborhood near the Raposo Tavares highway. When they got there, they were struck by a particular scene. The faithful, "almost all mulatto men who were drunk and stumbling back and forth, as well as some women, less poorly dressed than the men," were reciting Hail Marys and Pater Nosters, until the chaplain began to intone the "Salve Regina" in Latin, with a *caipira* spin:

> "Espéco justiça"—ora pro nobis
> (Speculum justitiae)
> "Sedi sapiença"—ora pro nobis
> (Sedes sapientiae)
> "Rosa mistia"—ora pro nobis
> (Rosa mistia)
> "Domus aura"—ora pro nobis
> (Domus aurea)

The two paragraphs that follow are worth reproducing:

> Mirror of justice, seat of wisdom, mystical rose, house of gold, morning star, ark of the covenant, refuge of sinners, comforter of the afflicted, queen of angels, queen of prophets, queen of peace—singing in his deep voice, the chaplain enumerated all the attributes ascribed to the motherly figure of Mary by the faithful down through the centuries. The tall black woman followed him, improvising a melody on a *caipira* guitar and complementing the music with at once ecstatic and controlled gestures of adoration. And the boys and the congregation added a chorus of astounding beauty.
>
> After leaving the chapel I asked the chaplain about who had apprenticed him in his role. He responded that it was his father, who served as a chaplain in the small rural landholdings of Sorocaba and Araçariguama. The night was cool, the moon shone high above, but the freight-moving trucks were still running heavily over the nearby asphalt. (translations by Robert P. Newcomb)

These paragraphs belong to the section titled *Uma litania cabocla na grande São Paulo* ("A Caboclo Prayer in Greater São Paulo") and perfectly express a concept dear to Bosi: "the autonomy of popular religious practice in relation to official Church hierarchy." Opposed to the use of the vernacular at mass, this group "re-archaized" the Catholic ritual, creating a border art in which medieval liturgical Latin was combined with guitar music. It was as if the whole

colonization process had been mixed up and revealed in that scene, illustrating that the poor survive because they can make sense of the world through practices that do not yet entirely submit to modern rule. It is an epiphany in which the critic surrenders to the beauty of that which resists the devouring machine of modernization.

If I had to boil it all down to a single formula, I would explain Alfredo Bosi's intellectual trajectory as a desire to approach that mystical core in which the expression of the dominated is the purest source of the spirit, and the secret engine of literature itself.

The year 1970 was one of great change and doubt. Though Bosi was teaching Italian literature at the time, he began to feel Brazil calling to him. Years earlier, the poet José Paulo Paes had invited him to write *História concisa da literatura brasileira* (A Concise History of Brazilian Literature), which would later become his best-known work—a work almost lost when his children, Viviana and José Alfredo, tossed the originals out the window to watch the sheets flutter in the air. Startled, Bosi picked them up, but he had to rewrite at least one of them, which had drifted away. This was all before computers and the cloud.

His daughter recounted the scene in a poignant testimony during the seventh-day mass transmitted via Facebook from the São Domingos Parish, in the Perdizes neighborhood, the same parish that welcomed Alfredo and Ecléa on their return to Brazil.

When Bosi told me about the possibility of teaching Brazilian literature, from the 1970s onward, he confessed to being torn. Like the literary critic Antonio Candido, who always said he was married to sociology and friendly with literature, Bosi scoffed, claiming that, "not so chaste, I was married to Italian literature, but I had my temptations…"

While researching the history of Brazilian literature to write his book, Bosi prepared his habilitation dissertation on Giacomo Leopardi, a passion carrying over from his days as a student in Florence. He defended the dissertation in 1970, which would set the tone for a new professional phase, focused, this time, on Brazil. The topic—myth and poetry in Leopardi—forms the basis of his reflections on literature as resistance, which would mark his classes from then on out and give initial form to the essays that, twenty years later, would become *Dialética da colonização.*

The Leopardi verses that most captivated him were the ones about the broom, a flower that grows near Mount Vesuvius, "lover of sad places that the world has left / and constant friend of fallen greatness" (translation by Jonathan Galassi). When he received the title of

Professor Emeritus at the University of São Paulo, in 2009, he read a text titled "Gratitude and Memory," the last paragraph of which elegantly summarizes what I've been trying to say all along:

> Machado did not find, like Pascal, whom he admired so greatly, the path of transcendent hope, nor, like Leopardi, the broom flower sprouting again in the desert. As for me, descending vertically from such heights, I confess that I placed my bets on Pascal's beliefs, and that I asked Ecléa to plant a broom in our garden. The broom flower is still there, blossoming, and, God willing, for a long, long time.

That day, I was in the Noble Hall auditorium, at the University of São Paulo, which was completely packed. His voice almost disappeared when he mentioned the broom planted in his garden in Cotia. In the front row, his whole family was watching him, moved.

His commitment to Brazil, attuned by Italian inspirations, would remain alive in his way of thinking and acting. At the institutional level, his work with the Institute of Advanced Studies at USP was fundamental; he directed their journal (the "apple of his eye," he once told me) for a long time. And we cannot, of course, forget the Brazilian Academy of Letters, which he viewed with great skepticism, but which he joined thanks to economist Celso Furtado and jurist Raymundo Faoro, who urged him to present his candidacy.

I remember a dinner Bosi invited me to at the old Hotel Glória, where he used to stay in Rio de Janeiro when attending the Thursday sessions of the Academy. Bosi knew all the waiters and was particularly fond of one of them, with whom he would talk about poetry.

The last time I saw him was in 2017, when we visited him at the small *sobrado* where he and Ecléa lived since leaving their countryside home in Cotia, and where he remained until he was hospitalized with Covid-19. He passed away on April 7, 2021.

Our encounter, on one of those cold and sunny days typical of São Paulo winters, was touching. Ecléa had practically died in his arms, only weeks before. He told us about how she had been preparing the movie they would watch for the umpteenth time, about the Carbonari. I think it was *Nell'Anno del Signore*, by Luigi Magni, with Nino Manfredi and Claudia Cardinale.

She wasn't feeling well; he took her to her room and tried to give chest compressions, but it was in vain.

Bosi remembered Ecléa singing that very morning, in a voice he described as mellow. We were chatting on the sofa when, suddenly, he burst into tears, covering his face with his hands. I hugged him, my wife came over to us, and we stayed there until, fully recovered, he invited us to walk around the house and go up to sunbathe. "An old man needs his sun," he said, with that sly look that always amused me.

In his office, over the glass of an old cabinet, we saw the posters of a tribute paid to him by a high school that had named the local library after him. On one of the posters, a colorful Bosi was staring back at us.

We sat down on a makeshift patio, on the roof of the house. With his eyes open wide, afflicted, Bosi spoke of the distinction between the Kingdom evoked in the Gospels and the World. He asked how I understood the expression "está no meio de vós," though which Jesus, according to Luke, announced the divine kingdom to the pharisees. Was it "no meio de" [in the midst of], or, in fact, "dentro" [inside] us? I googled the classic King James Version of the Bible, and we discovered that it reads "within you," an expression that would lend itself to both interpretations.

He spoke too of his excitement in hearing "Louvar," a song by Zé Miguel Wisnik about a poem by Cacaso, which Wisnik himself had sung at Ecléa's seventh-day mass. She had always adored the song, which ends with the following verses:

> Praise the rain of creation
> the water to drink
> the time to live
> the house to live in
>
> Welcome my lady
> blessed our lady
> welcome my blessed
> lady.

It took me a while to realize that Bosi was talking about an absence that was at the same time a presence: the distant and promised kingdom, which is perhaps already within us, and his longed-for reunion with Ecléa. It was, for me, hard to understand, but he was genuinely worried about whether he would meet her again one day, when he himself passed.

Soon he would no longer answer the e-mails or messages I would leave on his answering machine, which held onto Ecléa's voice for a long time, asking whoever could hear it to leave a message for both of them.

As his daughter Viviana said during the Dominicans' mass, he withdrew steadily from life, closing off his senses, shrinking his body and silencing himself, in a kind of asceticism, in a slow farewell. He died during the pandemic, as though integrated into a "painful collective destiny."

So many things went through my mind on that August day in 2017. Seeing him alone was painful. The bell in Cotia, the memories, the laughter, everything had been left behind. As we were leaving, I looked in the rearview mirror and saw Bosi still nearby, at the gate, slowly raising his arm to say goodbye, tears in his eyes. I never could have imagined it, but somehow he knew that that would be the last time we would see each other.

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