

# The Confluence of Mythic, Historical, and Narrative Impulses in Ivan Ângelo's *A festa*

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Ivan Ângelo, one of contemporary Brazil's foremost writers, published his most important novel *A festa* (*The Celebration*), in 1976. Ângelo's novel reflects the tension created between the individual lives of history's victims and the broader historical context in which they live. *A festa*, through its skillful use of mythic and narrative impulses, portrays the underlying quotidian realities that evoke and define true history. The Brazilian critic and teacher Janete Gaspar Machado in evaluating recent Brazilian writings, concludes, "*A festa* has been one of the most important novels . . . of the 1970s."<sup>1</sup> The following study is a critical exploration of Ângelo's synthesis of aesthetic and mythic elements and their application to *A festa*'s central question of human suffering, responsibility, and culpability.

Ivan Ângelo worked as a reporter and managing editor for the *Jornal da tarde*, a major São Paulo newspaper, before turning to literature. His novel combines the art of the fiction writer with the investigative skills of the journalist. It explores the consequences of a specific historical event—a tragic and avoidable riot—that is viewed from the dual perspective of the journalist's need to clarify facts and the novelist's ability to evoke emotional responses.

*A festa* is a novel that invites and even demands reader participation in the work's flow and interpretation. Ângelo refers to 1970 as the "ano da desgraça," "the year of Misfortune."<sup>2</sup> His novel searches below historical events to focus upon societal and personal struggles. The conventional historical account of this period reads as follows: "After 1969 the military ruled without much consultation of the civilian politicians; the press was severely censored and the guerilla movements ruthlessly crushed."<sup>3</sup> Ângelo's protean work personalizes this history, presenting its human drama from a multidimensional perspective. Upon the novel's publication Ivan Ângelo stated, "I hope to make the reader an accomplice not only in shaping the actual text, but in determining its significance, since my intention has been to provide wider participation in the terrible problems we face at the moment, in Brazil" (p. 226).

*A festa*'s structure obscures the distinction between short fiction, novel, newspaper account, and historical writing. Each small vision of a central event can be laid out into an ever changing mosaic, one whose totality is designed to recreate the "ano da desgraça." The work's plot line is not revealed chronologically. The overall configuration of the novel consists of several short pieces of independently existing fiction and six or seven autonomous microtexts. There is even a supposedly expendable section of the novel which, in fact, holds the key to the work's many

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<sup>1</sup>Janete Gaspar Machado, *Constantes ficcionais em romances dos anos 70* (Florianópolis: Ed. da USSC, 1981), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Ivan Ângelo, *The Celebration*, trans. Thomas Colchie (New York: Avon, 1982), p. 219. All subsequent quotes are from this edition.

<sup>3</sup>Francis Lambert, "Latin America since Independence," *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America*, ed. Simon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 272-275.

mysteries. In a mock-serious gamelike presentation, the section is described and the reader is offered the following evaluations: "necessary? surprising? useful? corroborate? unnecessary? useless?" (p. 149). The novel is an intense process, a narrative conundrum in which Ângelo's controlling metaphor is the symbolic search for a "New Eden." A group of eight-hundred refugees flee from the wasteland of northeast Brazil, searching for a symbolic lost paradise in the city of Belo Horizonte. Ivan Ângelo's artistic vision focuses upon two simultaneous occurrences: a riot and a birthday celebration. In his use of mythological prefigurations, Ângelo characterizes a modern day Moses figure, Marcionílio de Mattos, as both victim-hero and activist-hero, always in very human terms. It is not the actions of this messiah figure that are central to Ivan Ângelo's fiction; it is the power that the work generates as a call to consciousness in the mind of the reader.

In the initial section of the book "Documentário" (A Short Documentary, pp. 9-26), Marcionílio is portrayed as the new Moses leading his people to the Promised Land. This section of the book fashions together historical accounts that bridge well over a hundred years of political unrest. These factual accounts are interspersed with narrative renderings of the life of Mattos and the wanderings of the most recent group of Northeasterners. The impoverished migrants are barely delineated. They exist narratively as a monolithic representation of poverty. Only their leader's life is placed in high relief.

Their train is met by the police and the refugees are reboarded to be returned North. However, unexplained fires break out on the exterior of the locked wooden passenger cars. The refugees march on the police, led by Mattos and a reporter, and then disperse throughout the city. The event is labeled a riot and several people die. What follows is a narrative piecing together of the story.

Marcionílio de Mattos, who has been involved in a series of reform movements over the course of his life, is now accused of inciting this riot. Ângelo intersperses newspaper reports from three months later that affirm that Mattos was killed trying to escape from the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS). The mysteries and questions are then laid out for the reader. Were there accomplices? Was there an informant? Was Mattos murdered? Who lit the fires? What were the roles of the student Bicalho, Mattos, and the reporter Samuel Aparecido Fereszin?

In *A festa* the biblical motif of the Exodus is viewed as ironic or failed. John J. White's statements regarding recent attitudes towards myth most closely approximate Ângelo's use of mythological motif. "Attitudes to myths, inside and outside literature may have changed in recent times, with a certain anti-mythic reaction setting in . . . At most, they have been more often used in a pejorative way. Such prefigurations appear to have remained part of a standard method of telling a story and commenting on it at the same time from a different perspective."<sup>4</sup> Like the ancient Jews of Egypt, the "flagelados," the drought victims (the Portuguese noun seems to imply a greater sense of physical suffering than its corresponding English translation) leave an inhospitable land where they have been treated like slaves for hundreds of years: "For the peasants, the landowners are the police, the courts, the government itself—in a word, everything . . . And their lot is more or less equivalent to that of the ancient serfs of the glebe" (p. 13). The edenic Paradise for which this group of drought victims longs is portrayed later in the work as a place that is as morally and spiritually impoverished as the lands that they just left.

The mythological prefiguration of Moses leading his people is periodically interrupted by a narrative shift in focus to a police investigation of Marcionílio.

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<sup>4</sup>John J. White, *Mythology in the Modern Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 240.

From this perspective, Marcionílio is viewed as a dangerous subversive who has acted in a calculating manner to challenge the present government. Ângelo's use of a variety of different forms of discourse—recollection, narration, oral depositions, oral accounts and newspaper reports—functions as a dramatic device that places the burden of interpretation on his readers. The reader then becomes conscious of the continual overlay of star chamber proceedings that are in operation, condemning the peasant leader without a fair trial. "It has already been established, for example, that de Mattos—currently being held incommunicado at the DOPS—was a known subversive who participated in the Peasant Leagues of ex-Congressman Fransisco Julião" (p. 24). Thus, the reader again functions as the final arbiter in Ângelo's presentation of the facts of Marcionílio's life.

A *festa's* implicit social criticism is achieved by the reader's reaction to the violence and repression that pervade every level of society. The novel continues by presenting a panoramic tableau of life behind the walls of Eden. The work now focuses on the lives of the beautiful partygoers, the efforts of the local newspaper to cover the story, and the machinations at the Department of Labor and the DOPS. All three axes are united by the events at the train station. The cast of people involved is large, and their lives all intersect. There is a vapid but sympathetic androgynous society writer, a socially conscious journalist, a student activist, a self-important young lawyer, a married couple who made a strange suicide pact thirty years earlier, a working class couple whose lives are ruined by fate, the continual musings of the intellectual and artistic community at the New Moon Bar, and finally Roberto Miranda, a homosexual artist from an influential family whose birthday the group is to celebrate.

Ângelo's book describes the morally bankrupt life of Jorge Paulo Fernandez, a lawyer whose superficial existence is contrasted to the concern and social involvement of Samuel Aperecido Fereszin, a reporter, and Carlos Bicalho, the ex-student leader. Fernandez is so self-involved that he is oblivious to reports of others' hunger and suffering. He is a paradigmatic representation of that section of the Brazilian populace who refuses to recognize the existence of poverty or political repression. "Fifty thousand refugees? Agh, damn papers are always exaggerating. That's half of Maracanã Stadium, for Christ's sake.—No way" (p. 81).

Ataide and Cremilda are the working class couple whose sexual emotional life has been shattered by the secret police's sexual coercion of the wife and the physical maiming of the husband. "They told her: if you're nice to us today, we won't beat him. Let's make a pact: we'll only give him a hard time on days you give us one" (p. 181).

Repercussions from the events of the train station spread out over all levels of society and government. The minister at the Department of Labor and Social Services, Otávio Ernâni, Carlos' boss, attends the birthday celebration while the events at the train station occur. He is later dismissed from his job. Ironically, as his political and social life fall apart, he now feels strangely expiated of the guilt he has borne for years of being a mere pawn in a political end-game. Also, the police commissioner at the Department of Political and Social Order (despite its Orwellian resonance, the DOPS did in fact exist), dies grotesquely. "He died of laughter, literally, in 1982. The strange illness—certainly of neurotic origin, at the very least psychological—manifested itself for the first time in 1978 . . . He passed away weakly laughing his grim cackle" (pp. 154-55). Even the party-goers whose lives are insulated by wealth, power, and political influence, are affected by the Department of Political and Social Order's investigation and the actions of the secret police. The following year at Roberto Miranda's next birthday celebration, "The door opened with a splintering thud and the youths, with their hair cropped and

wearing civilian clothes, entered on the run, yelling, beating, trampling” (p. 223).

The sections “Author’s note” are filled with cynical black humor and mordant observations. The metafictional and self-reflective nature of the work is placed in high relief as the narrator discusses the very novel he is writing, the one the reader is presently reading. Ironically, Ângelo’s acerbic humor turns on the writer’s role with equal ferocity. “The game provided them the illusion of being at one and the same time, activists-with-respect-to-the-social-problems-of-Brazil and/or writers-kept-from-writing-because-Brazil-had-no-need-for-that-sort-of-thing-right-now” (p. 123).

Ângelo as social critic is able to parody the hypocrisy, sterility, and inertia of the lives of the majority of Brazil’s middle class cafe intellectuals. “Alarming incomprehensible words shot across cafe tables, ricocheting against bottles, glasses, and Andrea: infrastructure, pop art, phenomenology, bilateral patterns of decasyllabic verse . . . A few members of Radical Action relayed plans across the barroom prattle” (p. 57). “Andrea also picked up certain phrases like: ‘Women must no longer accept marginal status.’ In ’62, this was one of her favorite phrases” (p. 58).

As one of the work’s epigrams by poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade states, “The subject is time, present time, present life, present man” (p. 7). This present is also analyzed from a future perspective. *A festa* tells of the life of former student activist Carlos Bicalho in 1979. (The novel was published in 1976.) He is in a bar in Recife discussing the March 30, 1970, events that destroyed his life. Due to his involvement, he now is left without wife or child or a chance for a meaningful job. From this narrative perspective, Ângelo is better able to underscore the curtailment of freedoms that affected Carlos’s past and now define his future. “They didn’t let me. Decree 477. I couldn’t even find a job. I went to court, naturally. It just sat at a complete standstill for two years, you know how the courts work” (p. 215). However, it is Carlos who will carry on the mission of Marcionilio de Mattos. The New Moses, Carlos, is in the Northeast completing an age old messianic cycle: from the leadership of Antônio Conselheiro, the religious zealot; Lampião, the bandit; to Mattos and now Carlos, the unlikely Moses. “Well, they finally arranged some work for me. And so now, here I am: almost five long years in this political struggle.—I think you’ll like the Northeast.—Yes, I think I might. But even if I don’t . . .—Right, a job is a job” (p. 215).

Carlos’s life as a Moses figure is then ironically juxtaposed to Ângelo’s acerbic vision of Esdras, the Hermetic, the cafe intellectual. This is yet another example of Biblical resonances, suggesting—as with all apocalyptic writing—meaning is made manifest through the use of intricate and opaque symbology. Esdras is also representative of those Brazilian authors who are still writing a purist, dehumanized literature, and who retreat intellectually from the intense historical context in which they live.

Ângelo’s fragmented and multidimensional presentation of historical experience engenders a meaningful vehicle for liberating both the reader’s aesthetic appreciation and sense of social and moral consciousness. The work brings to bear disparate perspectives of the same reality, allowing the reader to fashion his or her private truth. Within the intricacies of the work’s structure, the reader then is asked to discover the basic unity that bonds and supercedes the fragmented presentation.

A formulation of this technique is included in the novel itself as a suggestion for an experimental play. “A man all by himself. Tape recorders, voices, slides, projections, recordings, newspapers, TV monitors. He plays opposite all the means of communication . . . He looks like a little squirt (a role for a midget?) in comparison with the material he enacts. Obligated to make choices every moment, based upon

facts provided by the various means of communication, but the information is never totally reliable, at times even contradictory" (p. 118). The work's totality conveys a sense of fidelity to experience; the distinction between fact and fiction, illusion and reality, is many times blurred. Thus, it is for each individual member of society, each reader, to make value judgements. *A festa's* technical artifact has a discernible design and purpose: greater reader involvement in the problems of the times. In his discussion of "stories of reading" and the "reader's experience," Jonathan D. Culler's deconstructionist theories illuminate Ângelo's approach to his craft. Culler states "these stories reinstate the text as an agent with definite qualities or properties, since this yields more precise and dramatic narratives as well as creating a possibility of learning that lets one celebrate great works. The value of a work is related to the efficacy granted it in these stories—an ability to produce stimulating, unsettling, moving, and reflective experiences."<sup>5</sup>

Out of the human drama of modern Brazil Ivan Ângelo created a responsive novel that is at once nationally oriented and at the same time, a prophetic and universal warning. *A festa* has evolved as the thesis novel of its generation. It truly encapsulates the thematic concerns and aesthetic preoccupations of an age. It was Jacques Ehrmann who stated, "The power of words over history, of history over words, such is the problem of our time."<sup>6</sup>

There have been many excellent novels by this present generation of modern Brazilian writers; however, *A festa* through its coalescence of historical, mythic, and narrative impulses is able to summarize in an inventively aesthetic fashion, the cultural failings of an entire era of political repression. It is both an ideologic stance and a masterfully conceived work of art. Ivan Ângelo's narrative preoccupation with questions of social morality and culpability reflect his desire to reshape national consciousness. *A festa* is a work of fiction that, while not indifferent to historical perspectives, maintains a consistent and original aesthetic posture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Jonathan D. Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 82.

<sup>6</sup>Jacques Ehrmann, *Literature and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup>As this study was being written, an article by Michael Kepp appeared entitled "Armed Clashes Mark Brazil's Land Reform: Wealthy Landowners Hire Private Armies of Guards," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 5 July 1986, p. B-1. According to the article, "The rich, rolling farmland surrounding the northern city of Imperatriz was, by mid June, so besieged by bloody clashes between big landowners and landless peasants that President José Sarney, preceded by 250 federal policeman, went there to restore peace."