

The Tension of Rationality

Roberto Schwarz, *Two Girls and Other Essays*.

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A commonplace assumption about the introduction of “theory” into literary studies—both amongst its proponents and its detractors—holds that it has led critics to do away with the notion of the author as an individual, creative genius. Theory refuses to believe in an author possessed of a spontaneous, irreducible talent that enables him or her to stand outside their history, their culture, and their limitations as a private individual, expressing absolute truths. Fundamental to the decentring of the author from such a position of mastery are the originators of those discourses most foundational for the development of literary theory broadly understood—Marx and Freud—with their respective arguments that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,”¹ and that “the ego is not master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind.”² Once the author’s consciousness, like that of all individuals, is shown both to be determined by his social conditions (Marx) and to be made up of desires, fantasies and obsessions that are profoundly inaccessible to his conscious thoughts and intentions (Freud), he is quickly di-

vested of the “mastery” that might have provided his work with a timeless quality, a direct access to truth; he is reduced to the passivity and unknowingness to which the rest of society is routinely condemned, acting out the social and unconscious determinants of his consciousness, over which he has neither control nor oversight.

Yet despite the familiar charge of reductivism made against Marx and Freud and their inheritors, according to which they reduce all historical actors and all cultural works to the mere reflection of processes that such actors have no knowledge of and no capacity to affect, it may instead be argued that the revolution these thinkers instituted lies above all in their dynamic models of interpretation. This is the argument made by Michel Foucault in his essay “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” and it demonstrates how far the charge of reductivism is from grasping the import of what these thinkers introduced to the interpretation of culture. It is the model of interpretation derived from these thinkers that can be understood to have chiefly influenced those who have made the most productive use of their work in literary criticism.

Foucault argues that these three authors produced models of interpretation according to which, on the one hand, interpretation is “an infinite task,” and on the other, that it has no final object. While perhaps seemingly paradoxical, these two conditions of interpretation are in fact closely linked: it is because there is no object which interpretation reveals, no object which it brings to the surface from the buried depths, that it becomes an incomplete, infinite task. To say that interpretation has no ultimate object is to say that it is impossible to get outside interpretation and thereby reveal that object as it is “in itself”: interpretations are rather always levelled at *other* interpretations, for, as it turns out, everything to which we have access, including the very empirical world in which we live, is nothing other than an interpretation of the real, an encoding which makes social existence possible by delimiting what may be thought, felt and uttered (or as Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has it, “every discourse brings with it some castration”³). The interpretations practiced by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud reveal the workings of these prior interpretations, rather than simply revealing the truth of what exists itself. Theirs is the discovery that, in Jacques Derrida’s words, “the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.”⁴ So Foucault cites Marx’s exploration of money and the commodity form not as “real things,” but as “interpretations” themselves, interpretations of the world which seek to fix it to the logic of capitalist exchange, rendering the latter seemingly natural; and he cites Freud’s interpretations of his patients’ symptoms not as straightforward enactments of the hidden truth of the indi-

vidual's psyche, but rather as expressions of phantasms which are themselves interpretations, ways in which the individual responds to a more primary psychic state that is not itself directly accessible.⁵ It can be seen then that, far from working to fix the object of interpretation to a single, identifiable meaning which will reveal its unknowingly conditioned nature, the interpretive model provided by both Marx and Freud is a dynamic one which sees interpretation as an unending task, and sees meanings and objects as unattainable in any final or pure form.

Two twists in the story of the fate of the authorial genius or master in the age of theory are then instituted. Firstly, the author comes to be understood as a master interpreter: his greatness lies not in his transcendence of his conditions, his expression of a truth unbound by system, but rather in the richness of his interpretation of his own time, of that prior interpretive paradigm which is the social world he inhabits. How well does this author's art allow us to grasp the parameters of the society in which he lived and wrote, the unarticulated laws of what was thinkable and sayable within that historical constellation? It is in the achievement of such an interpretive endeavour that the artist may be seen in this context to achieve a kind of transcendence, for it is only in knowing and articulating as fully as possible the conditions which govern one's own world that one can abstract oneself from them and begin to think the possibility of their being overcome.

The second, related twist is that criticism itself is now understood as a work of interpretation in the sense provided by Marx and Freud (and Nietzsche). Criticism is an effort to reconstruct the author's interpretive act or gesture, bringing to articulation the meaning of that author's work as a response to their time by rendering explicit the relationship between the two, a relationship which the works themselves could only bear mutely in their formal operations. Fredric Jameson, writing of the literary criticism practiced by Jean-Paul Sartre and the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, articulates this new conception of both the artist and the critic in terms of such a theory of interpretation as the reconstruction of the situation to which the author's work has given formal expression:

Now the meaning of Genet's style [in Sartre] or Luther's theological propositions [in Erikson] is no longer a matter for intuition, for the instinctive sensibility of analyst or interpreter in search of a hidden meaning within the outer and external one; rather, these cultural manifestations and individual productions come to be grasped as responses to a determinate situation and have the intelligibility of sheer gesture, provided the context is reconstructed with sufficient complexity. From an effort at empathy, therefore, the process of analysis is transformed into one of a hypothetical restoration of the

situation itself, whose reconstruction is at one with comprehension (*Verstehen*). Even the problem of evaluation (the “greatness” of Luther’s political acts, of Genet’s formal innovations) becomes linked to the way in which each articulates the situation and may thus be seen as an exemplary reaction to it. From this point of view, the response may be said to structure and virtually to bring to being for the first time an objective situation lived in a confused and less awakened fashion by their contemporaries. The concept of the context or situation here is thus not something extrinsic to the verbal or psychic text, but is generated by the latter at the very moment in which it begins to work on and to alter it.⁶

To return the literary work to its context, in this sense, is not to imprison it within that context; it is rather this, and only this, that grants the work its freedom. This model of criticism does not operate according to a binary of surface and depth, according to which the appearance of the work hides a truth that pre-exists it, whether that be the private truth of the author’s psyche or the public truth of her social environment. Such a binaristic mode of analysis, Jameson suggests, is one of “intuition” and of “empathy,” a feeling out of the hidden truth that the author’s work expresses. The mode of interpretation offered instead by Sartre and Erikson is a reconstitutive one in which the author is shown to provide a critical response to her time, interpreting her historical “situation” and rendering the latter coherent only in the act of its articulation. As it was seen that there is no final truth to be retrieved beneath and apart from interpretation, so the historical context does not exist as a thing-in-itself prior to its being brought to form in the author’s own interpretive work: it is this construction that makes the context coherent and recognisable. And, equally, it is the reconstruction of that interpretive gesture and of the context of its emergence carried out by criticism which makes accessible the meaning of that gesture, which the original work could only enact rather than explain. The greatness of the work is now understood in terms of the fullness of its response, of its interpretive gesture; and the success of the work of criticism may be understood in similar terms: that is, according to the extent and force of its elaboration of that gesture’s meaning as an interpretive enforming, or bringing-to-form, of the historical situation that framed it.

“Peripheral” Criticism

It is in this context that one may situate the work of Roberto Schwarz, a Brazilian literary critic who has no qualms about combining a Marxist approach to the study of literature with claims about aesthetic value, about the

greatness and mastery of particular authors. But the mastery in question is very much of this second kind, namely that of an author who reconstitutes his historical epoch in its formal objectivity, providing it with a representational form that makes it legible and criticisable. How Schwarz stages these discussions in the context of a literary tradition and a society—that of Brazil—not widely known amongst Anglophone readers who may be familiar with such questions as they feature in our own critical debates, will be of considerable significance (and not merely of exotic interest or curiosity), and this for two reasons. Firstly, the relative unfamiliarity both of the authors discussed and of their social-historical context allows for a certain estrangement from assumptions regarding the literary canon that we are more likely to hold when dealing with our own national literatures. Secondly, and more significantly, Brazil's historical position as culturally and economically peripheral to the West provides an additional turn to this whole question of the interpretive function of the author.

The title of the second of Schwarz's books to be published in English—a study of the late-nineteenth century Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis—expresses much of his approach to this question: *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*.⁷ Immediately with this title Schwarz eschews many of the deadening traps into which the study of cultural objects from non-Western cultures often falls: on the one hand, an embrace of localism for its own sake, privileging the particular, the national, or the exotic, as entirely removed from the monolith of a globally dominant, Western culture; on the other, a needy effort to demonstrate affinity and equality with the dominant culture, effacing historical and economic differences (in the case of nineteenth-century Brazil, those resulting from colonialism and a slave-based economy) by showing that “our artists” are as good, as sophisticated, as modern, as yours.

Schwarz instead sets up two things with his title: one, that Machado de Assis is a “master,” a great novelist, comparable with any other; two, that the society which produced this master was one “on the periphery of capitalism”—neither cut off from nor equal or equivalent to the European centre, but inextricably related to it, as peripheral. As the title of one of Schwarz's essays on Machado, collected in the volume under review here, suggests, that author's achievement is one of reaching “beyond universalism and localism”—neither of these commonplace approaches to such “peripheral” cultural objects will do. The question then becomes: How is Machado's mastery, his greatness, to be understood in its emergence from a peripheral, economically backward society? Staging the investigation of Machado's fiction on this level has us read him as a master of interpretation in the dynamic sense discussed above. It is not as if Machado occupies a

position outside or above his society, this country on “the periphery of capitalism,” and provides an objective overview of its contents, an omniscient sociology or unadulterated realism. The critique, pointed to in the Foucault text, of a binaristic model of interpretation which sees surfaces as reflections of a depth that lies in darkness, awaiting its discovery, has demonstrated the falsity of such a perspective; interpretation is an activity without end, and there is no position that can be taken outside it. What Machado produces is not an objective depiction of the *content* of Brazilian society, but a *formal* interpretive gesture which crystallises that society’s own formal structure. In a new English collection of his work, *Two Girls and Other Essays*, Schwarz develops this critical approach, which he designates with the concept of “objective form,” applying it to classic works of Brazilian literature (including two further essays on Machado de Assis), to contemporary works in Brazilian poetry and fiction, and to two classics of European modernism by Kafka and Brecht.

Why is such a formal gesture necessary to the effort to render objectively present the underlying nature or logic of a society? What does it provide that an effort to investigate social existence by way of a direct depiction of immediate reality does not? The particular nature of the formal gestures enacted by the various works approached in Schwarz’s book will be discussed in what follows, but it can first of all be noted that it is here that the Brazilian context of Schwarz’s work, its focus on a society historically situated on the periphery of capitalism, provides a specific answer to this question which will not be entirely the same as that given within the interpretations of Sartre and Erikson discussed above. This difference has to do with the relative absences, or what are sometimes called “structuring absences,” which can be said to differently define life as it is lived alternately at the centre or at the periphery of global dominance and wealth. To follow a schematic (and no doubt controversial) division proposed by Jameson, what is absent from immediate experience in Western societies is “the truth of that experience,” which in the imperial period is located elsewhere, in those subjugated places and peoples far away where the wealth that makes possible the social world and interior lives of Western subjects is produced. As Jameson suggests with regard to the example of Great Britain, “the truth of that limited daily experience of London lies ... in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual’s subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people.”⁸ The author who hails from such a country is, as Marx and Freud have shown, necessarily subject to rather than transcendent of these limitations,

and what this authorial subject expresses in her work is bound by her limited knowledge of both the economic/societal and the private/unconscious logics that structure her experience.

As a master of interpretation, the major author will achieve an expression of this situation—of the dependence of the centre upon the periphery, at every level of experience—but such an expression can only be unconscious, because the truth expressed is invisible to daily experience, and for this reason the work requires a “rewriting” by the critic in order that the nature of this expression be brought out explicitly. Probably the most celebrated example of this kind of critical reading is Edward Said’s discussion of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, which brings out the extent to which the family patriarch’s business activities in Antigua, only ever obliquely mentioned in the novel, structure the very fabric of the social world and interior experience of the Bertram family at home that Austen details with such subtlety and nuance.⁹ Said’s reading is, to be sure, on some level a “symptomatic” one, revealing the hidden presence of a profound, structural violence within the world of *Mansfield Park*, which Austen herself could not directly recognise, let alone represent. Yet in juxtaposing a rich description of the social world belonging to this wealthy family (and their less wealthy cousin) with the barely-mentioned external space of the plantation, Austen enables the critical reader to think through their connections, to build a picture of this greater social totality which includes both inside and outside, based on what her gesture allows us to see. In this sense, Said reads Austen as an interpreter of her time, of an England whose wealth was increasingly tied to imperialism and the practices of slavery, rather than as an author who merely provides an unconscious perpetuation of that society’s racist and imperialist underpinnings.

These relations between inside and outside, between an immediately experienced daily life and an unrecognised economic situation which determines it, obviously operate differently when seen from the perspective of the “outside,” of the societies that exist on the periphery of capitalism. Authors from these parts of the world (as heterogeneous and distinct as the numerous societies grouped under the umbrella of “non-Western” of course are) are far more likely to have direct experience or awareness of the kinds of exploitation that Austen and her Fanny Price could only have heard about in hushed whispers, and its incorporation into these authors’ work is likely to be far more direct. Jameson has indeed suggested that, whereas first-world texts can only unconsciously enact these kinds of interpretations of the social, political and economic logic of their society, third-world texts do so with full consciousness, and that as such “they imply a radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics.”¹⁰ While

those in the first world, authors included, are “condemned ... to the luxury of a placeless freedom in which any consciousness of [their] own situation flees like a dream, like a word unremembered on the tip of the tongue, a nagging doubt which the puzzled mind is unable to formulate,”¹¹ the historical “situation” is visibly, tangibly present and hence more immediately accessible to the author hailing from those places that have been on the receiving end of the exploitation which has produced the first world’s wealth. To them is denied the distance from the material circumstances governing existence, which those who have benefited from this production of wealth are at liberty—are indeed compelled—to take.¹²

But while the political and economic conditions framing social existence may be more readily apparent to the “peripheral” author than to her first-world equivalent, the representation of those conditions in such a context is by no means a straightforward matter, requiring only the kind of “naïve” realism which serious Western literature is supposed to have moved beyond long ago. One of Schwarz’s aims in these essays will be to revive realism in its richer sense, as what he calls objective form, and in so doing to demonstrate the representational and interpretive work required of the author in order to carve out this form. The particular capacities and limitations of a Brazilian author will, to be sure, be different from those of a European (a distinction which will further need to be made between the Brazilian author of the nineteenth century and the one of today), these differences having to do, for Schwarz, most of all with the novel as a foreign import from Europe, which will need to be deformed and reformed in various ways by the Brazilian author in order to achieve this formal objectivity. While the dynamics of absence and presence are on some level reversed, such that it is no longer (as in the European context) the aesthetic tool which is immediately given to the author, as if a natural phenomenon, and the social situation which is strange and impossible to grab hold of, but something like the opposite of this, still those dynamics are no less crucially in play, and the carving out of objective form in this context will prove an interpretive feat different from, but not less complex than, those of European authors whose work similarly achieves an expression of its historical situation.

Schwarz’s Other Realism

Schwarz is frequently at pains to demonstrate how distinct is the realism that interests him from that of a mere empiricism or sociological documentation, at the same time as this kind of empirical and sociological knowledge is shown to be indispensable for the literary achievement of objective form. In a chapter on a recent book by the poet Francisco Alvim, Schwarz

is appreciative of Alvim's use of everyday language and the concreteness of his evocations of particular experiences of Brazilian life, expressed through this common speech: "What is expressed in everyday speech is an actual social system at work, through which—thanks to the invention of this literary architecture—we can recognize and examine ourselves, for better or for worse."¹³ Yet this fidelity to the speech of ordinary people does not make Alvim simply a realist in the bad sense, a sociological poet merely transcribing the language that buzzes around him. Indeed, what Schwarz finds most interesting about this everyday language is its affinity with poetic modernism itself, the hardness of such utterances—as "immediate responses to contemporary social situations"—being at one with modernism's "desire 'to be' rather than 'to communicate'" (202), its problematisation of language's communicative function, its insistence instead upon language as an object in its own right, which does not straightforwardly or neutrally offer up its referent. These utterances have a similarly "dense, objective existence" (202), and in capturing them Alvim does something more than merely describe what he sees in the crime-ridden, working class areas in which his poems are situated. This street talk possesses a density that evokes situations as they are lived, not with the flimsy language of banal description, but as language-objects in themselves, weighing as heavy as the constructions of modernist poetry. These situations are narrated rather than described, to follow a distinction famously set out by Georg Lukács, which is to say that they are depicted in terms of their relation to human praxis, to lived experience, and not merely passively represented.¹⁴ Alvim seeks to let this language speak, unburdened by the formal laws of poetic tradition, unburdened even by the interfering presence of the poet himself. But this requires considerable work of an interpretive kind on Alvim's part: his ear "has [not] been limited to passive recording. These phrases have been finely tuned, scoured clean of superfluity, redundancy, cliché or generalizations: in other words, of conventional literary features. Alvim's work is to distil their experiential content and render them commensurable, as parts of the same system" (202).

Schwarz is sensitive to Alvim's effacement, or at least his problematisation, of that familiar literary device known as point of view:

The poet ensures that we often do not know who is speaking, whom they are addressing, whose viewpoint provides the title—itsself no neutral frame but a player within the overall field of uncertainties. This precise yet undetermined structure, demanding a set of diverse readings, allows systemic inequalities to speak for themselves. (200)

By withholding perspective in this way, Alvim allows his small poem-scenes

an objectivity—objective not in the sense of neutrality and transparency, but in the sense that the poem itself acquires the status of an object, in which is expressed not just the factual detail of a scene or the subjective impressions of the speaker or poet, but the outlines of the relation between the evoked scene and the greater social contours which frame it and provide its meaning.¹⁵

One example will have to suffice: the poem entitled “You think I’m stupid” reads as follows:

You’re the boss
and you let him act the way he does?
He’d better pay
what he owes you¹⁶

Schwarz notes, first of all, the ambiguity with regard to the position of the speaker in the title and in the poem proper. Are the words of the title spoken (or thought) by the “you” of the poem’s body (insulted by the other speaker’s presumption that he or she needs to be told how to behave), or by the same speaker (insisting that the “boss” listen to what they are saying), or by “him,” the one who owes “you” money (an insult he may have thrown at the “boss” which precipitated this third person’s intervention)? This ambiguous rendering of perspective and the complex web of relations between three people evoked by the poem give expression to the tension and density of a situation as lived interpersonally and socially, rather than as merely privately experienced. Meanwhile, “the substance to be deciphered lies in the relations of power in the background, which are neither named nor even touched by the poem’s sarcasm” (204–5). Neither named nor touched, but unmistakably present in not being named, the broader power relations that lie behind even this tiny scene begin to come into view, even while they can be sensed only obliquely, as they must be by most people most of the time. Schwarz calls this achievement of Alvim’s “an enormous minimalism” (the name of the chapter—Schwarz, like Alvim, is good at titles): a rendering thinkable, within the most compressed of forms, of the greater social dynamics of a rapidly modernising society, within pockets of which remains an older life of informality, dodgy business and petty crime, haphazardly adapting to the new system. “Each poem,” Schwarz writes, “even when it is composed solely of a title and a single line, can be seen as an episode, a coordinate, within the life of the whole. In this sense, while on one plane the poet takes compression to the absolute limit, he compensates on another by offering the full breadth of the social-historical world” (196). The word for this kind of writing, writing that me-

diates between the specificity of the immediate and the wider contours of the social-historical situation itself—characteristic of the poetry of Alvim and, in turn, the criticism of Schwarz—is, of course, “dialectical,” and it will be in terms of the dialectic that Schwarz will seek throughout these essays to distinguish the realism he is interested in from a straightforwardly empirical one.

One obvious advantage for literary criticism in asserting the importance of a dialectical realism is that it frees literature from the task of sociological description or recording, without in so doing having it give up on real life in the name of an autonomously progressive conception of aesthetic form. Just as Schwarz stresses the work undertaken by Alvim in order to make sensible the relations between the snatches of common speech he incorporates and condenses within his poems and the wider social dynamics they give a certain expression to, he will insist, in the one other chapter on a contemporary Brazilian author—Paulo Lins, and his novel *City of God*—on the difference between the sociological knowledge and the personal experience necessary for the writing of the work, and the work itself as the mapping of a dialectical network of social relations. The importance of research and historical knowledge to Lins’s work is emphasised by Schwarz, who notes the significance of the author’s youthful experience as research assistant to the anthropologist Alba Zaluar, who conducted field research into the “new criminality” thriving in the enormous slum area of Rio named the “City of God” in the 1980s. It is not only the fact that this experience granted Lins a wealth of hard data to refer to in crafting his fiction that matters here, but equally the fact that this work undertaken with Zaluar was done as part of a group, a team. “On the final page, as happens in film credits, the author thanks two of his companions for their historical and linguistic research. Artistic energies of this sort have no place in the comfortable conception of creative imagination cultivated by most contemporary writers” (230). Here Schwarz reiterates the critique, evoked in the introductory section above, of the author as an individual genius who transcends history and the coordinates of social life.

A certain transcendence is nonetheless offered Lins’s novel, which is seen to extend beyond any kind of explanatory, social-scientific outlook on life in the City of God:

In Lins’s work, the overriding gravitational force of the drug trade in the neo-favela serves to deflate a whole complex of explanations, once scientific and now *bien pensant*: the alcoholism of the father, the prostitution of the mother, the disintegration of the family and so forth. ... A set of naturalist sociological causalities is integrated, as one ideology among others, within a discursive web that has no final

word; and that operates, in turn, as an element in a wider mystery, formed by the huge business of crime, with its amorphous boundaries, and by the laws of motion of contemporary society—of whose effective shape such explanations have nothing to report. (231)

As with Foucault's explication of Freud and Marx's methods, so too with Lins we see that each effort at explanation, each interpretation, folds back to another, as the individual life of the young gangster is read in terms of his deprived family life, which is itself eclipsed by the greater reality of organised crime as big business, and by the "wider mystery" of a society which engenders such relations of power and wealth. The sociological and causal explanation is offered, but also deflated or derided by this novel that regards life in the City of God "from the perspective of the objects of study—and ... with a corresponding activation of a different class point of view" from that of the researcher (230). Rather than privilege either the immediacy of lived experience or the explanatory logic of empirical research, Lins presents them both to the reader, as elements "within a discursive web that has no final word," and which incessantly refer back to that "wider mystery" which the work endeavours to bring to representation.

Like Alvim, Lins brings out the poetry of the life and the speech of the inhabitants of this massive slum, and in so doing he grants to this world and its neglected people a resistance and a gravity which refuses the gaudiness of victimisation:¹⁷ "The verbal resources of samba are combined with a delinquent, concretist wordplay ... opening a seam of popular potentialities. ... The deliberate and insolent importance of the lyrical note in Lins's world, in the face of the crushing weight of misery that conditions it, is a distinctive gesture: a movement of refusal" (232). Once again, the capacities of poetic language are exploited not as a means of transcending the historical situation, but as a means of expressing it, of interpreting it such that one is no longer held down by its crushing logic, but is instead able to reflect critically upon it: "We need to be intimate with horror yet still able to see it from a distance—if possible, an enlightened one," Schwarz writes (229).

Literature and the Dialectic

The great value of literature in the contemporary world, then, lies not in carving out a space of private pleasures cocooned from the enduring nightmare of social history, but in its capacity to render the dialectical relations between the various layers of social, institutional and private life which other modes of knowledge and representation obfuscate. For Schwarz, the literature of an earlier period must be read with the same dialectical vigi-

lance, and the lessons such reading carries will be as valuable for us as will the analysis of contemporary work. For it is the dialectical mode of thinking as such that is under ever-increasing attack, as academic specialisation rampantly increases the quantities of specialist knowledge in the same breath as it depletes such knowledge of its wider meaning. So to seize from an old book its buried expression of the contours of a whole social world is to insist, even in the beleaguered present, on what Schwarz calls “the tension of rationality” (126), on a rationality that will hover above such specialised knowledge, connecting the pieces of this knowledge to the greater, unending narrative that sustains history and brings the life of bygone eras and distant places into meaningful relation with our own time and place—that narrative which in Marxist terms is called class struggle. Thus Schwarz, in a wonderfully sarcastic remark, indicates what he takes to be the value of literature in upsetting the compartmentalisation of knowledge, rendering thinkable the social whole or situation:

In all, you’d be better off respecting the division between different kinds of expertise and forgetting the unclassified interest that, in an evil hour, a novel awoke in you. Doing otherwise presupposes, beyond being conversant with several disciplines (something difficult to achieve in its own right), an independence of judgement in relation to them, and a certain relativization, in the name of the primary experience itself and the theoretical whole to be constructed, which to a certain extent makes the science itself, which, after all, is our protection and the means of our livelihood, look ideological. (26–27)

This quotation is taken from what is the most methodologically important essay in the collection, called “Objective Form,” in which Schwarz elaborates his own dialectical approach to literary criticism by way of a rich re-enactment of the argument made by an older critic, Antonio Candido, in his 1970 essay on the mid-nineteenth century novel *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, by Manuel Antonio de Almeida. The qualities Schwarz draws out of Candido’s criticism are those he will cultivate in his own work, including a bridging of “formal analysis and sociological reconstruction, procedures shown to be mutually complementary” (11), and an effort to read works of literature as interpretive gestures which bring social processes to form. In a passage worth quoting at length, Schwarz writes:

What has to be done is to read the novel against its real background and study reality against the background of the novel—more on a formal level than in relation to its content, and in a creative way. That is to say, not according to the received forms, which are precisely those that the emancipation of the form—and its move towards the

magnetic field of contemporary history—has caused to be put on one side, but through a bold exploration of aesthetic experience and available knowledge: reading one through the other, literature and reality, until the mediating terms are found. However, we have already seen that “finding” is not the right word, for the novel and the reality are not available to us in the same degree, nor is the way of studying them the same. In literature, in the nature of things, even the most secret, unconscious and intellectualized form has to be graspable by the imagination: otherwise it ceases to exist. But on the plane of reality, which for the person writing is made up of practical life, knowledge and the existing writing on the topic, it may not exist in a form that is available in a literary way, though it may be intuited. In such cases, the critic has to *construct* the social process in theory, keeping in mind that he must create the conceptual generality capable of giving unity to the novelistic universe he is studying, a generality that the novelist has already understood and transformed into a principle of artistic construction. This work, if it is worthy of the delicacy of its object, will produce new knowledge. What happens, then, is that we arrive at a structure of structures, or rather, a structure composed of two others: the form of the work articulated with the social process, which has to be constructed in such a way as to bring out and make intelligible the coherence and the organizing force of the literary work, which is the point of departure of the reflection itself. (21)

Here we are at a degree of distance from Jameson’s schema of third-world versus first-world literature mentioned above, since for Schwarz there always remains this basic question of the unconscious elements of practical, daily life as the objective experience of a social situation, whether that context is post-revolutionary France or the recently independent Brazil. Indeed, the limits of conscious knowledge, of visible access to these wider coordinates of the social whole, will be the very theme of Candido’s investigation of Almeida’s novel, and it will be in retrieving from the myopic perspective of the novel’s characters—and of the author himself—an oblique impression of those fundamental social layers which the text is precisely unable to represent, that Candido will produce his critical, interpretive gesture, returning to the novel that historical meaning which it cannot directly show.

The “conceptual generality” that Candido (re)constructs from his reading of the *Memoirs* is what he calls the dialectic of *malandragem*, translated here as “roguery,” a term referring to what editor Francis Mulhern calls the “specifically Brazilian figure of the *malandro*, a layabout and trickster on the edge of legality” (11, n. 2). Candido’s argument is that this novel, which de-

tails the life of one such *malandro*, a drifter without regular work or a fixed place in society (until, upon being arrested for one of his misdemeanours, he is given the opportunity to become a police sergeant), belonging neither to the property- and slave-owning class nor to the class of slaves themselves, manages, even while obfuscating the presence of those two fundamental layers of society, to capture the “generalized rhythm” (14) of the life of the *malandro* class, obliquely showing it to be engendered by the fundamental economic fact of slavery. The daily experience of those members of society apparently at the greatest distance from this economic relation—the itinerant, roguish, poor *malandros*—is revealed to be the very expression of that fundamental social reality which the content of the novel seemed precisely to keep out of sight. The argument somewhat recalls Walter Benjamin’s astonishing claim, in the *Arcades Project*, that the boredom of the upper classes is an expression, on the private, affective level, of the “economic infrastructure” that is the factory worker’s “miserable routine of endless drudgery.”¹⁸ (Adorno’s great remark that “boredom is objective desperation,” that it is “the reflection of objective dullness” rather than a merely subjective feeling which the individual must be relieved from by the distractions of commodity fetishism and whatever else bourgeois society has to offer, extends the ideas elaborated by Benjamin in this section of the *Project*.)¹⁹ Yet the layering of class dynamics here is something quite different from that of the bourgeois Europe Benjamin is interested in (though the time period overlaps), and what *Candido* finds in the *Memoirs* is something rather more dynamic than Benjamin’s model of working-class drudgery expressed in the moods of the dominant class. For here it is an entirely distinct, third social class, protected from the sufferings of slavery but without access to the wealth that is hoarded by the aristocracy, which comes to express the truth of this social dynamic in the lived experience of its members.

This “generalized rhythm” of social experience is what *Candido* calls the dialectic of order and disorder, expressed in the life of the hero of the *Memoirs*, but which is equally a reflection of the objective situation of the *malandros* as a social group, whose wayward experience allows us to see in relief the coordinates that have structured this experience, which are founded in the economic situation of slavery. The transient experience of these men, engaging in frivolous romances and minor criminal escapades, interrupted by periods of employment and apparent direction, and which *Candido* identifies as the dialectic of order and disorder, is expressed in the novel at the level of plot, but also in its formal workings:

The same alternation [between order and disorder] presides over the construction of the sentence, in which there is always room for both

sides of any question, and this means the suspension of moral judgement and the class viewpoint it conveys. At crucial moments, this dialectic ... finds its symbolic equivalents in certain images: in the Chief of Police Major Vidigal, who wears a frock coat but also his rough clogs, which he has forgotten to take off, or in the master of ceremonies, caught in his skullcap and slippers in his gypsy lady friend's bedroom. (13)

This attention to formal detail as an expression of the very form of social life is something which will be absolutely central to Schwarz's own criticism, as we have already seen: in the work of both Schwarz and Candido, "formal observation" becomes "the real guide in the discovery of new aspects of reality" (22).

Schwarz will ultimately part ways with his great master, however, with regard to where—geographically, culturally, and economically—they will each affix the boundaries of their social analysis. While Candido will remain a resolutely national critic, concerned with the national literature of Brazil and the elements of a national situation and even a national character that are borne out by literary analysis, Schwarz will, even when utilising a model of formal and historical analysis largely inherited from Candido, have his sights set on the questions his analysis poses for literature as an international form and for the thinking of society as irrefutably global, of local concerns always needing to be explained not just in terms of the national situation but in terms of global politics and the relations between the exploiting and the exploited. At a time when the discipline has lost some of its chic with the decline of deconstructionism's academic currency, Schwarz brings home the true value of comparative literature as the analysis of an increasingly globalised society, utilising aesthetic methods for this analysis to which the social sciences have scarce access:

For better or worse, literature created [in Brazil] does not come out the same as the models it adopted. There is an interesting topic there. If you study that difference together with the difference between the respective societies, you then see that comparative literature has the merit, or could have the merit, of coming to a more complex view of what contemporary society is. This would be a contemporary society understood not only as national, but as a more or less articulated and very unequal system of societies.²⁰

Already in the essay on *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*, the localism which Schwarz will ultimately object to in Candido's work can be observed. The *malandro* is identified by Candido as a specifically Brazilian character type, and the situation of which he is expressive—the dialectic of order and dis-

order which organises the lived experience of those existing outside the fundamental economic situation that is slavery—is understood to be enclosed within the Brazilian context, cut off from any questions of international economic relations. One of Candido’s major claims is that the figure of the *malandro*, as a national type embodying a characteristically Brazilian indifference to order and stricture, may, under more amenable historical circumstances in which this character can spread through all levels of society, have an emancipatory and even utopian value: what it promises is a “world without guilt,” at profound odds with the puritan values of capitalist societies (15, 30–31). But as Schwarz points out in some critical remarks which come near the end of his essay on Candido’s text, as much as Candido eschews the triumphalism of nationalist literary criticism, which seeks always to place a positive value upon whatever component of the national literature it isolates as a demonstration of the validity of the national culture (after all, Candido uses his analysis to provide a critical interrogation of nineteenth-century Brazil as a society based around a slave economy—hardly a parochial nationalist stance), he nonetheless remains locked within a national framework, looking for both causes and solutions to the problems he identifies within the specifically national context. Even the critical comparison he makes between Brazilian *malandroism* and the puritanism of the United States (for which he gives the literary example of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*) depends upon a strictly divided understanding of relations between countries as the distant interactions of monadic, self-enclosed and self-sustaining individuals. Schwarz writes:

The trouble is that this concert of nations nowadays seems unreal, and this retrospectively casts doubts on whether it existed previously. Faced by the extraordinary unification of the contemporary world under the aegis of capital, this community of nations is a concept removed from the available historical experience, a dialectical dead zone. Would it not be more plausible to look for the terms of a common history? ... The social process to be understood is not national, even though nations do exist. (31)

Schwarz’s own work, while continuing to pay homage to Candido’s great example of a literary criticism which captures and expresses the dialectical relations of aesthetic form and social history, will remain true to this critical proposition that the social process to which criticism must be addressed exceeds the borders of the national situation, that indeed the national situation itself can only be understood in terms of an analysis that is international in its scope.

Machado de Assis on the Periphery of Realism

Schwarz's great endeavour in this regard, his great effort to come to an understanding of the situation of a national literature by way of its relationship to the international situation of capitalism as the establishment and entrenchment of unequal relations within and between societies, occurs in his many writings on Machado de Assis. Two of the chapters in *Two Girls* concern Machado. The first, an essay previously published in English in the *New Left Review* (a publication which has been almost single-handedly responsible for making Schwarz's work accessible to Anglophone readers, and in which four of the eight essays in this volume previously appeared), offers a condensed treatment of Machado's development from his early novels to his first recognised major work, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*. The second, which forms the first half of the book's titular diptych (concerning the first of the two "girls" in question), provides an analysis of Machado's novel, *Dom Casmurro*, and the character of the hero/narrator's wife, Capitu.

The first of these, "Beyond Universalism and Localism: Machado's Breakthrough," follows from the critical insights regarding the question of nationality which concluded the preceding chapter on *Candido* (here and throughout, Mulhern's selection and ordering of the essays into a sequence of chapters that demand to be read in the given order is to be commended). Schwarz's concern in this chapter is to consider how an aesthetic paradigm imported from Europe—that of the novel, and in particular the novelistic mode called realism—plays out in the context of former colonies like Brazil, "where the difficulty or impossibility of repeating the development of the core countries is the primary social, economic and cultural experience" (39). For Schwarz, the importation of the realist novel to Brazil has two opposing functions or effects. Firstly—again following *Candido* and his account of Brazilian literary history in the nineteenth century, according to which the newly declared Republic found itself in the mid-century needing to cultivate a national cultural life that would stand as an equal to the great civilisations of Europe—Schwarz sees the development of the Balzacian realist novel in Brazil at this time as an example of a cultural politics which sought to keep the country up to date with foreign developments. At the same time, the specifically French, post-revolutionary situation which Balzac and others had developed a literary form adequate to depicting, which saw the utter destruction of earlier forms of life (associated with the *ancien régime* and with feudalism) and the privileging of individual desire

and avarice at the expense of older hierarchies proper to bourgeois society, was dragged along with the cultural capital attached to the name of Balzac, despite the foreignness of this historical situation to Brazil. So Brazilian novelists found themselves utilising the techniques of plot and literary style developed in and for an historical context profoundly foreign to their own. The “realism” they developed thence had as its depicted content a world that reflected little of the “real” Brazil of the time.

The author who exemplifies this Balzacian realism in Brazilian literature, for Schwarz, is José de Alencar, in contrast with whose work Machado’s great achievement of a realism proper to the Brazilian situation will be established. In considering Alencar’s 1872 novel *Senhora*, Schwarz observes a tension between the imported, Balzacian narrative of the triumph of selfish, pecuniary pursuits over human feeling, which characterises the book’s central plotline, and the effort to stay true to realism as an imperative through the inclusion of scenes of “local colour,” which include secondary characters who belong to the semi-feudal world of paternalism, remaining in servitude of one kind or another to the aristocracy—an economic relation that remained prevalent in Brazil even after the abolition of slavery in 1888. Such characters have none of the individualism, the conception of rights or agency, of autonomy and of the centrality of individual financial gain to social success, which characterise the Balzacian novel and the central plot that Alencar presents. These bits of local colour, these scenes of everyday life meant to serve as the backdrop to the central narrative, have the destabilising effect of being too realistic for the novel, too realistic for the Balzacian realist narrative, and as such they upset it, only serving to demonstrate the artificiality of the central narrative of bourgeois avarice and the concomitant downfall of the spirit of community in the Brazilian context. “Such discrepancies of register and proportion,” writes Schwarz, “are characteristic of Brazilian novels of this period: expressions of the desire to be up-to-date without renouncing the basic relations of local society, which are less than modern” (43).

Brazilian modernisation, following the declaration of the Republic, had taken a very different turn from that of post-1789 France. Instead of a massive purging of the old aristocracy and its institutions, Brazil’s independence and its introduction of a capitalist economic model occurred without any such total restructuring of society. “The colonial heritage of landownership, slavery, traffic in human beings, extended family and generalized clientelism went almost untouched. Brazil’s insertion in the modern world proceeded by way of a social *confirmation* of the colonial ancien régime, not its supersession” (43). In other words, the older, semi-feudal relations of servitude and paternalism, dramatically overthrown with the individualism and

the trashing of tradition which was the object of Balzac's critical gaze, remained at large in Brazil at this time. Its is a modernisation of "uneven development" (43), as actual economic and social relations find themselves at odds with the aesthetic models which have been imported precisely for the purpose of demonstrating the country's achieved modernity. The sense of community and human feeling, whose decay was so caustically represented by Balzac, remains alive and well in nineteenth-century Brazil in the form of the continued presence of paternalism and aristocratism as modes of social organisation.

It will be Machado who will exploit this ambivalent, contradictory character of Brazilian society, producing a realism proper to this social context. In his early novels, Machado dispenses with Alencar's Balzacian plots, reducing questions of modernity and individualism to the idle talk of aristocratic characters, showing instead the fundamental role of paternalism in this still slave-driven economy. With slave ownership creating a massively precarious labour market, the working poor are forced to seek protection amongst the aristocratic, landowning class, who in exchange are free to exploit them. This, and not the bourgeois individualism of France, was the fundamental economic situation for those belonging neither to the propertied classes nor to the slaves: a dependence for favours upon the aristocracy, who continue to wield power at all social levels, even while they pay increasing lip service to the liberal tenets of French democracy (even including the controversial, modern fashion of French realist novels). If some members of this unpropertied class live, like the hero of Almeida's *Memoirs*, as *malandros*, rogues and drifters succumbing to the precariousness of itinerant existence, others join "a very diversified layer of social dependants, ranging from rural bullies and tame voters to *agregados*—men or women attached to a family as permanent adjuncts" (44). Machado's early novels focus on the experience of such *agregados* and *agregadas*, dependants who rely upon the favour granted them by rich families in order to live. In each novel, "at some crucial moment the grotesque arbitrariness of the possessors is devastatingly exposed" (45)—a young female dependant who thought herself protected by her employer is confronted with her powerlessness in the face of a seemingly arbitrary display of indifference or dismissal.

Most pertinently, Machado understands this arbitrariness of the ruling class in social (and not merely psychological) terms. These patriarchs and matriarchs have "a dual and ever-shifting social role" (45) which leads them to sway between paternal care, arrogant caprice and blithe indifference in their relations towards their dependants. This experience is expressive of a whole historical situation in which the ruling class finds itself somewhere

between what in Europe were the two overwhelmingly distinct, discontinuous historical periods of aristocratism and liberal capitalist modernisation. The Brazilian ruling class, by contrast, has during this period managed to maintain its sovereign rights while allowing certain modern relations of property, as well as the rhetoric of liberty and equality, to creep in, to the degree that they serve the power and wealth of this class. So the experience of the *agregadas* in the face of these masters was one of helpless confusion, in which “there was no way for them to foresee whether they were paying respect to a godfather and sponsor who would reciprocate; to a figure of authority who would brutalize them; or to a modern person of property, to whom inferiors were perfectly indifferent, to be treated like strangers” (45). Machado’s achievement in these early novels is to reveal the dissonance between the country’s official posture of European liberalism and the real situation of a society making simultaneous use of the semi-feudal relations of an aristocracy to a population over which it maintains entrenched power, and the development of bourgeois property laws which, in the Brazilian context, only serve the continued wealth of colonial inheritors.

With the 1880 *Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, which Schwarz calls “the first world-class Brazilian novel” (46), Machado achieved his great “breakthrough.” This novel enabled a far truer representation than did the earlier ones of the above-described national situation, in which the arbitrary rule of the aristocracy and the economically backward circumstance of a slave-driven economy placed the mass of the free population in a position of precarious dependency. In the dialectical fashion we might expect Schwarz to be attentive towards, Machado’s greater realism, his greater achievement of a representation of the real of Brazilian society, was achieved only by way of a massive divergence from the “realist” genre tropes which characterised his earlier novels. *Brás Cubas*, a novel narrated by its eponymous hero who has died prior to the commencement of his writing, is written in an elliptical, fragmentary style in which the narration of events follows Cubas’ arbitrary whims, rather than the established rules of objective and ordered literary discourse. Most shockingly of all, the perspective of the narrator has shifted from a third-person perspective sympathetic to the plight of a female protagonist, the poor *agregada*, victim of the monstrous power of the ruling class (as in the early novels), to a personified narrator who is a proud member of this very ruling class—Brás Cubas himself, who, in his rambling and idiosyncratic story, embodies the arbitrariness of his class that was the object of the earlier novels’ horror.

Machado’s breakthrough, in short, is to approach the self-satisfaction and arbitrary domination of this class from the inside out, where his earlier

novels had done so from the outside in. The reader of *Brás Cubas*, provided with the first-person perspective of this rich man of leisure, must learn to read critically, to read against the perspective she is offered, uncovering the cruelty buried beneath the narrator's charming, sophisticated prose. An obvious parallel with Nabokov suggests itself here; but, as soon as one makes this comparison, significant differences also become apparent, differences which one is inclined to regard largely in Machado's favour. For whereas the cruelty of Humbert Humbert and the paranoia of Charles Kinbote are essentially purely psychological properties, their only apparent contexts being the generalised malaise of the European exile, in Machado such behavioural traits are linked back to the social context of class-engendered brutality and thus shown to be something more than psychological mysteries. The comparison would seem once more to evoke Jameson's distinction between writers from dominant and peripheral, or exploiting and exploited, cultural positions, with Machado's much closer proximity to the economic realities of exploitation enabling him to locate his narratives in their social context, while Nabokov's distance from such realities leads him to produce narratives from which any hint of a social basis for the consciousness of his characters has been ironed out or unconsciously obfuscated—an obfuscation supplemented by his manically repeated mantra of loathing for those masters of materialist thought, Freud and Marx.²¹

In any case, Machado's achievement in this shift of perspective is to allow for a far greater insight into the social dynamics informing the contradictory behaviour of the ruling class than his earlier novels allowed. *Brás Cubas* is a character "endowed ... with an encyclopaedic stock of knowledge and rhetorical tropes," whom Machado uses to "[hold] up a kind of mock synthesis of the Western tradition to the mirror of Brazilian class relations" (47–48). Full of liberal European sophistication on the surface, the persona he shields beneath this prose is one of a vicious cruelty and indifference cultivated by generations of unchallenged aristocratic rule. In short, "what had hitherto been the central problem of [Machado's] fiction as content ... becomes in *The Posthumous Memoirs* its form, the inner rhythm of the narrative" (47). Whereas in the earlier novels the very arbitrariness of the patriarch's cruelty towards the female protagonist could only be understood from her (and hence the novel's) perspective as random and inexplicable, the decision to reach inward and have the discontinuous spheres of paternalism and individualism be embodied in the very structure of *Brás Cubas's* narrative allows the reader a picture of this class dynamic that could not otherwise have been reached. As was the case with *Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant's* limited perspective, focused upon the seemingly insignifi-

cant social character of the *malandro*, and as was equally the case with Alvim's "enormous minimalism," so too here does the intensely concentrated focus on one aspect of social life allow for a better grasp of the contours of the whole than could any attempt at a neutral representation of reality as depicted content. "This one-sidedness," as Schwarz remarks of Almeida's *Memoirs*, "is a decisive achievement, because it sees more where there seemed to be less" (18).

Machado's later novel, *Dom Casmurro*, extends this very modern device of the unreliable narrator, behind whose narrative lies a truer story to be deciphered against the grain of the story that is presented. Once more, the value of this device is understood by Schwarz according to the concept of objective form, where aesthetic form acts as "the real guide in the discovery of new aspects of reality," a reality which, as with *Brás Cubas*, is shown to be structured in terms of the class dynamics of a paternalist ruling class and a massively disempowered population. Here the ruling-class narrator is Bento Santiago (the nickname, Dom Casmurro, which he adopts, contains one of the novel's many jokes at its narrator's expense, the word "Casmurro" carrying an unacknowledged sense of someone who is stubborn or morose, alongside its more congenial sense as simply "a quiet person" [57–58, n. 2]). The story he tells is of his doomed marriage to Capitu, a poor neighbour with whom he fell in love as an adolescent. Santiago's narrative is structured such that the reader comes to suspect Capitu of infidelity, and to see her eventual disappearance into exile with her son—who Santiago suspects may not be his own—as a mark of the perfidy of the *femme fatale*. But the critical reader, reading against the grain of this narrative, is able to uncover another story, one in which Capitu is the victim of a paranoid, obsessively jealous, autocratic master whose inherited wealth and power have granted him an absolute certainty in his sovereign right, as well as the capacity to present himself with all the sophisticated charm of an educated man, as evidenced by the accomplished prose of the text he narrates.

The essay Schwarz devotes to *Dom Casmurro* and the figure of Capitu is one of the strongest in the collection as a work of practical criticism. As always, the formal analysis operates in relation to the hitherto unrecognised aspects of reality which the operations of literary form have made representable. Discussing the character of José Dias, an *agregado* who shows ingratiating subservience to his masters, parroting the sophisticated talk and grandiose pretensions of the ruling class, Schwarz writes: "The *agregado* takes his love of formalities to its ultimate conclusion, which is disbelief in the forms themselves. He jumps from one to the other as it suits him, with no embarrassment, with no need for consistency, with dizzy-

ing mockery of the dignity he worships, and this gives him a kind of freedom of movement vis-à-vis his masters” (72). Once more, the truth of a situation is expressed by a marginal figure: Dias’s parroting allows one to grasp the emptiness of the masters’ speech and the cruel, arbitrary nature of their whole way of life, and this parroting becomes both Dias’s prison and his escape, the means for his survival in a world where adherence to aristocratic domination is essential.

The device of the unreliable first-person narrator, whose story ends up revealing much about him that contradicts the image he intends to give to the reader, carries a quintessentially modern appreciation of what has here been identified as the inescapability of interpretation, of point-of-view as a necessarily partial perspective which can never be overcome with a final objectivity or omniscience that will set things straight once and for all—a discovery which, as was suggested above following Foucault, owes its greatest theoretical development to the work of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. For Schwarz, Machado’s novels achieve their status as equals of the great literature of the world, and thus achieve modernity for Brazilian literature, in their very success at revealing the contradictory, quasi-modern character of Brazilian society itself. The novels teach their readers to be vigilant and critical, or in short, modern: “Once the authority of the narrator is questioned, it is up to us to interpret what we hear and see when we read. We must become self-reliant readers, secluded, active and judicious, such as a truly modern literature seeks to create as a sort of historical threshold” (50).

But one of the other great achievements of Machado, for Schwarz, is that his critical stance extends beyond the national situation, such that there is no easy opposition, as in Candido’s account of Almeida’s *Memoirs*, between, for instance, Brazil as a society of weak organisation and the United States as a puritan society exemplifying Weber’s protestant ethic, whose citizens have been schooled for participation in a capitalist economy. For, as has been seen, one of the deeply contradictory aspects of Brazilian society that Machado’s novels exploit is the tension between the entrenched paternalism of class relations and the rhetoric of European sophistication and liberality with which the ruling class presents itself. The device of having such characters narrate the novels, narrators who utilise the language and the charm of their educated, cosmopolitan class in such a way as to obfuscate the brutal truth of their insensitivity towards the suffering masses, serves also to put the lie to the ostensible nobility of liberal Western values themselves. Again it is the case, as with José Dias, of the marginal expressing the truth of the centre, which the centre itself cannot recognise. The truth of the West’s show of liberalism and egalitarianism is brought out by this Brazilian novelist, developing the formal capacities of

the novel as a (natively European) aesthetic form in order to express these endemic contradictions.

A Dialectical Diary

Throughout these essays Schwarz emphasises the relationship between realism as an objective depiction of immediate, empirical circumstance, and objective form as a means of representing the structural logic of the social whole itself, tirelessly asserting the need for criticism to explore the dialectical interplay between the two. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that the most extensive essay in the collection will be devoted to the study of a text that, as a mark of its very genre, bears a relationship to the real at once more direct and more problematic than that of any novel, namely, a private diary. *The Diary of Helena Morley*—such being the pseudonym which the author of the diary gave herself when it was published some decades after she wrote it—is the journal of a Brazilian girl written over the years of her adolescence in the late nineteenth century, and is the subject of the second, much longer half of the “Two Girls” diptych. Schwarz’s analysis of this apparently light, inconsequential adolescent diary is provocatively framed in comparison with that most elaborate and artful of novels, *Dom Casmurro*, with the self-consciousness that Helena develops over the course of her diary read alongside the character of Capitu, as another young woman of this quasi-modern, postcolonial society who is faced with the deep conservatism of the ruling class which cultural and economic modernisation have not so far seemed to challenge.

The analysis of the *Diary* will be Schwarz’s most challenging task, because of the relationship to the above-mentioned questions of realism and objective form that this literary genre holds. If ever there were a form of writing trapped within the empirical, unable to reach beyond the contingent experience of the everyday so as to grasp that deeper logic of society itself within which this experience may be made sense of, it would surely be the private diary. Helena Morley, a girl from a family of fallen nobility in the diamond mining town of Diamantina, reliant now on the father’s work in the mines and on the capricious protection of wealthy relatives, is an individual with such limited experience of the world that one can hardly see how her private diary could shed light on anything of broad social significance. A close proximity to the real on one level would seem only to push reality in its more meaningful sense as a social form further out of the picture, without the interpretive capacity of a master novelist to transform the fragments of empirical observation into a reflection on more underlying, systemic realities.

Yet as Schwarz has insisted throughout these essays, because social form has an immanent presence within all facets of individual life, the traces of this form will remain legible upon even the most seemingly isolated or autonomous cultural object, as long as the object in question has managed, through the critical, interpretive effort of its producer, to express something of the truth of the world that is available to it, however limited the knowledge of its wider social meaning may be. The articulation of that meaning will require only the appropriate interpretation from a critic able to read these traces and restore the object to the social coordinates which allow it to be more deeply understood, and which the text itself is already attempting to approach. This is Schwarz's aim in his reading of the *Diary*, looping between the direct content of the individual entries and the wider social contours, the shape of which the development of Helena's insights allows to be brought into view—as ever, the effort to think dialectically is visibly present on the page, as Schwarz proposes homologies between Helena's writings and broader social-historical developments, and continues to revise and reframe these homologies as his reading proceeds.

While the space does not remain here to go through Schwarz's reading of the Morley diary in any detail, it can be noted that Helena once more plays the role of a marginal figure who expresses a truth to which those at the centre lack access. Her dependent position—as a child, as female, as belonging to a family without inherited wealth—places her in a subordinate position relative to the dominant institutions of school and church, and to the power of the wealthiest families in Diamantina, those who have reaped the benefits of the diamond mines that others (including Helena's father) work on, such as some of her own cousins. At the same time, Helena is a modern individual, with enough access to modern ideas and enough freedom of thought granted by her family situation to enable her to think critically about the social environment she and her family live in, as well as the circumstances of the lower social classes, including the freed slaves who continue to live in poverty.

The Actuality of Theory

Whereas a character like José Dias believes too much in the words of his masters, and in his parroting only reveals their emptiness, in Helena's case there is a sincerity to her adoption of a critical, modern mindset which enables her a distance from the attitudes and assumptions that surround her, allowing her to see something of the relations between the various aspects of life in Diamantina, which open outward to broader social relations in post-abolition Brazil. Having access to the teachings of Enlightenment

thought, but lacking the wealth or power which can turn these lessons into mere markers of class privilege, Helena acts on them in startlingly direct ways which contradict the basic conservatism of the social institutions of the time. The “clarity and concreteness” of her writing is understood to emerge from “the relative impoverishment of the region, which did not wipe out the urban, enlightened point of view but combined it with a picturesque compact assortment of goods, opinions and activities” (164). As such, the independence of mind cultivated by Helena grants her diary a capacity for something more than mere description, raising her effort to authentically describe her own experience to the level of dialectical social analysis (however limited), rendering legible the relationship between private experience and social life.

At one moment, the girl says that she is writing her diary at her father’s suggestion, to preserve her memories for the future. But this is not the tone of the diaries, in which she is always trying to identify something beyond the details of daily life that clarifies existence and shows how to avoid the traps it lays; this is when, in her own eyes, Helena has achieved something. She has no interest in noting things just for the sake of it, recalling the past simply to recall it. It is the activity of a young mind eager to observe and understand the daily life of the family and the town that gives the diary’s episodes the tension of rationality. (125–6)

Latching onto this tension of rationality within the cultural objects of his analysis, Schwarz reads these objects in relation to the social coordinates whose outline is faintly drawn in the very workings of their literary form. One of the finest essays in the collection, which unfortunately there has not been space here to discuss, entitled “Brecht’s Actuality” (translated in the volume as “Brecht’s Relevance”), weighs up the question of what aspects of Brecht’s work have remained “actual” or contemporary in societies (such as Brazil) and periods (most pertinently, the present day) foreign to that in which Brecht wrote. Surely the greatest value of Schwarz’s great book is its demonstration of the actuality, both of “theory” in general and of Marxist theory in particular, for the study of literature today. Literary criticism as global social theory: in the modesty of his attentiveness to the formal details of these works, and in the unfashionable conviction that a text bears a meaningful relation to the social-historical situation out of which it emerges (however obliquely that relationship may be expressed), Schwarz has produced work whose genuine ambition for literary criticism is almost unfathomably great when compared with most contemporary work. If the contemporary inheritance of deconstruction leads increasingly to a privileging of

the irrational and the aporia for their own sake, the other side of this coin is found in those “post-theory” theories in which a pure rationality deduced from cognitive science or from Darwinism is assumed to enable a disregarding of questions of representation altogether. Schwarz’s route is, as ever, a third one. To pursue the tension of rationality that literature lets us feel, “the unclassified interest that, in an evil hour, a novel awoke in you”; to insist upon extracting a rationality from the contingency of empirical experience and aesthetic detail, and bringing out their relation to the social-historical situation of their emergence—this is Schwarz’s great achievement in these essays.

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NOTES

- ¹ Karl Marx, “Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 211.
- ² *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 16: 284-5.
- ³ Colette Soler, *L’inconscient à ciel ouvert de la psychose*, 221. Quoted in Bruce Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique: A Lacanian Approach For Practitioners* (New York and London: Norton, 2007), 255.
- ⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.
- ⁵ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” in Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 276.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Imaginary and Symbolic in Lacan,” in *The Ideologies of Theory* (UK: Verso, 2008), 80.
- ⁷ Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis*. Trans. John Gledson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).
- ⁸ Fredric Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 347-360 (quoted passage, 349). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- ⁹ Edward Said, “Jane Austen and Empire,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 80-97.
- ¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), 65-88: 79-80.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹² The debate around Jameson's essay began in the immediate aftermath of its publication, with Aijaz Ahmad's response in *Social Text*, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"," *Social Text* No. 17 (Autumn, 1987), 3-25, and Jameson's "Brief Response" to Ahmad's text in the same issue. The point that this kind of theory overly homogenises the numerous societies that exist outside the spheres of global dominance is no doubt hard to deny, as indeed is the point that many individuals and groups living within Western or "first-world" countries do have the kinds of direct experience of exploitation and material necessity in their daily lives that are otherwise ascribed to third-world culture. Nonetheless, my appeal to Jameson's essay obviously indicates that I believe this schema remains valuable as a model for thinking about the relations between the dominant paradigms of cultural production and those cultural forms that escape these, and that in so doing demonstrate the specific limitations of such dominant paradigms and the canonical works which they include. That is to say, even if we may wish to complicate the strict divisions between who in particular fits into the categories Jameson imposes as "first-world" and "third-world," the basic schema remains valuable as a way of thinking about modes of experience and cultural production and the economic conditions that enframe them. Of course, it may be argued that this way of reading works well with those "non-Western" authors like Machado de Assis, who are explicitly positioning their own work in relation to European literature, undermining it from without, but that it may work less well when addressing other "peripheral" literatures that are more self-enclosed, less concerned with the question of a relationship to the dominant West. The Jamesonian response to this (which will, at least implicitly, be shared by Schwarz) would be to say that such a relationship between dominant and dominated societies under conditions of imperialism (in Machado's time) and even moreso under globalisation in our own time, is simply inescapable, and that one is engaged in working through such a relationship in one's cultural practices whether one consciously avows it or not.

¹³ Roberto Schwarz, *Two Girls and Other Essays* (UK: Verso, 2013), 201-2. Citations from the book are henceforth given in-text.

¹⁴ Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe?" in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*, trans. Arthur Kahn (Merlin Press, 1978), 110-148.

¹⁵ A further pertinent critical account of the narrative device of "point of view" is provided, once more, by Jameson, who in his great essay on Joyce's *Ulysses* reads Chapter 16, the "Eumaeus," detailing the aftermath of the night on the town and preceding the unsuccessful meeting between Bloom and Dedalus, as a parody of Henry James and his celebrated use of point of view narration. "The theory and practice of narrative "point of view," as we associate it with Henry James, is not simply the result of a metaphysical option, a personal obsession, nor even a technical development in the history of form (although it is obviously also all those things): point of view is rather the quasi-material expression of a fundamental social development itself, namely the increasing social fragmentation and monadization of late capitalist society, the intensifying privatization and isolation of its subjects." Jameson, "Ulysses in History," in *The Modernist Papers* (Verso, 2007), 137-151 (quoted passage, 149).

Schwarz on the other hand does, as it happens, appeal to James and the device of point of view as a favourable point of comparison with Machado de Assis, writ-

ing that “Machado was a contemporary of Henry James, to whom he should be compared. Like James, he did not believe in a reality that was not mediated by a point of view.” But this should hardly be seen to contradict Schwarz’s remarks about point of view (or its refusal or deferral) in *Alvim*. As the above citation continues: “In [Machado’s] writing, such mediation has a conflictual class character, beyond questions of individual psychology. The unreliable voice is undoubtedly a social one, a tendentious voice because it is part and parcel of a social question” (52). In the cases of both Machado and *Alvim*, the pertinent question is of the deconstructive unfolding of the centred position of subjective point of view by confronting it with the social reality that enframes it.

¹⁶ Quoted on 204.

¹⁷ The 2002 film adaptation of Lins’ novel is less likely to be spared a critique on such grounds. However, a cinematic parallel to Lins’ practice can perhaps be suggested in the films of Pedro Costa, which afford, in their representation, a grandeur to the lives of the destitute. See also Jacques Rancière, “The Politics of Pedro Costa,” Tate Modern catalogue essay, 2009. Of the degradation of Lins’ work in the film version, Perry Anderson has noted this as indicative of an increasing commercialism in an ever-more liberalised contemporary Brazil—a commercialism that goes hand in hand with the bureaucratisation of the university, which may be the ultimate enemy against which these essays of Schwarz’s are written: “In the arts, explosive forms continue to be produced, though they are now far more liable to neutralisation or degradation into entertainment: Paulo Lins’s novel *Cidade de Deus* reduced to cinematic pulp by an expert in television ads; José Padilha descending from the bitter documentary truths of *Bus 174* to Gaumont-grade action films.” Anderson, “Lula’s Brazil,” *London Review of Books*, 31 March 2011, 3-12. The Padilha films Anderson refers to are those of the massively popular *Elite Squad* series.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), D2a,4, 106 (the second quoted passage is Benjamin’s citation from Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*). More generally, see convolute D, “Boredom, Eternal Return,” 101-119. See also Andrew Benjamin, “Boredom and Distraction: The Moods of Modernity,” in Andrew Benjamin, ed., *Walter Benjamin and History* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 156-170; and Jacques Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn,” in Michael P. Steinberg, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, “Free Time,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2001), 192. It is worth noting that Schwarz does elsewhere explicitly indicate his debt to both Adorno and Benjamin, though their names are mentioned only in passing in the essays collected in this volume.

²⁰ “Resolving Doubts with Roberto Schwarz: An Interview,” *Cultural Critique*, No. 49, “Critical Theory in Latin America” (Autumn, 2001), 156.

²¹ The one text to compare the two authors of which I am aware is Brian Boyd, “Nabokov and Machado de Assis,” in *Stalking Nabokov* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 248-262. These comments should not be taken to disregard

the genius of Nabokov's representation of American social life in his major English novels, especially *Lolita*.