

Roberto Schwarz' Dialectical Criticism

Regina Lúcia de Faria

Translated by Paulo Henriques Britto

To understand Brazil was to understand these dislocations, which were experienced and practiced by everyone as a sort of inescapable fate that had no name, for the improper use of names was precisely their nature.

Roberto Schwarz, *Ao Vencedor as Batatas*¹

I

Within the limits imposed by the very nature of this essay, I shall attempt to outline Roberto Schwarz' objectives as a critic by examining his studies of the novels of Machado de Assis. Such studies are mostly contained in his books *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* (1977), an examination of Machado's early novels;² *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo: Machado de Assis* (1990), an analysis of *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*;³ and *Duas Meninas* (1997), on Dom Casmurro,⁴ but also including a comparative study of Capitú, the book's female protagonist, and Helena, the narrator of Helena Morley's *Minha Vida de Menina*.⁵ My aim is to evidence the importance of Schwarz' work in the context of Brazilian academic criticism in the last three decades.

II

Roberto Schwarz belongs to the second generation of university-trained Brazilian literary critics, who systematized the methods of literary analysis and renovated the debate on cultural dependence and Brazilian culture in general. The theoretical reflections of these intellectuals, active both as professors and as authors of books and essays published in newspapers or periodicals, acquired unquestionable importance in the academic world in

the latter half of the 1960s, when they began publishing,⁶ and even more in the 1970s, when their work became required reading for undergraduate and graduate students in literature programs across the country. Schwarz studied at the Universidade de São Paulo, and like Davi Arrigucci Jr., João Luiz Lafetá, Walnice Nogueira Galvão, João Alexandre Barbosa and others, he is associated with the critical-dialectical tradition of literary analysis adopted by Antonio Candido.

Silviano Santiago, another member of this generation, but one of the critic-scholars who have pursued their careers in Rio de Janeiro universities, has written that perhaps the best approach to Schwarz' work is "to trace it to the most significant works of his teachers at the Universidade de São Paulo," namely Caio Prado Jr. and Antonio Candido (Santiago 217). Caio Prado, who identified in nineteenth-century Brazilian society the presence of a segment of the population until then neglected by historians—freemen—offered Schwarz the interpretive key to the analysis of the shifts in meaning undergone by liberal ideas as they were adapted to the Brazilian environment. Antonio Candido, by excluding the so-called "first" Machado de Assis—that is, the author of works that preceded the 1881 publication of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*—from his *Formação da Literatura Brasileira*, opened the way for Schwarz to build "an original field of studies of his own" concerning Brazil's greatest nineteenth-century writer (Santiago 217). This undertaking began with the publication of *Ao Vencedor as Batatas*.

III

The point of departure of Schwarz' "As Idéias Fora do Lugar," ("Misplaced Ideas"), the opening essay in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas*, is the discrepancy between Brazilian cultural and quotidian life in the nineteenth century and its original European model. According to Schwarz, this discrepancy—which might be broadly summarized as the disparity between the Brazilian Empire's liberal façade, based on various French, English and US liberal ideas, and the predominance of slave labor—"was in fact a constant, pervasive presence that unbalanced the ideological life of the Second Empire down to the smallest details," as attested by the Brazilian fiction of the period (14). Slave labor—inimical to the effectiveness so highly valued by rationalism but still profitable to a certain degree, "founded on violence and on military discipline" and relying on authority—was incompatible with liberalism. However, Schwarz observes, slavery was not the only sign of the incongruity

of liberal ideals in Brazil; nor was it the effective nexus of Brazilian ideological life in the nineteenth century. The relations between the members of the propertied class and “freemen”—the “multitude of third parties... who were neither proprietors nor proletarians, whose access to social life and to their own property depend[ed] materially on the indirect or direct favor of a grandee”—insidiously contributed to the distortion of the liberal ideal, by displacing it at the moment of its absorption (16-19).

The process of colonization based on the monopoly of land, Schwarz argues, generated three classes: “the landowner, the slave and the ‘freeman,’ who was in fact a dependent.” While the relation between landowners and slaves was clear-cut and guaranteed by force, that between landowners and freemen was regulated by the mechanism of favor. A disguised form of the violence that was the rule in the sphere of production, favor “assured the two parties, particularly the weaker one, that neither was in the condition of slavery” (18). This mechanism, made into “our nearly universal mediation,” affected and governed all kinds of activities, “such as government, politics, industry, trade, city life, the Court, and so on,” and even “professions, such as medicine, and occupations, such as printing, that in Europe owed nothing to favor.” In this way, the practice of favor dislocated the ideals of bourgeois society, such as “the autonomy of the individual, the universality of the law, disinterested cultured, objective remuneration, the work ethic, and so on” that in the European context were seen as breaking both with feudal privilege and with the class prerogatives of the *Ancien Régime* (16). Brazil never experienced feudalism, directly or indirectly, since the process of colonization resulted from the mercantilistic spirit; but Brazilians were fundamentally followers of European tendencies and adopted, on the plane of ideas, the arguments that the European bourgeoisie had developed in order to oppose arbitrary power and slavery, while in actual practice they accepted the fact of favor, unceasingly reaffirming “the sentiments and notions” inherent in it (17).

The slave system and the practice of favor resulted in an unprecedented acclimatization of modern thought in Brazilian society: it acquired a rather original stamp, with unique practical and ideological-moral characteristics. Brazil provided a curious context for the adoption of the modern spirit:

... once European ideas and reasons were accepted, they could and often did serve as a nominally ‘objective’ justification for the arbitrariness that is the natural corollary of favor. With no detriment to its existence, the antagonism vanished into thin air

and the incompatible terms were reconciled. This harmonization was of capital importance. It had a number of effects, and its impact on our literature was profound. From the ideology it had originally been—that is, an involuntary deception, well-founded on appearances—liberalism turned into what can only be called an intentional token of various kinds of prestige that in fact had nothing to do with it. The favored party, as he legitimated arbitrariness by dint of some ‘rational’ reason, consciously aggrandized himself and his benefactor, who in turn did not see why he should contradict him, living as he did in an era dominated by reasons. (17, author’s emphasis)

This dislocation in the meaning of liberal ideas thus became a problem for and a topic of nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, even when writers were unaware of the fact. The task of Brazilian writers became to trace the process of acclimatization of liberal ideas in Brazil, re-creating it as fiction, lest the inevitable difference should appear as an involuntary defect, formally identified as “naiveté, garrulousness, narrowness, servility, crudeness, and so on” (24). This formal discrepancy was a consequence of the fact that local writers were forced to treat themes of universal history and contemporary European issues—which were invariably present in the French and English novels that served as a model for them—and of the introduction of a localism, itself derived from European Romanticism, that clashed with the “grand plots that were characteristic of a Realism tinged with Romanticism” (32). To discern, in the subtlest way possible, how the real form—that is, social relations in Brazil placed in a practical configuration—is transformed into literary form—that is, a principle of construction of an imaginary world—is Roberto Schwarz’ task in his seminal study of Machado de Assis’ work.

Form, understood as a mediating principle that organizes in depth the elements of fiction and reality and that operates on both planes simultaneously, is the nexus between the novel and society. Therefore, even before it is captured by the novelist’s intuition and objectified by him, form is a product of the social process. In agreement with Marxist theory—in particular with the brand of Marxism associated with the German tradition and the influence of Lukács—the notion of social form may be understood as the product of material constraints on the reproduction of society in different areas of social life. Hence the forms found in works “are the repetition or the transformation, as a variable result, of preexisting artistic or

extra-artistic forms" ("Originalidade" 36) How profitably can the study of form be applied to literary studies?

Being "a practical schema, with its own logic, programmed in accordance with the historical conditions that it responds to and that simultaneously historicize it," form retains and reproduces in a certain way the contingent set of historical conditions under which it is born. These conditions, in turn, become "its literary effect, its reality effect, the world they signify," reappearing, "with the same logic, on the plane of fiction and as a formal result" ("Originalidade" 35; *Ao Vencedor* 38-39). As Schwarz emphasizes, "every form always articulates a heterogeneous compact of sociohistorical relations," and "makes historicity, to be deciphered by criticism, the very substance of the works" ("Originalidade" 36). In this sense, literary representation configures, in a dynamic way, the socioeconomic organization that is contemporary to it, taking society and the structural relations represented in it as an active inner element. Thus a literary work comes to be a privileged source of knowledge about the historical reality configured in it.

Formally, the aesthetic result of José de Alencar's work is a compound fracture. This is explained by the fact that the author addresses topics (for instance, "the power of money" in *Senhora*) whose symbolical force has to do with a "demythologized" and "mystified" society resulting from bourgeois rationality, to directly reflect a social universe organized by the logic of paternalistic relations. On the other hand, this fracture expresses, even if only involuntarily, the cultural and ideological discrepancy that characterizes Brazilian life.

While Alencar represents the "involuntary reflection" of a Brazilian cultural discrepancy, in Machado the "incongruence of ideas" is elevated to the category of "artistic truth"—that is, the discrepancy appears as the result of a "reflective elaboration" to the extent that it is formally assimilated. This process, tentatively achieved in *Iaiá Garcia*, is first accomplished with mastery in *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, according to Roberto Schwarz' thesis in *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* and its companion volumes.

In his early novels, which reflect the subaltern status of those who are not sufficiently independent to criticize, Machado relegates to the background any references to the liberal ideals, to the new civilization centered on capital, to the libertarian ideologies of Romantic individualism; instead he focuses on the sphere of the family and paternalistic relations—present only secondarily in Alencar's novels—to whose authority all conflict submits. Social injustice

is mentioned, but there is not even a hint of revolt about the underprivileged characters, who conform to the demands of the logic of favor. This solution gave the novels greater verisimilitude in terms of local themes, but also made them seem “stale,” “stifling,” “mawkish”; worse still, by severing all connections with the contemporary world, it had the effect of heightening Brazilian provincialism (*Ao Vencedor* 65-66). Machado overcomes this formal shortcoming, beginning with *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*, by having the narrator of the novel adopt, “in a poisoned way,” the viewpoint of the ruling class. This device allows the author to take on European social assumptions and adapt them to Brazilian local conditions, thus transforming “the disproportion between bourgeois ideas and the swings of favor into a specific diction, a sardonic and familiar music” (*Ao Vencedor* 50). The formal adjustment obtained by extending the cultural maladjustment into the structure of the novel also pioneers a path that can be followed by the literature of a dependent country.

IV

In his essay “A Originalidade da Crítica de Antonio Candido,” Roberto Schwarz emphasizes that formal study makes it possible “to speak of the work and reality, one in terms of the other” through the articulation of their structures. Hence the originality of the method and its evident relevance to literary discussions (45). Elsewhere, also referring to the method of analysis developed by his former teacher, Schwarz states that “for the first time the dialectics of literary form and social process was more than an empty word” (*Que Horas* 154). As Silviano Santiago has observed, the same could be said about Schwarz’ studies of Machado de Assis (Santiago 219).

The critic’s strategy is to seek the testimony of form and the logic that organize the novel, if he is to avoid the simplistic view of a literary work as a mere illustration of society, even when it adopts a critical tone. What makes Machado’s fiction refreshingly new, Schwarz says, is the fact that it places the narrator in a social situation. That is: since the narrator is placed in a field of antagonisms, his logic requires the mediation of the social types that are complementary in relation to him and through which he is specified—for instance, “the poor young woman, the rich and elegant lady, the agregado.”⁷ Imitating Machado’s own writing, Schwarz captures and describes, through the dialectical presentation of opposites, the relations in which Machado’s narrators are involved. As one of Schwarz’ commentators, Davi Arrigucci Jr.,

has observed, it is as if they were moral and social filigrees, unveiling, naming and formalizing aspects of Brazilian life as they are experienced and practiced, but never before named (78).

Notes

¹ Schwarz, *Ao Vencedor as Batatas* 21.

² In addition to José de Alencar's *Senhora* (1875), in this book Schwarz analyzes in detail three novels by Machado: *A Mão e a Luva* (1874), *Helena* (1876) and *Iaiá Garcia* (1878).

³ English translation: *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997). (Translator's note)

⁴ English translation: *Dom Casmurro*. Trans. Robert L. Scott-Buccluch (New York: Viking, 1995). (Translator's note)

⁵ English translation: *The Diary of "Helena Morley"*. Trans. Elizabeth Bishop (New York: Farrar, 1957). (Translator's note)

⁶ Schwarz' first book, *A Sereia e o Desconfiado: Ensaio Crítico*, was published in 1965. Luiz Costa Lima, an intellectual associated with the Rio de Janeiro group (though in fact he was educated in Recife) published *Por Que Literatura?* in 1966.

⁷ The term *agregado* refers to a person who lives with a family without actually belonging to it, whose status is somewhat inferior to that of an actual member but higher than that of a servant, even if the *agregado* performs some sort of useful service for the family, such as odd jobs, babysitting, etc. (Translator's note)

Works Cited

- Arrigucci Jr., Davi, et al. "Machado de Assis: Um Debate. Conversa com Roberto Schwarz." *Novos Estudos CEBRAP* 29 (March 1991): 59-84.
- Candido, Antonio. "Dialética da Malandragem." *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* by Manuel Antônio de Almeida. Critical edition. Ed. Célia Lara. Rio de Janeiro: Livros Técnicos e Científicos, 1978. 317-342.
- Machado de Assis. *Obra Completa*. Vol. I. 5th ed. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar, 1985.
- Santiago, Silvano. *Nas Malhas da Letra: Ensaio*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1989.
- Schwarz, Roberto. *Ao Vencedor as Batatas: Forma Literária e Processo Social nos Inícios do Romance Brasileiro*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1977.
- . *Que Horas São? Ensaio*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1987.
- . *Um Mestre na Periferia do Capitalismo: Machado de Assis*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1990.
- . "A Originalidade da Crítica de Antonio Candido." *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, 32 (Mar 1992), 31-46.
- . *Dois Meninas*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1997.
- Süssekind, Flora. *Papéis Colados: Ensaio*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 1993.