

Interview

A critic on the periphery of capitalism

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Roberto Schwarz, 65 years old, is unquestionably a critic on a level with Machado de Assis. It was with tools carefully sculpted by him that the great Brazilian writer, until then read by many as a sort of out of place Englishman, emerged before contemporary readers, in two magisterial essays - *Ao vencedor as batatas* [*To the winner, the potatoes*], of 1977, and *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo* [*A master on the periphery of capitalism*], of 1990 –, as the author of a powerful work, whose formal solutions are profoundly and intrinsically revealing of the Brazilian social process at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th.

But if the sorcerer from Cosme Velho lies at the center of Roberto Schwarz's critical work, it does not, however, exhaust it. An essayist guided by the steadfast search for an objective idea of form, at the same time literary and social, in this quest he can stay his gaze both on Oswald de Andrade and the fringe poet Francisco Alvim.

An attentive and concerned observer of what is going on today with the country's literature, which is keeping a wide distance from an ongoing and vigorous production of good books, perhaps the result of a strange lack of concern in the country of writers with an exhaustive knowledge of the subject they are dealing with, he did however promptly note the powerful strength of *Cidade de Deus* [*City of God*], "the great finding", by Paulo Lins. And he calls attention to Valdo Motta, an almost unknown poet from Espírito Santo, brought to light in a fine essay by Iuma Simon, and who is "a new, different, point of strength in Brazilian culture".

Calm almost to the point of suavity in setting out his viewpoints, however radical they may be, elegant, albeit always incisive, in the elucidation of the polemics in which he has involved himself in the field of criticism, Roberto Schwarz shows himself in this interview, and in the best meaning of the expression, the engaged intellectual he has always been – which earned him exile from 1969 to 1977, a period that covers some of the most dramatic years of the military dictatorship in this country.

Besides engaged, this Brazilian born in Vienna, Austria, full professor of Literary Theory at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), formally retired in 1992 is extremely productive. He has remained in his teaching activity as an invited professor until 1997, is the author of a dozen books, including two of poetry and one play, plus a hundred articles, and who signs off as the translator of a dozen other works.

I would like you to talk a bit about your upbringing and the personages who most influenced you in that stage.

— My parents were Austrians, left-wing intellectuals, atheists and Jews. When Germany annexed Austria, they had to emigrate. Were it not for this, my father, who was a completely literary man, would have been a writer and a teacher. Although we arrived in Brazil with nothing, he soon began to rebuild a fine German library, which I

have to this day. He died early, when I was 15 years old. Anatol Rosenfeld, who was a friend of his and of the family, started to accompany my studies and to suggest what to read. For many years, he would dine at home on Sundays, which became a day that was obligatory for reviewing the weeks and for discussions. In spite of the big difference in age, we became great friends.

Anatol had a group...

— Yes, he gave a course in philosophy at Jacob Guinsburg's house. The group would meet once a week, and I started to take part as well when I was 18, shortly before going to university. This went on for many, many years, with the pupils reading an excerpt from some philosopher once a week, and Anatol would comment on it. This way of his of arranging his life was interesting: in some courses, he would have dinner before, which was good for the housewife, who have the dinner livened up intellectually, and good for him, who ... had dinner. And he would give the course afterwards.

And then you joined the Social Sciences at USP.

— Yes, in 1957, also on the suggestion of Anatol. I was in the last year of secondary school, a bit uncertain whether I would take Literature, Philosophy, or Social Sciences. Very objective, Anatol told me to go to the university and watch a few classes before deciding. I watched a literature class, by a professor whose name I shall not tell, and gave up doing Literature. I watched a class by Cruz Costa, who cracked joke after joke, and left me kind of ... And I watched a class of Paula Beiguelman, in Politics, very well prepared and interesting. So I decided in favor of Social Sciences.

Now that you were on the Social Sciences course, did you take part in that group from the seminar on The Capital (Marx)?

— The seminar started in 1958. It was on the initiative of a group of young professors, coming from the Social Sciences, from Philosophy, from History, and from Economy, who had the good idea of including some students as well. This meant that the seminar was already multidisciplinary and reaching up to the next generation right from its birth. In those days, Marx was taught little or not at all, although many professors from this area were leftists. So that the decision to study his work seriously had a strategic dimension. In the original nucleus, there were Ruth and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Octávio Ianni, Fernando Novais, Paul Singer and Giannotti. The most assiduous students were Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, Francisco Weffort, Gabriel Bollaffi, Michael Löwy, Bento Prado, and I.

And what was the weight of the seminar in your upbringing, in your view of the world?

— It was decisive. Unlike my friend Giannotti, studying Marx in those days was not to assimilate one classic amongst others. On the one hand, it was a question of betting on a critical reflection about contemporary society. On the other, you kept your distance from the authority of the Communist Parties on the subject, who used to foster a shallow understanding of Marx, imposed as a dogma. There was also the excitement of discovering and proclaiming the intellectual superiority of a profoundly uncomfortable author for the well-thinking academic world and for order in general. In the seminar venture, there was something of the unusual, and also of the precarious, besides the premonitory. Few people knew German, we were not familiar with Marx's cultural context, the modern bibliography was not available, not to say that it had disappeared. From the "normal" university point of view, we were not ready for the enterprise. In

compensation, there was harmony with the progressive radicalization of the country that had been set into movement, and perhaps with the undertow that was to lead the world to 1968. Up to a point, this unpreparedness was an advantage, because it allowed us to face up to the difficulties that the Brazilian experience opposed against Marxist schemes with a free spirit.

What were the dynamics of the seminar like?

The group would meet every fortnight and discuss more or less 20 pages a time. The discussion would go from elementary questions of understanding to complicated problems, with theoretical and political consequences. As the professors were at the age of writing their theses, which were usually on a Brazilian subject, there began to take shape in the seminar the distance between Marxist construction and the country's historical experience. The seminar had the strength of not disregarding the discrepancy, and also of not considering that it annulled the best critical theory of contemporary society. Reflection about it was needed, and seeing the differences as a fecund problem, and perhaps as part of the inequalities in the development of capitalism. Marx could not be applied just as he was to Brazil, which was nevertheless part of the universe of capital.

The theme of the modern reproduction of backwardness was arising, according to which there are social forms known as backward that in fact are part of the reproduction of contemporary society, in the national and international ambit. Although the corresponding work had not been written, these observations, connected with the experience of the peripheral nations, have a historical and worldwide relevance, for a sober and non-ideological appreciation of the realities of progress, which is more perverse than it seems. When my turn came to do a thesis and to analyze the novels of Machado de Assis, I had impregnated myself a lot with this way of seeing things.

You were already interested in literature, but in formal terms, how did your move to literary theory and criticism take place?

— I was a student of Antonio Candido in the second year of Social Sciences, in 1958, the last year in which he taught Sociology. The next year, I began to get depressed with the empirical side of sociological research, the surveys and the tabulations were not my stuff. At this point, Antonio Candido had gone from Sociology to Literature and was teaching Brazilian Literature in Assis. I was ruminating over his example, and I went there to complain about life and ask for advice, because what I really liked was literature. It was more or less agreed that when I finished the course I would take a master's degree in Comparative Literature abroad, and then I would go to work with him at USP. In those days, I was already writing a bit of literary criticism for a newspaper.

Which paper?

— A literary supplement of *Última Hora [Last Hour]*, where I published an article on *O amanuense Belmiro [Belmiro from Manaus]*, a novel about which Antonio Candido had written years ago. An impish friend of mine took the work to the professor, telling him that I thought his article was similar to mine. He thought that was funny, read it, and invited me to collaborate on the Literary Supplement of the *O Estado of São Paulo*, which was run by Décio de Almeida Prado. So when I went to Assis looking for advice, he had an idea of what I had been up to.

Going abroad was because there was no master's course here those days?

— Postgraduate studies were just beginning. In those days, only people who were working in some college would take a master's or doctor's degree. As I was coming from Social Sciences, to teach in Literature, I needed an appropriate degree. I went to the United States to get a master's degree in Literary Theory and Comparative Literature, at Yale University. Coming back, in 63, shortly before the coup, I began to work on Literary Theory, which was a novelty at USP.

And when you were now starting to work with Antonio Candido, how were the themes for work outlined?

— The first years are always a hard sweat. Getting courses ready, learning enough to teach, it's not easy at the beginning. But the basic idea for my work I got early on. It was more or less the following: I read Machado de Assis and I found his irony special. I had the impression that there was something Brazilian in that kind of humor, in its methodical witticism. And I set out after that. I combined the attempt to describe Machado's irony with the intuition that it was something Brazilian – which was necessary to explain. I combined a close reading of this irony with the theory of Brazil from the Capital seminar. The idea that the substance of Machadian irony had to do with the mixture of liberalism and slavery in Brazil came to me earlier, before 64. Now, from that point to write about it is a long step.

And what about the doctorate?

— I did it at the Paris III University, Sorbonne. My theme was To the winner, the potatoes. The book is from 1977. When I went back, it had already been published.

Your going to France was actually a result of the political repression that the dictatorship set up in the country. What was your experience of exile like?

— France was friendly to the refugees, who kept arriving in waves, as the dictatorships took hold of Latin America. Within this general disaster, the truth is that exile was also very interesting, presenting Latin Americans to each other, and even Brazilians from the different regions. The air was full of the *événements de mai*, the 1968 events. To anyone who did not have his life broken, or was under excessive material pressure, and for those with the discipline to resume their studies, they were good years.

To arrive at the apex of your investigation of the relationship between the irony of Machado de Assis, the behavior of the Brazilian elite, and, at last, the social structure of the country, or, in other words, to arrive at *A master on the periphery of capitalism*, you spent more than 11 years, is that not right?

— I am slower than I ought to be.

In some measure, is Antonio Candido's work pioneering, when he casts an eye at literature that is traversed by a more sociological view of the country? Or is this a general practice in criticism, which he is better at making explicit?

— I would invert the terms of the question: Antonio Candido casts on the historical-sociological view of the country – which he knows as few do – a look traversed by literary experience and analyses, in whose revealing value he believed, and to which he owes his discoveries. The pioneering is there, in this inversion, which gives full citizenship to the esthetic angle.

Let's take it by parts. That literature is part of society, or that one knows literature

through society and society through literature, are capital theses of the 19th century, without which, by the way, the specifically modern importance of literature becomes incomprehensible. They lie at the origin of genial visions and the worst tomes. Next, they turned into the commonplace that sustains conventional literary historiography. Within this picture, the trait that distinguishes dialectical criticism, and which makes it special, is that it takes away the banality and adds tension to this reciprocal inherence of the poles, without suppressing it. The obvious has no worth for it. If one does not have to guess, to research, to construct, to refuse appearances, to consubstantiate difficult intuitions, criticism is not criticism.

For dialectical criticism, the work of literary figuration is a substantive mode of thinking, a *sui generis* way of research, which aspires to consistency and makes the greatest demand. The result is not a simple reiteration of the daily experience, whose prepotency it opposes, whose contradictions it makes explicit, with a decisive result for clarification. In short, in terms of method, the starting point lies in the configuration of the work, with lights that are its own, and in society.

Contrary to what the detractors of this criticism say.

— That's right. It sets off from esthetic analysis, and seeks the not evident, the result of what the formal work of the artist has shaped. Whereas the traditional, or positivist, position, which has also been renewing itself and continues to be present with other names, limits itself to the crude contents, seeking the same in society and in the works, seen in redundant terms, of direct reciprocal confirmation.

You were already saying this at the age of 23, in the article about psychologism in the poetics of Mario de Andrade.

— The truth is that I don't remember. To take up the thread again, there is a formula of Lukács, according to which the social element of the work lies in its form. Not that the contents are not social, but the form, by working them out and organizing them, or also by being inflected by them, configures something more general, analogous to the precedence of society over its separated contents. If the works are interesting, it is because are organized in a revealing manner, which has some grounding in the organization of the world – a grounding to be discovered case by case. As the major part of literary historiography is of national inspiration, and as the nation, until the other day, was an almost self-evident horizon, a sort of unfounded certainty was created, according to which the space to which literature and literary forms refer is also national itself.

Well, the more audacious literature, precisely for having an aversion to the lies of officialism and nationalism, and for guessing the advance of extranational dimensions of bourgeois civilization, does not fit into this picture. In Brazil's case, the national point of reference has a reality of its own, of a different kind, which has continued to be effective (up until today?) and catalyzed an important part of formal invention.

Partly for the complex of a new country, which made the creation of a national literature a deliberate project. Suffice it to recall the programmatic picturesque nature of the romantics, or the Machadian attempt – discovered by John Gledson – to contrive intrigues with a national relevance, or Naturalism, with its scientific-allegorical tropics, or the modernist invention of national logotypes, like Brazil Wood, the Negress, and Macunaíma.

The question gets more interesting when we recognize it outside the sphere of the national project that had been taken up, in a certain range of inflections, problems, reactions, etc. It is as if the national matrix were to impose itself unconsciously, by force of things, or rather, as a consequence of the peculiarity of the country's social structure, which generates a singular social, linguistic, political, and historical set of problems, with which we struggle, and to which it is up to us to respond, whether we want to or not.

By leaving aside, or by making the author's intention one ingredient amongst other, historical-structural analysis, one puts oneself in the terrain of settings and objective workings, the dynamics of which does not run along foreseen tracks, and may lead where the author does not imagine. The point of reference is national, but without a guarantee of a happy ending. This is a critical adult conscience, according to which we do not do what we want, or we do what we do not want to do, and nevertheless we pay the bill. An enlightened and illusion-free position, which becomes a model for esthetic and social comprehension, when it becomes evident that bourgeois society does not govern itself but superficially, while there is no sign of it being overcome.

Here too is the step forward taken by Antonio Candido, in the admirable essay about *O cortiço* [*The tenement*], still not duly explored. He showed that the author thought that he was romancing the Brazilian process of war and accommodation amongst the races, in harmony with the racist theories of Naturalism, but actually, led by the logic of fiction, showed a primitive process of economic exploitation and formation of classes, which developed in a barbarous fashion and belied the novelist's racial and national illusions. The course of things is national, but differs from the one foreseen by the writer.

What does your question "up until today?" mean, when you touch on the pretense of the national foundation of the great Brazilian texts?

— Dialectical criticism supposes works that are more or less closed and highly structured. In Brazilian literature, there aren't many that invite an analysis of this kind. When Antonio Candido decided to study, in this vein, *Memórias de um sargento de milícias* [*Memories of a Militia Sergeant*], he was choosing the difficult path and taking to the limit a critical vanguard position. This daring was little noted, because the novel – funny and unpretentious – does not make one think of this kind of attempts. Manoel Antônio de Almeida did not only not want to do what the critic discovered, but he also moved on an incomparably more modest plane.

Is this disproportion a mistake? On the contrary, it draws the consequences of a certain idea of objective form, which does not coincide with the author's intentions, which it was able to exceed and to counter amply. An idea of form and of analysis that the critic shares with a few masters of dialectical criticism. Antonio Candido's two central essays, about *Sargento de milícias* and *O cortiço*, as they are rigorously supported by an analysis of the works, reveal their strength and relevance on a plane that would not have occurred to their respective authors.

This is a particularly Marxist view, isn't it?

— In its essence, I think it is, although the terminology isn't, or it is only in part. The good part of the Marxist tradition tells you to believe more in the objective configuration of the works than in the political convictions or positions of the writers.

There is a famous statement by Marx, in which he says that he learnt more with Balzac's novels than with the work of the economists, and that despite Balzac being a conservative. Going beyond preferences, there is above all a deep affinity in the conception of the objective form, whether social or ethical, as the case may be, and its internal dynamism is carried out not only against, but also through the illusions of the interested parties (Aluísio's racism, for example, is part of the strength with which *O cortiço* shows that the problem is class, and not race). The model is the cycle of capital, which occurs – to use Marx's expression – "behind the backs" of the participants, led into crisis against their will.

But going back to your question: this kind of criticism assumes that society is highly structured works and societies. It is seeing in each other the logics of the work and of society, and of reflecting on it. It so happens that we live at a moment when this idea of society, as something circumscribed, with its own destiny, is being put to question, not to say that it is in decay. No one now thinks that countries from the periphery have a strong internal dialectics, perhaps a few countries from the center have it, perhaps not even them. And in the field of the works, with the massive entry of the market and the media into culture, it is commonly said that the idea of art has changed, and it is possible that the standard of the previous period has been abandoned. Perhaps the premisses of dialectical criticism are disappearing...

I think that the writers' intention still exists of producing something that brings to the words the feeling of this present of such frayed relationships and values, confused, violent, etc. Why does one not, then, arrive at this work, capable of showing a very intimate relationship between form of the text and social form?

— I am also not convinced that this is no longer possible. But it is a fact that the social process has changed its nature. Its circumscription, in the sense that you could say "this is Brazilian society", is ceasing to be effective, to be true. For example, the case...

Let's take the case of *Cidade de Deus* .

— Before that, so as not to lose the thread, I want to talk about Adorno's essay on Beckett, to my taste one of the most brilliant ever to have been written about modern literature. In *Endgame*, the personages are figures stuck into a trash can, mutilated, and speaking a language limited to almost nothing, just waste. This is usually regarded as a reduction to essentials, an timeless minimalism, to show that the human being, even in the most precarious situation, keeps its greatness entire. But Adorno shifts the scene, gives it a date, and says that, quite to the contrary, what Beckett is describing is a post-catastrophe society.

Post nuclear catastrophe, post Second World War, in short, the era in which modern civilization showed that its capacity for self-government or for self conquering is not what it was said to be. Within this universe, the tatters of philosophy, the waste of initiative, of the desire for progress, the twitches of hope, in actual fact represent intellectual garbage, waste water.

Accordingly, the critical operation consisted of shifting to a precise and well explained, albeit imagined, historical moment, what used to be allegorized as the human condition. This shift gives incredible vivacity and artistic particularity to what seemed to be tasteless generalities and allegories. On the referring side, there is also a shift: society is

not national, regional, or municipal, it is the planet after the disaster. Adorno's essay changes the reading of Beckett and is a great critical find. It is an example of how the social and historical references have unexpected ambits and can be of different kinds.

Going back to your question, in the case of Paulo Lins there is in fact a circumscribed universe, segregated by police, so to speak. A universe closed by circumstances that are "modern", disastrous, highly worrying, that makes it possible to write a novel "in the old fashioned way". But the novel is not old in any way.

What most aroused your attention was precisely this possibility?

— No. It was, first, the extreme vivacity of popular language, inside the grim monotony of the barbarities, which is a rhythm of greater truth. Next, the very modern and esthetically uncomfortable mixture of the records: the rather raw assembly of journalistic sensationalism, and anthropologist's field notebook, the technical terminology of the outlaws, police rudeness, lyrical effusion, a Metro action film, etc.

And above all the narrative point of view, internal to the world of the bandits, though without adhesion, which poses an unprecedented problem. There is also the detailed knowledge, systematized and reflected in a universe of relationships, close to scientific investigation, something that few Brazilian novels have. In short, it is a powerful, representative, mix that has broken down the distance and the picturesque aura of a world that is ours. It is a happening.

In parallel to the development of a dialectical criticism, another very different criticism flourished in Brazil, commanded by the concretists, in particular by the Campos brother, and between the two intense polemics were established. I would like you to locate this question a bit.

— The opposition is there, but it is not easy to determine what is important in it, because it was covered by a rivalry similar to a soccer match, wrong in relation to both the parties. As far as I understand, the versions that remained were determined by the years of the dictatorship. In one of them, the critics linked to the Literary Theory at USP were held to be content-mad mummies, backward professors, blind to the questions of form, adepts of sociologese, narrow-minded nationalists, besides being Stalinist censors. Whereas in the concretist field, there were said to be the revolutionaries of form, up to date with French structuralism, Russian formalism, and the science of language, aware that the literary sphere does not communicate with social life.

Naturally, the field in front would change the signs of these same terms, and would oppose, to shorten things, the engaged and the alienated, a little in parallel – as a friend pointed out to me – with the polarizations of the song festivals of those days. Well, nothing of this fits. The dialectical critics were paid-up formalists, committed precisely to reflection on the problem. Their angle was esthetic, their sympathies were modernist, and their position had been anti-Stalinist for ages. The theoretical lines that it contrasted with were positivist historiography, psychologism, vulgar Marxism, and the classification of works according to the political convictions of their authors.

To give an idea of the conceptual and critical independence with which one used to work at USP (in certain sectors), it costs nothing to accompany a few steps of a characteristic journey. Perhaps one may say that Antonio Candido went to seek in the close reading of New Criticism – a formalist technique, developed in the States, in the

30s, with a conservative bent – an instrument to face up to the sociologism and the vulgar Marxism current in the Brazilian left of the 40s.

Except that he reworked the procedure and opened it up in the direction of history, with a view to historicizing the structures, which allowed him to sound out a new kind of literature and of Brazilian society. Without any flaunting of terminology and much less of international labels, the essays by Antonio Candido that are relevant here are surely the most original items of structural analysis ever done in Brazil. In the concretist field too, history does not match the clichés. The idea that they were "alienated" or disinterested about the course of extraliterary history is false.

As vanguardists, they understood their formal revolution as part of a social revolution under way. They were from the left, and Haroldo regarded himself as close to Marxism, I don't know whether in recent times as well. If the slur of not very social stuck to them in the pre-64 years, it was due to the antiexperimentalist prejudices of the Communist Party, which, in those days, wielded authority and denounced the "formalism" of modern art. Which did not prevent the concretists from contending with gallantry for their place inside the left and announcing, at a congress of literary criticism in Assis, in 1961, their "participating jump". They sought to link formal invention with Brazil's political radicalization. In short, contrary to the commonplace, the dialecticians were formalists, the concretists were engaged, and what drove them all was the historical acceleration of the country.

Did the concretists develop the line of Oswald de Andrade?

— That is what they say, although I find it difficult to recognize the family look. Still on the clichés, it's interesting to note that, contrary to what they claim and the others repeat, they are by far the Brazilian writers who most availed themselves of sociology to justify themselves and to explain their own supremacy. Amongst us, there are no others who depend so much on social theory to guarantee the position to which they aspire for their work. Their theory is worth what it is worth, but the contradiction merits a mention.

Going back to the polemics, it is not easy to find any great reasons for them. On the one hand, critics-professors attempting a historical-structural interpretation of Brazilian literature, pulling to the left. On the other, to the left as well, the group of the concretist poets, who militated to impose their work, in which they saw revolution, besides theorizing to their own benefit, which is equally natural, but not always convincing.

For history to have been different (and nobody having called them "pestilential vermin" or head of a "campaign for hunting concretists"), perhaps it would have sufficed for the professors from USP not to have turned up their noses to the "thesis" of the poets, according to which the noble line of modern poetry, which comes from Mallarmé, passes through Oswald de Andrade, Drummond and João Cabral, and culminates in they themselves.

But one can also imagine that the antagonism is grounded on different ideas as far as the evolution of forms is concerned. From the dialectical point of view, formal modernization exists, does not mean what it intends to, and ought to be analyzed not only as a solution, but also as a problem. From the point of view of the concrete poets, which seek it as a kind of iconization and acceleration of language, it is the straight and positive line that leads to an unquestionable higher plane. For reflection, it costs nothing

to note that the Concrete Movement was launched at that same time that Adorno was indicating, as a landmark, the aging of the New Music, that is, the depletion of the vanguardist tension.

But concretism also changed.

— Following 1964/68, when the revolution was no longer the order of the day in Brazil, one part of the writers started regarding language as its only trench. It was the era in which literary criticism talked about subversion of syntax, of forms, of genders, textual revolution etc. There was to be a funny study writing about these replacements.

And this had some international theoretical support, did it not?

— Yes, of course it did. It was the apex of structuralism based on linguistics, and hence of neostructuralism, the latter specialized in dissolving the positive structures. Whereas the structuralism sought by some from USP's Literary Theory was based on history, and was discovering the formal potency, on the esthetic plane, of the country's class structure. On second thoughts, perhaps there was more antagonism than has been said up until now.

And afterwards, this war had a repercussion in spaces with a greater reverberation of discourse as well, such as in Brazilian popular music, didn't it?

— It's a point that merits attention. The book by Caetano Veloso, *Verdade tropical* [*Tropical truth*], is very valuable and interesting in this regard. Caetano has a clear idea about what was at stake, and a great capacity for summing up intellectual debates. The book is always polemizing with the left, but describes the process in a realistic manner. The idea that all that is just a question of language does not enter his head.

After the most furious phase of the clash between dialectical critics and concretists had passed, apparently some lines of work of literary criticism in the country seek a certain synthesis between propositions from the two tendencies. Did not Silviano Santiago do this in some measure?

— I don't think that synthesis is the word. But Silviano wrote in the 70s. The middle ground of Latin American discourse, an essay of great strategic ability, the first important mobilization of the work of Derrida on the Brazilian scene. He uses deconstruction to disbelieve the categories of oppression, and makes them a play on language, which it certainly is too.

But is it not more than that? Be that as it may, here too it is not just a question of language, since the essay, as far as I can see, owed its repercussion to the powers that it opposed: to the arrogance of the military, to the authoritarianism of the armed left, to the presumptions of American imperialism, to our feeling of inferiority before the cultural supremacy of the great centers etc. Further on, Silviano refined Derrida's deconstruction with the game or conflict between genders, making it an element of sexual liberation, in particular of homosexuality.

As far as I know, he was the first critic to make the liberation of homosexuality an important element in the periodization of the history of Brazil, making it converge with the theme of the political opening and redemocratization, of which it was to be a touchstone. In my opinion, it is a great ploy, although the construction seems to me conformist, on the other hand.

**How would you describe the current panorama of literary criticism in Brazil?
What are its theoretical strong points?**

— The international theoretical lines are represented and are functioning, there are numerous postgraduate courses, with scholarships, and notwithstanding that, there is a certain exhaustion. Sorry about the mania, but what is missing is the dialectical spirit. As the notable moments of Brazilian culture have been enshrined, we don't remember up to what point they have depended on the reverse side of society. This is a truth that is insufficiently taken into consideration. Reflection today has to redimension itself, through the world that is forming without the knowledge of the official discourse about modernization and progress. All you have to do is to go up to Alto de Santana and look at São Paulo to know that what is happening is out of control and has little to do with the major lines incorporated into our mental organization. In this regard, cultural studies, with their lack of a hierarchy, do not fail to be an answer, although – as far as I know – not very critical of capitalism and not very interested in questions of esthetics, which diminishes its range a lot.

One work that I find admirable and that did not have any repercussion is the essay by Iumna Simon, which came out in the Praga n° 7 magazine, about the poetry of Valdo Motta. He is a black poet from Espírito Santo, a militant homosexual, very poor, and given to theological speculations. It's poetry that takes the poet's anus as the center of the symbolic universe. From then on, it mobilizes a lot biblical reading, heretical leanings, a reading of modernists, a capacity for formulation, rhetorical talent, and social fury.

The point of view and the bibliography escape the conventional, but the treatment of social, racial, and sexual oppression has nothing exotic about it. Well, Iumna read the poet by chance, realized the strength of what was happening, tried to find out more, and ended up organizing a volume of poems for Unicamp's publishing house, together with Berta Waldman (Valdo Motta, *Bundo e outros poemas*, 1996 [Valdo Motta, *Bundo and other poems*, 1996]).

To do justice to the poet, who is perfectly contemporaneous, she had to delve into areas that she was ignorant of, and, above all, to compare him with his peers, to reflect on his inclusion in current culture, and to draw the esthetic consequences that are appropriate. It is on works like this – without disparaging any other possible lines – that criticism depends to recover vitality and to be on a level with reality.

I am going to go back to an earlier point: why was New Criticism, as an enterprise in the United States, so conservative?

— New Criticism was born from a theory of professors in Literature from the south of the United States, the anti-Yankee Old South. They saw the poem as a field of singular complexity, where language does not have a utilitarian purpose and is not abstract, which, in a way, symbolizes an opposition to capital, to the world in the North. To consubstantiate this position, they developed a technique for analysis centered on ambiguity, tension, and irony, attributes that are foreign to modern functionality.

There is a letter from Allan Tate, one of the great figures of the movement, in which he says that he has just read an article by a German describes the work of art as they do, although unfortunately he was a Marxist. The German was Adorno, who was a war refugee in the United States. The anecdote is interesting, because it shows that Adorno's

anticapitalism, with a socialist horizon, up to a point converged with the anticapitalism of a catholic and traditionalist southerner – in a position contrary to the instrumentalization of language.

The dense analysis that New Criticism practiced really did represent a new level in the matter of understanding poetry's internal complexity. The technique could be used, of course, in many ways. Anatol Rosenfeld, for example, used to say explicitly that he used to practice close reading, but informed about its philosophical culture, which had nothing to do with that of the American new critics. They were perhaps provincial, but they developed a thing of genius.

Was New Criticism assimilated well in Brazil?

— It is a good topic for research. In the 50s, there was militancy, in particular from Afrânio Coutinho, difficult to read today. As ever, those who had their own project and knew how to keep their distance, like Sérgio Buarque and Antonio Candido, took good advantage.

Doesn't it seem to you that the contemporary world, mediatized, spectacularized, offers an environment that is hardly suitable for literature as an insistent and strong exercise? Is it just a Brazilian phenomenon?

— Certainly not. But somehow Brazilian intellectuals are digging their own land very little. We know little the things on which we depend at this moment.

If you think of the knowledge that Guimarães Rosa, Mário de Andrade, Machado de Assis had of their subject, you will see that their writing was associated with a dogged process of acquiring knowledge, of social and moral verification, of experimentation. After all, one of the things that most distinguishes the book by Paulo Lins is that, as he was a research assistant of an anthropologist, has the exhausted and articulated knowledge of his universe. This gives the book a power of its own, which his colleagues lack. The disappearance of intellectual demand need not have occurred, it was lack of vim.

In poetry too, something like that happened, it gave up speaking of the contemporary world in a sustained fashion. In Brazil, for a reason that I do not know, there suddenly started to appear a poetry that was short, not very reflective, not very bold. I say this knowing that this is not all, because the more minimalist poetry of recent times is also – in my opinion – more reflective and complex – I am thinking of *Elefante* [*The Elephant*], by Francisco Alvim.

When you say that you do not know, are you being ironic, or do you really not know?

— I would say that the predominance of concretism, which covered the second half of last century, made poetry impermeable to thought, bringing it great damage. The blame is not the concretists', I think it is natural that each poetic group should try to promote itself and to be valued. The incredible thing that happened was that the Brazilian intellectual world put up little or no opposition to that standard.

At one point, Marx said that the secret of the victory of Louis Napoleon lies not in his strength, but in the weakness of the French society of the time. In an analogous way, I think it is really a question of asking what happened to Brazilian cultural life in the last

half century, for something so limited as concrete poetry to attain such eminence. It is a deeper question than it may appear. It has to do with underdeveloped credulousness in the face of progress.

I'd like you to tell the curious case of Bertha Dunkel, which few people know.

— It was the following: more or less in 1966, they commissioned me to do a didactic explanation of the Marxist idea of increase in value, to be used in classes for a group of workers, which at the time was clandestine. I wrote with as much clarity as I was capable of.

As it did not work out too badly, there was an interest in making the leaflet known in a wider ambit, and the Theory and Practice group decided to publish it in their magazine. I invented a personage to sign the "article", which was this Bertha Dunkel. Bertha for Roberto, and Dunkel, which means dark, for Schwarz, which is black. I wrote a small biography as an introduction, explaining that she was a German vanguard writer, who in the 20s, driven by the closeness of the revolution, had decided to dedicate herself to political didacticism, in which she saw a literary form and an esthetic problem. Of course, there were questions that were interesting me. The whole thing took a funny turn, because a well known intellectual, who knew the whole German workers' movement, had a recollection of Bertha.

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